

The new pledge was immediately instructed to take his weekday meals at the House. Attendance at the evening meal was mandatory. Taking breakfast and lunch, both meals served in the kitchen, was optional, but encouraged. The “new man” was also asked to knock on the House treasurer’s door at his earliest convenience; there was the matter of a board bill to attend to.

The evening meal was in many ways the centerpiece of the program. The communal supper served in the refectory and the “after dinner coffee” served in the parlor permitted brothers and pledges to acquaint themselves with each other over the course of the spring academic term. Conversation, usually irreverent, was a House specialty and it usually took but a week or so before brothers obtained a good working knowledge of the pledge class, and vice versa. The scene for this amiable exchange of good talk and mildly eccentric humor often shifted to the House’s large porch as the weather turned warmer. There the custom of throwing the last dregs of cold coffee from one’s cup on the tolerant “coffee bush” beneath the south railing of the veranda became established. Alas, the bush was lost when the grounds were landscaped in 1984, but the tradition of heady after dinner conversation continues.

The pledges were expected to arrive at the House about twenty minutes before supper in order to mingle with the brotherhood in the first floor common rooms. Attire was never less than “coat and tie,” and suits were generally worn on Wednesday evenings, which were considered as “date nights,” and on Friday evenings if a weekend party was imminent.⁴ Proper dress for a pledge included having his pledge pin on the left lapel of his jacket.⁵ The omission of this item was regarded as a serious infraction of the House Rules. In this era the chapter considered itself to be a “smooth” house within the norms of the Cornell fraternity community. The dress code, adhered to in 1967, was destined to perish in the early Nineteen-seventies.

Dinner was announced when a House waiter triggered the striker mechanism of the hall chimes at six o’clock, more or less. A memorable sequence of resonant bings and bongs resulted if the device was in good order. The brothers then entered the refectory with pledges in trace. The seating plan was thus: House officers and seniors at the head table by the west window, juniors and sophomores at the middle two tables and pledges at the “pledge table” by the Clifton Beckwith Brown mantle. However, imbalances in numbers within the classes and the appearance of guests often scrambled this arrangement within the upper classes. Members stood behind their chairs until the “Pope Cat” said grace and then signaled that it was time to be seated by tapping a glass once with a spoon.⁶

This ritual was varied on date nights when brothers brought lady guests to the evening meal. On these occasions the dateless brothers and pledges assembled in the main hall upon hearing the dinner chime and lined up in two flanks leading to the refectory door. The brothers having guests then escorted their ladies through this cordon and helped them to their seats. The remaining luckless brothers and pledges then filed in to take their places as before.

The principal entertainment for the evening came at supper just as the dessert was served. The pledgemaster obtained the brotherhood’s attention by ringing a spoon against the rim of his glass and

4 ΔKE Brother Ross Warne Maghan, ΔX ‘66, letter to HWF, 19 January 1989.

5 The ΔKE pledge pin is triangular in shape and measures roughly three-eighths of an inch between adjacent points. The surface is divided into three fields, tintured with the Fraternity colors: *gules*, *azure* and *or*.

6 The function was performed initially by ΔKE Brother David Austin O’Day ΔX ‘69, and later by ΔKE Brother Brian Merrick O’Connor, ΔX ‘70.

calling out, “Flick Report!” At this point one of the pledges would arise, take his place on the platform by the head table and deliver a recitation from memory that followed a strict format, the following being typical.

Good evening, Sir! At the Near-Near we have *For a Few Dollars More* starring Clint Eastwood at eight —count ‘em, eight o’clock. Two —count ‘em, two bells. At the Far-Near, *The Sand Pebbles* is playing with Steve McQueen at eight-thirty —count ‘em, eight-thirty. Three —count ‘em, three bells. At the Near-Far, *A Man for All Seasons* starring Paul Scofield begins at eight-fifteen —count ‘em, eight-fifteen. One —count ‘em, one bell. The curtain opens on *Thoroughly Modern Millie* with Julie Andrews, Carol Channing and Beatrice Lillie at the Far-Far at eight —count ‘em, eight o’clock. Two —count ‘em, two bells. And finally, at the Way-Out we have *Our Man Flint* starring James Coburn at eight-thirty —count ‘em, eight-thirty. Three —count ‘em, three bells.

