

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MYSKANIA

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This is the story of MYSKANIA, membership in which was the highest honor attainable in college. Each year a dozen juniors, more or less, who had demonstrated outstanding capacity and dedication, were chosen to lead and govern the student body in their senior year. For decades this system worked admirably. Then, under pressures associated with the changing times, there was erosion in MYSKANIA's responsibilities and powers, and, eventually, its prestige. It died in 1979. Purple and Gold, the University's service organization, has inherited part of MYSKANIA's tradition.

This report is based mainly on news stories in State College News and its successor, Albany Student Press. These sources have been supplemented with material from Pedagogue and Torch, the memorabilia files at Alumni House, and oral reports by some MYSKANIA alumni. There are gaps in the story - internal conflicts, unpublicized actions, anecdotes, the temper of pivotal times - which could be filled in by letters to The Carillon from alumni with first-hand knowledge.

### Before

1906 - a three-year normal school on Willet Street burned down. From 1906 to 1909, new buildings went up - Hawley, Draper and Husted, now half of the downtown campus. In 1910, New York State College for Teachers was chartered, granting bachelors and masters degrees. In 1914, the senior class organized the first Moving-Up Day. On February 1, 1915, Dr. Abram R. Brubacher became president. Within days, a petition was presented to him, with hundreds of signatures, asking that student government be organized. On Moving-Up Day, 1916, the sophomore class stunt was an allegory on the need for a college newspaper; Dr. Brubacher gave the class authority to start it. (The Echo, a literary magazine, and The Pedagogue, a yearbook, existed already.) The first issue of State College News appeared in October 1916. The students were moving toward the independence consummate with the college's new status.

### Birth and Infancy

On February 15, two weeks after Dr. Brubacher took office, he referred the petition for student government to a faculty committee. On the letter setting up the committee are pencilled in the names of students of that time - Agnes Futterer, 1916; Clarence Hidley, 1915; Blanche Avery, 1916; Kolin Hager, 1917 - apparently under consideration at the faculty committee meetings, and very familiar to students of the next several decades.

In April 1917, more than two years after its organization, the committee announced the results of its deliberations in student assembly. A student council, all seniors, would take charge of student

concerns. This group, which would function for the brief remainder of the college year, was appointed by the faculty committee. A week later the council adopted MYSKANIA as its name, the meaning of which has been a well-kept secret. During its brief tenure, it decreed rules for college dances and, more important, it set up its duties and privileges and a system of succession. In the first available statement of these duties, there was considerable deference to the faculty: "...only such power as may be delegated by the faculty." The method it adopted for selecting a new MYSKANIA was appointment by the faculty of five juniors, selection of five, six or seven juniors by the outgoing MYSKANIA, and inclusion of the senior class president if he had not already been selected.

The first MYSKANIA to serve for a full year was tapped on Moving-Up Day in May of 1917, and included ten members. To the music of a piano, the junior class walked across the stage on which the outgoing group stood, and those chosen were pulled out of line as they passed. According to the 1918 Pedagogue, the new MYSKANIA gave itself a more independent set of duties and privileges: to sit on the platform at the weekly student assembly, govern all college elections, administer the college traditions, control fraternity and sorority activities and make recommendations to the student body.

This 1918 MYSKANIA presided at the weekly student assembly, compulsory for all students. (An interesting footnote - there were two absentees from MYSKANIA because they had volunteered for military service, Jesse Jones and W. Irving Goewey. Not on MYSKANIA, but also absent from assembly, was Edward E. Potter, 1918, the first student to die in the war. Potter Club was named for him when it was formed in 1931.) This MYSKANIA established events for interclass rivalry, set up and approved a News Board to run the already existing State College News, and created an extended day of activities for Moving-Up Day.

