

POTTER CLUB

ORIGIN

The origin of Potter Club was obtained from Bernard Kerbel '33 one of the original thirteen founders. His narrative is as follows:

It was with deep interest that I read the article in a recent issue of the Alumni Quarterly about the Potter Club and since you indicated a need to know a little bit more of some of the history of the club I thought I might write about just that. As one of the thirteen founders of the Club I can remember many of the events leading to its formation and occurring after its founding. Perhaps, one of the least known sets of incidents are those I am about to relate.

The beginning of the organization actually dates from 1931 (my sophomore year). At that time there were several men already graduated and employed in teaching who had formed and were forming, by their frequent return to the campus, a fast friendship for undergraduates. These were the days of few jobs, not much money for those who did have jobs, and even less money for those training to be teachers. They were days of dreams, ambitions, hopes in a pretty dismal depression period. We did have Prohibition and like today, comraderie, beer parties, bull sessions on every conceivable subject. Beer parties - in speakeasies, one in particular just above Quail Street on Western Avenue.

Yes, we couldn't afford lavish events but we could afford time invested in friendship. Those days, say the beginning of many college traditions. I guess we were pretty scared group of lads because we wanted to cling to friends and traditions. These were highly prized possessions in a depression period. We revelled in the unofficial gatherings for a Saturday morning basketball workout in the old gym in Hawley Hall (Now a part of the library). We liked to join in song in the locker room shower afterwards (nothing like it for acoustics), to work our miracles of coffee at the Boulevard (we had our way) and to gather at College House (a student operated rooming and boarding house) for any penny-ante poker, seven-card with fives and ten's wild, high-low.

I guess we cherished those friendships so much that one of the grads, Israel (Babe) Kaplan '30 (I believe he is now teaching at Potsdam College) suggested the formation of what he called a "State Union" (an unconscious play on words). The concept was to retain for all future time the fullness of those friendships in a closed, non-fraternal organization which could be composed of all the guys we all loved and saw so often. The idea caught fire and we gathered often, to discuss it and to galvanize the idea into action.

One such gathering was at the farm of the parents of Ken Miller's (Class of '32). On a bright and cheery day in the spring of 1931 we were fed acres of steak and mountains of farm-fresh potatoes, and I think, gallons of some kind of home brew. We decided then to form this State Union but we had first to achieve college administration's approval. That was the next step.

The exact details of what occurred escapes me. Russ Ludlum made the overture to President Brubacher. This much I do know, and here is the real beginning of the Potter Club, President Brubacher had been thinking for a long time of the need for another men's organization as part of Campus Life. At that time only one fraternity existed, KAPPA DELTA RHO. President Brubacher, I know, did not like the idea of the closed organization and the "STATE UNION". It was he who gave us the story of EDWARD ELDRED POTTER and his idea that we form a club on that name. I guess this point of view by College Administration did not set too well with the men who already graduated because they withdrew from any participation even though friendships remained. There were some misgivings - who was Potter, what did he do that we should fashion a club in his name? This and a number of other questions came to our minds but after we heard more from President Brubacher, Potter's mother and sister we felt that we did have an ideal. Potter, left in his Sophomore year, 1917, for military and aeronautic service during World War I. During one of his flights (he was not a combat pilot, but ferried planes to and from the front) he was killed. His mother was awarded his degree in 1920, the year he was to graduate. If College authorities thought so much about him as to award him a degree posthumously, here surely was a man of stature and someone we all could emulate.

So there it was. By the time we achieved full organization in the 1931-32 college year the Class of 1931 members were already graduated. The original thirteen could only have been six but the seven men of Class of '31 who were part of the original group were retained as part of the founding group.

We now had to devise an identification pin and this part of the history remains in my memory. Walt Anderson '32 and I designed the emblem. The six-sided pin with the bundled fasces on the left signifying unity and on the right Minerva with the center band of letters "EDWARD ELDRED POTTER CLUB."

Walt and I did the emblem on a bristol board, 100 times the actual size of the pin. I know this is still hanging in the Potter House library. It now remained for us to express a meaning to the six-sided emblem. Believe me, it was not difficult thing to do to set up the symbolism and the ritual that inevitably followed for use at rush smokers and at initiations. I don't remember the exact symbolism but I do recall that Walt Anderson and I worked inspiredly while all through the planning we were worried about one element, the fasces, an idea lifted from the Roman ritual of the bearing of the fasces by a retainer of the Consul. Remember those were the days of Nazi ascendancy and fascism which also had its symbolism in the fasces. But when a new issue of U. S. dimes were released, the fasces appeared thereon and we knew we could not go too far wrong.

This is the story behind the story. One thing more - originally Potter Club was not thought of as a fraternity and I suppose even today this is true. The Pedagogue of 1933 lists the Potter Club among "Activities" rather than among fraternal organizations. Its main purpose

was described in the Freshman Handbook for the class of 1935, which I edited, as an organization having "as its main purposes the formation of a closer bond between alumni and undergraduates, to raise the social standard at State College, etc." I can't tell you what was meant by the "etc." but you can see from the rest of it that the idea of alumni-undergraduate relationship was retained. The "social standard" part became, in the earlier years, the entertainment of prominent literary and musical personalities when they came to State for appearances. We entertained in what was the student lounge in the basement of Richardson Hall and I can recall having as our guests Carl Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Vachel Lindsay.

All but one of the original thirteen are listed in your roster. The one not listed is Samuel Dorrance one of my closest friends from early childhood. Sam, a brilliant lad who went on to medicine (his brother Billy, class of '42 followed in that pursuit) was killed in a plane crash during the 2nd World War while enroute to Africa on a U. S. Army Medical Mission. So in a sense he was like our Club's namesake.

The rest of us, Beach, Driscoll, Jones, Lincoln, Ludlum, Newcomb and Osborne of 1931, Anderson, Hritz and Miller of 1932, myself, 1933 and Greenfell Rand of 1934, are proud, I'm sure of the part we played but more than that of the history of the Potter Club through all the years of its existence.

9/60

By Bernard Kerbal, '33

Comment by Larry Newcomb - Bernie this seems to be most complete.

Your memory is still good. I can make no changes.

If this Club should collapse, think nothing of it. Student interests come and go and I think the Club has outdone itself for many, many years.

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