The Near-Near was the Deke House name for the former Strand Theater located at 310 East State Street. Similarly, the Far-Near was the Temple Theater (since demolished) at 114-116 East Seneca Street, the Near-Far was the State Theater at 109 West State Street, the Far-Far was the Ithaca Theater at 413 West State Street, and the Way-Out was the Cinema Theater at the Triphammer Shopping Plaza (opened in time for the 1968 pledge program). This naming convention was based on the theater’s relative distance from the Deke House, the Near-Near being, of course, the closest.

The number of bells declared by the pledge was his personal assessment of the movie’s quality. The scale ran from a low of one bell for a poor film to a high of four bells for an outstanding attraction. However, the decree of four bells was a rare event because the entire brotherhood and pledge class were then obliged to attend the movie en masse that night. The audacious pledge awarding four bells to a film could find himself in hot water with any brothers who did not share his artistic opinion. A lunatic fringe element held the view that all movies released by the Walt Disney Studios automatically rated four —count ‘em, four bells.

All numbers were emphasized with the repetitious “—count ‘em” phrasing. This could lead to argument amongst the more disputatious members of the chapter. A Cornell Cinema Society movie appearing at Ives Hall might be reported as “Ives one-twenty —count ‘em, one-twenty,” or “Ives one —count ‘em, one, twenty —count ‘em, twenty.” Pledge Brian Merrick O’Conner ‘70, a student of mathematics, once reported on *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* with “Zero —don’t count ‘em, Zero Mostel and Jack Gilford.” This resulted in an involved debate amongst the ideologues of the brotherhood.

If the Flick Report was delivered in a clear voice and without hesitancy, the brothers signified their approval by snapping their fingers. Otherwise, derogatory murmuring was likely to be heard. The pledge might be dismissed at this point or, particularly as the program progressed into spring, he might be grilled by the pledgemaster on any number of points. The questions could pertain to the Flick Report, to any of the Fraternity or chapter lore that the pledge was expected to know, or to the great philosophical questions of life itself. The pledge might be asked to render a few verses of a ΔKE song or deliver a short debate style extemporaneous speech on a topic chosen by the pledgemaster. The speeches were often quite amusing. Topics included: “My Preferred Prophylactic, the Trojan,” “Why I’d Rather Be a Deke than an Alpha Delt,” and “Ten Outstanding and

Commendable Attributes of Our Pledgemaster.” If the stage entertainment proved disappointing, the pledgemaster might ask for a volunteer from the pledge table to stand up and tell a joke.

These proceedings seldom lasted more than ten or fifteen minutes. The general tone was largely set by the personality and mood of the pledgemaster. He could be serious, sarcastic, sympathetic or enigmatic as the circumstances dictated. He might call upon another pledge to answer questions if the principal actor was either too glib or too hopelessly befuddled. Reputations were made and broken by these performances. One survived by wit, or shriveled for lack of it. The verbal rapiers wielded by the audience were every bit as sharp as those found at the Algonquin Round Table. No pledge escaped without wounds, although some bled more profusely than others. Every performer breathed a sigh of relief when the pledgemaster, sensing that the brothers were finished with their desserts and ready to retire into the parlor for coffee, signaled the end of the show.

All but one of the pledges were free to leave the House after coffee if he so wished. The pledge remaining was said to be on “Phone Duty.” He would normally spend the evening, until eleven o’clock, studying in one of the second floor suites in the vicinity of the telephone booth. Alternatively, he might settle into a card game to pass the time. The ring of the House telephone would bring this pledge to immediate action. His task was reach the telephone before the fourth ring began and answer with the greeting, “Good evening. Deke House.” He then went off to find the appropriate brother and announce the call. The pledge had to know more or less where every brother was if he hoped to carry out his duties. This sometimes required considerable discretion as some brothers left standing orders that they were “in” for certain callers and “out” for others.