The May 29, 1918 issue of State College News said, "Moving-Up Day this year was by far the best in the history of the college, and great thanks are due MYSKANIA which managed the affair... The most important and most exciting event of the day was when the dignified members of MYSKANIA, one at a time, descended from their seats of honor on the platform, and marching to the place where the selected junior sat, announced the name, pinned purple and gold ribbons upon him or her, and then both proceeded back up on the platform again. The chairs of the men in service were covered with flags." Activities for that Moving-Up Day included singing "Where, Oh Where" as the freshmen, sophomores and juniors moved up to the seating section for their next year and the seniors moved "out, out, to the wide, wide world." The seniors were in cap and gown, the girls in all the other classes wore white dresses, the freshman girls had their hair hanging down their backs and tied with red ribbon, the freshmen boys wore red neckties. After the activities in the auditorium, there was a procession onto the campus where each class formed its class numerals and then sang their class songs written for the occasion. The seniors "planted the ivy" (a

tradition which continued for decades), after which each class presented a stunt on the college steps - a minstrel show by the seniors, patriotic tableaux by the juniors and sophomores. The day before there had been a "banner rush"; the freshmen had stolen the sophomores' class banner, and MYSKANIA organized the first rush, with thirty sophomore boys trying to retrieve their banner from a like number of freshmen. Incidentally, they succeeded, smeared with mud and paint - that's right, paint. In the afternoon of that Moving Up Day there was an interclass track meet and baseball game, and in the evening there was community singing, step-singing by the various classes, and then two hours of dancing on the campus.

### Adolescence and Maturity

MYSKANIA continued to establish and adjust the patterns for college life. The 1919 body wrote a constitution for State College News, and later granted amendments to it. It established a Student Finance Board. It launched a contest for a new Alma Mater, won by our well-known "College of the Empire State," and established the Dramatics and Art Council.

The 1920 MYSKANIA established class officerships, and made changes in the selection process for the 1921 MYSKANIA: the faculty was to name four instead of five, outgoing MYSKANIA add four, five, or six (one less than before), the student body elect two (later changed to three) from the entire enrolled junior class, and the president of the senior class be a member ex-officio. The faculty bowed out of the selection process that year, recommending that certain important campus officers be ex-officio members. This latter suggestion was not followed, leaving only the senior class president a member of MYSKANIA by virtue of his office.

The 1922 MYSKANIA, all but three selected by the outgoing MYSKANIA, was the body that proposed to the student assembly the formation of a Student Association, and conducted elections. In December of 1921, MYSKANIA installed the first set of officers and wrote a Student Association constitution, which was adopted in May, 1922. This gave the Student Association management of all matters of student interest other than academic, and recognized a number of boards, one of which was MYSKANIA. Student Association controlled the executive, financial and legislative functions, MYSKANIA the judicial and the guardianship of tradition. Thus MYSKANIA voluntarily declared itself subordinate to the student body. In fact, the executive board of the Student Association was to act as a court of appeals from MYSKANIA's judicial rulings when necessary. The president of Student Association replaced the president of the senior class as the only ex-officio member of MYSKANIA. Three members were to be elected by the student body, a practice which continued until 1931, when MYSKANIA chose all of its own successors.

The transfer of direct government to the Student Association did not leave MYSKANIA with nothing to do. Besides supervising rivalry events, it continued its elder statesman role. For instance, the 1923 MYSKANIA appointed an interclass committee to draw up a new body of rules for class rivalry. Campus Day, in the fall, was established, with election of a campus queen, athletics in the afternoon and skits by each class in the evening, followed by a dance. An annual "Get Wise" party, hosted by the sophomores for the freshmen, told the latter what traditional rules were required by MYSKANIA, and what other traditional rules the sophomores would try to enforce. In this connection, in the spring of 1927, MYSKANIA punished three freshmen for breaking tradition (not wearing their freshman caps, using the front doors of the college buildings or wearing high school insignia) by removing from freshman office Louis Wolner, the class president, Fred Crumb, the class treasurer, and Tom Herney, vice-president. Wolner's punishment was revoked as a result of a protest petition, but that of the other two stood. When Tom's father died, in his sophomore year, he left college for work so his older brother, Joe, could stay here and get his degree. Tom eventually went to law school. As for the other two malefactors, Lou became the superintendent of schools at Homer, New York, and Fred became president of the college, later the State University at Potsdam, New York.

