



Pi Kappa Alpha's Long Road Back

After a four-year hiatus,
the chapter founded 98 years ago returns to Millsaps

By William Jeanes

Almost a century ago, under a new moon on Friday, April 7, 1905, eight Millsaps men calling themselves the Sphinx Club became the 33rd chapter of a national fraternity, Pi Kappa Alpha.

That night's ceremonies, conducted by three Pikes from the University of Arkansas, set in motion a continuum of brotherhood that, with a single unfortunate interruption, has extended from that day to this.

Discussions of affiliation with an organized fraternity had begun in a campus boarding house in a small room occupied by Jesse Sumrall, one of the eight students who became the chapter's founders. The College's first president, Dr. William Belton Murrah, himself a Pike at Birmingham Southern College, had assigned the Sphinx Club a meeting room on the third floor of the College's main building. In that meeting room, the club members examined the prospect of affiliating with a national fraternity. With or without the encouragement of Murrah, the group chose Pi Kappa Alpha, founded at the University of Virginia in 1868. The Millsaps outpost carried the designation of Alpha Iota Chapter and was the third national fraternity at Millsaps.

For 94 years after its founding, the Pike chapter provided its school, state, and nation with business leaders, scholars, legislators, judges, ministers, doctors, and writers by the dozen. These have included bishops, generals, best-selling authors, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, a congress-

man, a national president of Pi Kappa Alpha, and the sixth president of Millsaps College, Bishop Homer Ellis Finger Jr. On a less serious note, an alumnus who became an eminent professor of philosophy served as the namesake of Kermit the Frog.

Altogether, Alpha Iota initiates since 1905 number nearly 2,000. But in October 1999, initiations came to a halt. The chapter was gone — its charter revoked, its house emptied and taken over by the College. The lamp of brotherhood flickered, but it did not go out. Today, through the cooperation of concerned and dedicated alumni, the Millsaps administration, and Pi Kappa Alpha International, the flame of fellowship burns once more. A Pi Kappa Alpha chapter will return to Millsaps College.

How this came about, and why, provides several lessons in leadership and offers an instructive look at a fraternity's relationship with its members, its school, and its community.

The removal

Fraternity chapters go through high and low points just as individuals, corporations, and church congregations do. By the late 1990s, in the eyes of the Millsaps administration, the Pikes had hit an alarming low. The active membership, at 15, was far below the school's interfraternity average, below the 25-member standard of the international fraternity, and below the chapter's own high-water mark of 70-plus. Sporadic disciplinary problems had for a decade been the rule rather than the exception. A Pike from that time might tell you that the administration was looking for an excuse to close down the chapter. A member of the administration



Millsaps College as it existed in 1910, when the Pike chapter was established on campus. The chapter founders cast their vote for Pi Kappa Alpha on the third floor of the Old Main, the building on the far left.

The Millsaps Alpha Iota chapter was gone — its charter revoked, its house emptied and taken over by the College. The lamp of brotherhood flickered, but it did not go out.

might respond that the chapter was lucky not to have already been shut down. In this charged environment, the Pike chapter handed out bids to prospective members on a Saturday morning in October 1999.

Awaiting the bid offers, some would-be pledges spent Friday night partying. The next morning, the new Pike pledges accepted bids and assembled at the house. More drinking took place. One pledge, according to reports from those involved, had begun his celebration much earlier and had consumed a large but unspecified quantity of beer. At the Pike house, he consumed more alcohol and suffered a seizure. Some of the active members immediately took him to Mississippi Baptist Medical Center, where he recovered. Word of the incident took little time to reach the administration.

Millsaps President George Harmon, as a courtesy, telephoned the two Pike alumni who served on the College's Board of Trustees and told them that he intended to close the Pike chapter. What the trustees knew about the state of the chapter concerning its size and disciplinary problems, they learned from Harmon. Neither trustee felt overjoyed

by the decision, but both quickly gave Harmon their unqualified support. The College closed the chapter that same day.

The issue of underage drinking aside, a number of alumni and active members felt that the chapter had been treated unfairly, largely because the active members were unaware that the pledge in question had been drinking for hours before continuing to celebrate at the Pike house. Moreover, the chapter leadership acted quickly to secure medical help. At least one chapter alumnus felt so strongly about the chapter's removal that he sent his children to other schools. There is no question, of course, that the active members were infuriated at the time, and a few doubtless remain so.

What generates such strong emotion over a College's decision to remove what it saw as an intolerable annoyance, to say nothing of its view of the Pikes as a group hell-bent on wrecking the school's image? To answer that, it's useful to examine what constitutes a fraternity.

What is a fraternity?

Like most organized institutions, fraternities have their adherents and their detractors. They have been called exclusionary, frivolous, outmoded, and any number of other unattractive adjectives. Those accusations usually emanate from outside the fraternity community. Those who have belonged to fraternities, generally speaking, harbor radically different opinions.

Dr. Frances Lucas, the 10th president of Millsaps College, sees it this way: "Fraternities and sororities have been an important element of the college community since

they first started on campuses more than 150 years ago. The Greek life program at Millsaps is built on the premise that fraternities and sororities enhance the educational mission of the College and provide an element of residential and social character to the campus.” Lucas came to Millsaps from Emory University, where she served as senior vice president for campus life. One of her legacies there is a strong Greek system that the university considers an asset.

A fraternity can frame a student’s entire collegiate experience. A chapter that encourages leadership and scholarship will help its members flourish within the halls of learning. A chapter that overemphasizes the social side of college life will not be helpful in achieving the basic goal of a college: an education. In short, one can fall among companions good or bad in a fraternity, just as one can in a business, the military, or other professions.