Pledges were required to memorize an imposing amount of material during the course of the program: (1) the Fraternity’s chapter roll, (2) the objects of Delta Kappa Epsilon, (3) the names of any five of the Fraternity’s fifteen founding fathers, (4) several DKE songs including “We Hail Thee, Holy Goddess,” “Phi Marching Song,” and “The Son of a DKE,” (5) the founding dates of the Fraternity and the Delta Chi chapter, (6) the names and accomplishments of any ten famous Dekes, and (7) the complete name and home town of each brother and fellow pledge. The standards for this portion of the pledge’s education were exacting. Recitations from memory were expected to be word perfect.

In addition to the above, each pledge was expected to acquire a good general knowledge of the Fraternity’s history and the Delta Chi chapter’s traditions, customs, memorials and quirks. In all, the pledge had to absorb a substantial quantity of information and have it ready for recall whenever the pledgemaster or one of his deputies so requested. The burden was much eased by spreading the task over the thirteen or so weeks of the program. Each pledge was given a copy of the *ΔKE Handbook for Pledges* (1956 edition) published by the Delta Kappa Epsilon Council. This contained the bulk of the factual material concerning the Fraternity. Information about the chapter and its members was harder to come by; pledges quickly discovered that “chatting up” each of the brothers was the only way to determine such arcana as middle names, home towns, and House traditions such as the story of the Roosevelt Spruce Trees.

Recent years have seen various forms of a formal Big Brother system wherein each pledge is paired up with a supportive brother who helps his protégé learn the ropes. An informal version of this practice was in force circa 1967.⁷ At that time the brother-pledge assignments were allowed to develop as

⁷ ΔKE Brother Walter James Dinehart, ΔX ‘69, letter to HWF, 15 January 1989.

a matter of natural course. A pledge might find that his Big Brother was the man who recruited him during rushing or, more frequently, it was a brother whose room he used for studying when he had phone duty. The ubiquitous House card games, both poker and bridge, established many of the brother-pledge pairings. The pledgemaster kept close track of this activity and made certain that no pledge was left to flounder about on his own.

The second floor bulletin board played an important part in the program. Here the pledge would find House announcements, intramural game schedules and, more importantly, the schedules for Flick Reports and Phone Duty. A simple rotation scheme was used so that each pledge suffered his fair share of these tasks. Pledges were allowed to swap assignment dates with each other if given the pledgemaster's permission. And the bulletin board also featured the infamous Red and Black Ball List.

This prominent document consisted of three columns and as many ruled horizontal lines as there were men in the pledge class. The left most column carried the heading, "Name," beneath which the names of the pledges were listed in alphabetical order. The middle column was labeled, "Red Balls," and the right column was ominously labeled, "Black Balls."

Any brother could award a pledge a Red Ball for an infraction of House Rules or a clear failure to master any aspect of the pledge program. A poorly delivered Flick Report or even an outrageously bad joke might earn this mark.⁸ When this occurred, a solid red disk would be drawn in the "Red Ball" column opposite the errant pledge's name. The pledge was now obligated to "work off" this red ball and it was always wise to do so promptly since red balls could otherwise accumulate with dire results: four red balls automatically converted into a black ball which was entered into the third column as an solid black disk. Black balls could only be worked off during initiation in an unexplained, but certainly unpleasant, manner.

Red balls were handed out very sparingly and with the pledgemaster maintaining general control of the process. The procedure was taken seriously by the brotherhood and was, for the most part, just. Diligent pledges who toed the line might get away with only a handful of red balls and no black balls during the course of the program. Nevertheless, there would always be one or two pledges who accumulated red balls with ease and one or more dreaded black balls.

The pledgemaster would normally allow the House Manager, traditionally the vice-president, to organize activities that would allow the offender to work off the red ball in a way that benefited the House. A pledge might liquidate a red ball by polishing the refectory wood work, carting in a good supply of firewood, or fixing some part of the House that was in disrepair. In general, it took about two hours of hard labor to erase a red ball.

The House Manager also planned and directed the inevitable spring house project. This was usually a major renovation requiring plenty of no cost pledge labor. In 1967, the pledges and a number of brothers removed all of the interior plaster-and-lathe hallway walls in the second floor portion of the 1893 edifice and replaced same with new sheet rock paneling. This dusty project took some four weeks to conclude and completely occupied the pledges on week ends. The exhausted workers were compensated with steaks and beer at the end of the day.