In 1930, when Lou Wolner and Fred Crumb were both members of MYSKANIA, and Lou was editor of State College News, MYSKANIA adjudicated a bitter conflict. The Finance Board, with Warren Cochrane as chairman, wanted the News to print the names of students who had not paid student tax, which Wolner refused to do because it was coercive and libelous. The conflict went to MYSKANIA, who decided against the News, whereupon the News Board resigned. MYSKANIA members took over the board positions for the remainder of the year, appointed a board for 1930/31, and eventually 28 names of tax delinquents were printed.

The 1934 MYSKANIA had a difficult case to decide. In that depression year a temporary junior college had been established affiliated with New York State College for Teachers. Its students wanted to participate in State's varsity athletic program, but were denied permission to do so by MYSKANIA.

As is evident from these examples, MYSKANIA was a stable, respected, useful body. It had voluntarily relinquished day-to-day management of student self-government, but it was accepted as a parent, granting permission for or initiating new activities, and refereeing their performance.

#### Beginnings of Rebellion.

The first instance of a function taken away from MYSKANIA, not given away, was in the 1934-35 school year. Student Council decided that management of inter-class rivalry was an executive function, not judicial. Even then, the Council only took over the

responsibility for making the rules, but left the actual supervision of events to MYSKANIA.

Much more serious changes began in 1945-46, when there were rapid increases in enrollment, and when veterans returned from World War II, resentful of the officer class, scornful of the innocent and naive old college ways and suspicious of decisions reached behind closed doors. A letter-writing campaign by two insurgents appeared in three successive issues of State College News, objecting to MYSKANIA's secrecy, particularly in its self-perpetuating selection of new members. The News, with MYSKANIA, polled the student body with a series of questions to determine the degree of satisfaction with MYSKANIA - its secret constitution and meetings, its powers and performance, its selection method. The results indicated satisfaction with performance, duties and powers, but opposition to the secrecy of choosing a new MYSKANIA and a split opinion on the secrecy of MYSKANIA's constitution, the only constitution not subject to approval by the Student Association.

In response to the poll, MYSKANIA moved for an amended selection procedure, perhaps hoping the motion would be rejected by the vote of the student body. The proposed method was for MYSKANIA to recommend ten names to be voted on as yes/no, to suggest a number of other qualified persons, and to accept additional nominations made by students outside MYSKANIA. The Student Association accepted this procedure.

In the State College News for March 19, 1946, the following box appeared:

"MYSKANIA announces

WHEREAS a new plan for the election of MYSKANIA has been passed by the Student Association, and

WHEREAS this means the withdrawal of recognition from this organization by Student Association, MYSKANIA announces the dissolution of MYSKANIA as of this day of March 25, 1946."

MYSKANIA burned its constitution, its records, its history. However, the Student Association was unwilling to accept its demise, and asked for a volunteer group to serve as a temporary "Judicial Council" for the purpose of making nominations and electing new members for the next year of the Judicial Council, a name which didn't stick.

The volunteer group was to consist of any members of the resigned MYSKANIA willing to serve, plus those senior members of the 1945/46 Student Council, Board of Finance, Campus Commission and Election Commission who would accept the responsibility. Twelve seniors did take on the job, including six of the twelve resigned MYSKANIA. As

a result of their efforts, MYSKANIA rose again from the ashes. Membership continued to be the highest non-academic honor in the college, but the group was more vulnerable than in the first 30 years of its existence.

The kind of criticism that preceded the drastic change in the selection procedure had already led MYSKANIA, in 1945, to stop wearing robes in assembly. The first MYSKANIA to use the new selection method recommended nine juniors for the 1947/48 MYSKANIA (the student body approved only seven of these), and suggested nine others, of which six were voted in. None of the 13 additional nominees were elected. Quite evidently, there was no longer blind acceptance of MYSKANIA's judgment in this year, nor in subsequent years.

In 1947/48 another potential diminution of MYSKANIA's functions was launched, but did not succeed. A constitutional committee recommended a new constitution for the Student Association among the provisions of which was placement of judicial power in a five-member judiciary, not MYSKANIA. The new constitution, presented as a take-it-or-leave-it complete package, was rejected.