Maintaining a balance between work and play has never been easy. And few organizations can teach this balance in more ways than a fraternity. That said, there’s nothing inherently magic about an organization that chooses to spell out its name in Greek letters. Yet, magic can abide there — not in the occult sense but in the marvel of warmth generated by friendship and brotherhood.

A fraternity chapter, ideally, represents the essence of diversity. Belonging to a group that marches in lockstep will teach you no more than you can learn from observing national conventions of any political party. But belonging to an organization made up of members who don’t look alike, think alike, work alike, or play alike can be of enormous use in teaching tolerance and understanding that applies to everything you do after your formal education is complete.

The return

Shortly after Harmon’s retirement from Millsaps, three Pike alumni met with Vice President for Administration John Pilgrim and Dean of Students Todd Rose at the University Club in

“Greek organizations are committed to instilling in members the ideas of scholarship, community service, leadership, brotherhood/sisterhood, interfraternalism, personal integrity, and social development.”

— President Frances Lucas

Jackson to discuss the chapter’s expulsion and the prospects for its return. The two Millsaps administrators surprised the alumni by outlining a well-considered timetable for the chapter’s return and a plan for returning the Pike house to the new chapter.

In brief, the College insisted that the chapter not be invited back to the campus until all members active at the time of the expulsion had graduated. This meant that no formal action concerning the re-establishment of the chapter would begin until 2003. At that time, the administration would support a new Pike chapter established under the guidelines of the Pi Kappa Alpha International Office. Meanwhile, the College would renovate and refurbish the house, maintain it, and use it as a women’s residence. The administration renamed the house the Panhellenic House.

In 2002, after considerable informal discussion, the alumni formed a seven-member steering committee to work with the College, the chapter alumni, and the fraternity’s home office. Among the concerns was preparing for a fund-raising effort aimed at repaying the College for much of the renovation work done to the house, with a view toward having it returned to the chapter.

The largest concern, however, was voiced this way by one of the committee: “How on earth will we be able to carve out a new chapter on a campus this small, where there are already four Greek fraternities comparable to PiKA?”

Indeed, the task seemed, if not insurmountable, extraordinarily difficult. A fraternity operates just like a college, persons leave, other persons

enter, all within a four-year structure. Talks with Pike International Office representatives, based on their experience, convinced the committee that the goal was possible if not altogether probable.

Events accelerated in late 2002, and by early 2003 the Pike International Office had sent a team of recruiters to the campus. The recruiters hoped to interest 15 men in becoming members of what is called a Pi Kappa Alpha Colony. The colony, though without a house, would then learn to function as a fraternity, guided by both alumni and International Office representatives. Once the colony met a lengthy list of goals, including everything from scholarship to accounting, it would be reinstated as a chapter of Pi Kappa Alpha.

The interviewer/recruiters met with members of the College administration, campus organizations including sororities, the athletic staff, and other faculty and staff, seeking names of Millsaps students not affiliated with a fraternity. The original goal turned out to be low. By the time the recruiting team completed its work, 31 men had signed on as members of the Pi Kappa Alpha Colony.

With recruiting over, alumni groups and the steering committee had the opportunity to meet the new colony members — who will become known as the “Re-founding Fathers” of the chapter.

“I’m stunned at both the quality and the quantity of the recruits,” said one of the committee members. Another paid tribute to the recruiting team, saying, “I’d hire one or all of them in a New York minute.”



Pi Kappa Alpha in 1905



Pi Kappa Alpha in 1906

The future

The colony will be well into its considerable task of becoming a full-fledged Pike chapter by the time this article appears. It will conduct its first rush in the fall, and if it meets its many goals, the colony will be rechartered in 2004, marking the end of Pi Kappa Alpha's absence from Millsaps College. The chapter will reacquire its original designation as Alpha Iota. Those interested can follow the chapter's progress at www.pikes-millsaps.org.

Lucas said of the effort, "Involvement in Greek life is one of many ways to enhance the quality of life for students. Greek organizations are committed to instilling in members the ideas of scholarship, community service, leadership, brotherhood/sisterhood, interfraternalism, personal integrity, and social development."

Lucas' thoughts were echoed by Ryan Van Anandel, the fraternity's director of expansion, who spearheaded the establishment of the colony. The chapter in 1999 "wasn't running at the standards the College or the international office expected." With the fresh start "we will bring a brand new fraternity with brand new ideas." Van Anandel also said that the fraternity did not condone hazing and that it placed a premium on leadership training and scholarship.

The new chapter will reoccupy the handsome red brick building built at the south end of the campus in 1987, a house that replaced the wood frame structure built on Marshall Street in 1939. That house, the first one owned by the chapter, followed a succession of rental houses on North West Street. The Pikes who will live in the house

join a brotherhood of nearly 2,000 men, a line that stretches through the Great Depression and several wars — and across the momentous and monumental events and discoveries of the 20th century.

One of Alpha Iota's original founders, Jesse Sumrall, lived to be 104 and saw most of the past century. In his 90s, Sumrall still communicated with the chapter he helped found. That Sumrall still cared about Alpha Iota after all those years draws a heavy line under the word "brotherhood."

And places a heavy responsibility on the Re-Founding Fathers. **MM**

(William Jeanes, B.A. '59, is the former publisher of Car and Driver and Road & Track magazines. He is also a Pike and a Millsaps Trustee.)