⁸ ΔKE Brother Brian Merrick O'Connor, ΔX '70, recalls that he received a red ball for a bad joke that he told during the course of a Flick Report.

The Quiz Night was another tribulation that the pledges faced on a bi-weekly basis.⁹ After the evening coffee, the pledges were asked to form a line abreast along the east wall of the parlor. Furniture was moved about so that the brotherhood might be comfortably seated while the pledgemaster conducted an interrogation covering the material that the pledges had been assigned. There was finger snapping for good performances and audible expressions of disgust for pledges who were not in command of the ΔKE lore.

The Fraternity Chapter Roll was certainly the most crucial memory exercise. The pledge was expected to rapidly recite, “Phi, Yale, 1844. Theta, Bowdoin. Xi, Colby. Sigma, Amherst.” and so on without a stammer or hesitation. Ultimately, the entire roll of some fifty-three active chapters could be given before a wooden match held in the fingers of a prepared pledge burned down to an unpleasant level. The goal, in non-pyrotechnic terms, was to take no longer than sixty seconds for a complete recital. The pledgemaster broke the memorization problem down into manageable portions so that by the time initiation rolled around, the pledges exhibited a reasonable facility whenever the command, “Chapter Roll!” was heard.

The Pledge Skit was an annual rite of spring and occurred at the approach of initiation. This was an entertainment composed, directed and enacted by the pledges without any significant guidance from the brotherhood. In 1967, it took place in the basement room adjacent to the bar that is now used as a pocket billiards room. The script called for a humorous parody of the brotherhood and a barbershop quartet rendition of several ΔKE songs. The pledges were forewarned to wear old clothes as the brothers tended to be critical of most performances and express their displeasure by casting mugs of beer at the offending performers.

Several aspects of the pledge program can only be placed in the miscellaneous category. One pledge was selected to keep the House clock wound and on time. Another took charge of the House cigar mess which at the time dealt exclusively with the Marsh Wheeling brand. Another was responsible for keeping firewood in the library. These appointments, once made, were permanent.

The Cornell ΔKE pledge program of 1967 was also notable for what it did not incorporate. There was neither physical hazing nor degrading ritual. There has never been a pledge paddle in the Delta Chi lodge; such tripe is the stuff of lesser societies. Flick reports were never scheduled for date nights. Pledges were never questioned when guests were present. Party weekends were party weekends and pledges were treated tolerably as long as they refrained from making advances at the brothers’ girlfriends.

Running an orderly program required discipline, and a large part of the pledgemaster’s job was to keep the brotherhood in line. Upon taking office, Pledgemaster Maghan dutifully instructed the brothers, “Don’t beat, intimidate, thrash, dump, kill, skewer, maul or otherwise geld [the] pledges,” and somewhat later he felt obligated to plead, “that (1) Brothers don’t go at each other’s throats in front of [the] pledges, and (2) brothers commit no indiscretions with pledges, i.e., loading pledges in[to] meat lockers [or] belting them in the Labonza.”¹⁰ Thus, the pledgemaster was as much the protector of his fledglings as he was their tormentor.

⁹ *CMM*, 16 February 1967. Brother William Alan Morrison ‘70 recalls that Quiz Night was always scheduled for Thursday evening.

¹⁰ *CMM*, 16 February 1967. *CMM*, 15 March 1967.

In the end, fourteen new men “wore with pride the diamond pin of our jolly Fraternity” and, in time, took their turn in the great cycle of rushing, pledging and initiating the next class of Cornell Dekes.¹¹

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¹¹ Lyric from “The Son of a DKE,” L.S. Burchard, Nu 1877.

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Summary

The author describes the form and substance of the Delta Chi Chapter Pledge Program as it was conducted in the late Nineteen-Sixties with details concerning bid signing, communal dining, date nights, flick (motion picture) reports, ΔKE catechism, red and black balls, House projects, quiz nights and the pledge skit.

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Notes

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