#### Change Again

Once again, in 1957/58, a complete revision of the Student Association constitution was presented to the student body but this time section by section. Some of the changes that were accepted excluded the president of Student Association from MYSKANIA; created a senate, and assigned MYSKANIA as the judicial branch of government. Its duties were to interpret the Student Association constitution, try all impeachment cases, act as a court of appeal, consider unusual cases referred to it by any student group, be guardian of the freshman class and uphold traditions. In 1958/59, the Student Senate returned to MYSKANIA the responsibility for organizing the freshman class. In 1959/60, MYSKANIA recommended up to ten of the nominees, but all the others (25 that year) were self-nominated, i.e., applicants for the honor.

New York State College for Teachers was renamed State University of New York at Albany in 1960/61, but the move to the new campus did not begin for another four years. It was in 1962/63 that MYSKANIA was called on to judge a cause celebre. Some of our students, while attending a basketball tournament at Cortland, behaved outrageously. According to the State University News of March 8, 1963, "For these men (?) a tournament weekend cannot just consist of basketball games, cheering, a few drinks, and a little camaraderie and conviviality. No, for these people 'mooning,' 'c.c.o.'s,' and 'hymns,' are more in the vogue." The administration referred the matter to MYSKANIA for consideration. MYSKANIA met three to four hours daily, for two and a half weeks, obtaining student-submitted briefs and calling in students who had attended the Cortland weekend for informal hearings.

They issued summons for formal hearings to those that had been most seriously implicated, and finally reported that "there had been a serious misrepresentation of the University," and recommended that action be taken against several individuals - expulsion for one, suspension for another, social probation or reprimands for others. This was the last vigorous action of MYSKANIA.

The 1960's were not a good time for preservation of traditions. Nationwide, Vietnam war protests, resentment of authority, scorn for the "over thirty" generations, civil rights conflicts, sexual freedom, were all evidence of a ferment in the young. Our campus was not exempt, especially in the late 1960's.

### A New Era

In 1963/64, freshman-sophomore rivalry was abolished, the end of a tradition of more than 40 years. The earlier year-long series of rivalry events, culminating in the spring on Moving-Up Day, had already been condensed to a six-week period at the beginning of the college year, and ending on Campus Day. In 1963, an apparently apathetic sophomore class failed to field a push-ball team on time, and the contest was awarded to the freshmen by default. This controversial decision sparked debate on the value of rivalry. An editorial in the State University News of October 12, 1963, said "Rivalry (is) under attack as childish, silly, outdated, unworthy of a great university." In defense of rivalry, the editorial went on, "Rivalry, if it is done properly, can be important in building a freshman class into a real class." Before the next freshman class appeared in September, 1964, the source of so many memories for alumni of earlier years was put to rest, and MYSKANIA had still less to do.

The next year students began to occupy the first completed dormitory in the uptown campus. Also in that year drastic amendments, effective in May 1965 were made to the Student Association constitution. Under the new rules, MYSKANIA's judicial duties were eliminated and vested in a separate Supreme Court, appointed by Central Council from candidates screened by MYSKANIA. The Albany Student Press said, "Each year, under the old system, the members of MYSKANIA are taken from their respective spheres of influence and placed in a judicial position. This limits, by separation of powers, the potential contributions of members of MYSKANIA to the Student Association and community." The Student Association constitution did not allow simultaneous service on MYSKANIA and any other major office, such as Central Council or Senate.

The principal functions of MYSKANIA under the revised constitution were to guard traditions, act as guardians of the freshman class and act as screening agent for appointments to Supreme Court.



The Supreme Court was an idea that was hard to implement. It was supposed to consist of four seniors, three juniors and two sophomores, but there were too few applicants (because the separation-of-powers concept also applied to members of the Court), and the 1965/66 MYSKANIA found only seven students to nominate to Central Council, who could therefore make no choices among candidates. In the following year, again, only seven candidates were submitted for the nine positions. Besides the scarcity of applicants, the court was unable to function in many years because the constitution did not provide for filling vacancies, leaving the court without a quorum. A backlog of cases piled up.

The lack of final powers in MYSKANIA's duties, as set-up in the constitution, created a void. A 1967 editorial in Albany Student Press asked "Where's MYSKANIA?" It discussed the lack of functions for the group and said that next year's seniors would be the last to remember its former glory.

MYSKANIA did make sporadic efforts to create a more effective role for itself. In March 1967 it said it planned to involve itself in intercollegiate functions on this campus, evaluate the school's grading system, revive school spirit and help solve group problems on campus. In October 1967 it proposed reassuming the judicial function by amending the constitution, but backed off again the following month, proposing instead the vague goal of "being a student sounding board...in contemplation of future needs of the student body."

A March 1968 editorial called the 1968 MYSKANIA a do-nothing and said if the 1969 MYSKANIA "remains only as an honorary, then it is worthless to the student body and should be defunct." The 1969 MYSKANIA tried to organize a Student Association conference for an overview of student government, but no apparent changes resulted. It did recommend an end to chaperones at student affairs (accepted by Central Council) and an end to freshman curfews.

The 1970 MYSKANIA, in screening the nominees for the next year's MYSKANIA, followed the criteria for selection to the letter, and came up with only 14 nominees from the 38 juniors who had applied. All 14 were tapped by MYSKANIA in blatant disregard of the SA Constitution which required exactly 13. An ultimatum had been delivered by the 14 candidates saying that either all 14 would be tapped or no tapped person would take the MYSKANIA oath. Tapping was before an audience of 150, not the full student body as in Moving-Up Days on the old campus.

Central Council voted to prosecute MYSKANIA for attempting to seat all 14, blasting MYSKANIA 1971 for "blackmailing" the outgoing MYSKANIA. The new group replied that omitting one of the 14 as a result of a popularity vote would be cruel, a point more important than constitutionality. The subsequent issues of Albany Student Press had no word of the resolution of this conflict. Could that have been because the Supreme Court could not assemble a quorum?

Once again, a new Student Association constitution was passed in March 1971. This one said that MYSKANIA was to be composed of "several" members "nominated and selected from the junior class by a screening committee." Exceptions to the qualifications for nominees or to the procedures was left to the determination of Central Council. The constitution said, "Duties and Functions - MYSKANIA shall perform selected ceremonial functions of the University." Period!

In May 1971 thirteen members were elected to MYSKANIA, but the results were withheld "pending the possible referral to Supreme Court of certain Central Council actions." Neither the "certain actions" nor news of the results of Supreme Court adjudication appeared in print. In 1972 and 1973 nominations and elections took place without conflict. In May 1973 when the Albany Student Press announced the names of MYSKANIA for 1974, it included a story about MYSKANIA's hopes to bring back some of the traditions of the past; to work at regaining its standing in the eyes of the University, and to create greater student awareness of the high honor MYSKANIA deserves.

The description of MYSKANIA members' functions at this time, which appeared with a March 1974 announcement that nominations were being accepted, said they were freshman class guardians, tour guides on Community-University Days and participants in Alumni Day functions and in ceremonial functions at Freshman Convocation in September and Commencement in May.

The May 1974 instructions for election to MYSKANIA said "graduating seniors only vote for MYSKANIA." This was the only mention of such a limitation, and may have been mistaken. In May 1976 there was an irregularity in counting ballots for MYSKANIA. Because the count was taking too long (not enough of MYSKANIA '76 showed up to help), the MYSKANIA members present took a sample counting every seventh ballot instead of a full count. It was decided that re-elections would be held in the fall, but when the fall semester started, as the Albany Student Press headline put it, "Lack of interest snuffs out MYSKANIA re-elections." And the news story went on, "MYSKANIA will continue to exist in its present form and membership unless Supreme Court action is taken." Apparently there was no such action, and the results stood.

The last MYSKANIA was from the class of 1979. When this MYSKANIA appeared before Central Council to justify its budget request, it could not define an adequate set of functions, and was not included in the budget. It did not call for nominations for 1980; there was no election; there was no MYSKANIA.

The Life and Death of Myskania  
Page ten

MYSKANIA had served, and served well for its time, but the times changed. Student Association, the child it had created and nurtured, finally squeezed it out. The once young and lusty MYSKANIA, grown old and impotent, died - except in memory.

Alfred Basch  
MYSKANIA 1931  
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