

Novelist Cites Case Against Frats

(Editor's Note: The American Weekly for the past two Sundays has acted as a debate forum for the age-old argument for and against fraternities and sororities. Reprinted below is the text of the first article, "The Case Against Fraternities," by Sloan Wilson, former assistant professor of English and director of information services at the University of Buffalo. Tuesday's Emerald will carry the article favorable to fraternities by Herbert L. Brown, past chairman of the National Interfraternity Conference. Students should recognize that each article is merely an expression of one man's opinion.)

Wilson is author of the recent best seller, "Man in the Gray Flannel Suit."

Last winter a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was killed while being initiated into a fraternity. He had been left out in the woods alone on a cold night by his "brothers" and was trying to find his way back to his campus. While crossing a frozen pond, which he may have mistaken for a snow-covered meadow in the darkness, he fell through the ice and was drowned.

Fraternities are allowed a good deal of latitude in the name of good clean horseplay, but they aren't supposed to kill people. All sorts of reforms were undertaken on the M.I.T. campus, and the paid executive secretaries of fraternities all around the country were kept busy writing statements about the good deeds their members have substituted for old-fashioned hazing.

In spite of this, the incident of the boy falling through the ice in the darkness dealt a hard blow to fraternities. A lot of people began to wonder what all these Greek letters really mean and whether fraternities aren't fundamentally vicious.

I think this is too bad because there is nothing vicious about fraternities. They can be called stupid, witless, juvenile and purposeless associations much like the "clubs" small boys organize in back-yard shacks, but they can't be called vicious. Most of them have a kind of Boy Scout code of honor which makes their members burst with pride.

It bothers me to see fraternities criticized for the wrong reasons. Fraternities can easily prove they're not vicious, and they can easily change their initiation procedures to avoid unfortunate fatal accidents. In doing this, they may seem to have undertaken important reforms, and to have justified their existence. That, of course, would be nonsense. The existence of fraternities can't be justified any more than can many other manifestations of adolescence.

Very few people seem to understand what fraternities (and sororities and other secret clubs) are. They are organizations of students which ask some people to be members and exclude others. The standards of acceptance are vague and are established by the fraternity members themselves.

The goal of each fraternity usually is to get as its members the "best" students enrolled in an institution of learning. By "best" I don't mean the more brilliant or the most moral; I mean "best" as construed by the adolescents themselves.

To some this means rich, handsome and white Protestants, a definition which in its guileless

witlessness almost achieves innocence. To others, "best" means those possessed of the prevailing code of social behavior, or the best available after "better" fraternities have taken their pick.

Fraternities like to boast about getting "a good cross-section" of students as members, but on almost any campus an old hand will be able to tell which fraternities specialize in attracting the local version of socialites, which ones pride themselves on varsity athletes, and which ones are havens for the boy intellectuals. There are fraternities especially known for heavy drinking, for wild parties and luxurious living.

On almost any campus it is easy to find which fraternities are for white Protestants only, which ones are largely Catholic and which ones are largely Jewish. In the past, many fraternities openly placed written articles of racial or religious restriction in their constitutions. Recently there have been many hasty and red-faced attempts to bring the constitutions of fraternities into line with the constitution of the United States, but no one can seriously doubt that intolerance and bigotry is still practiced by many fraternities.

From campus to campus and from year to year the chapters of fraternities change, but each tends to seek students of like nature. On each campus there will be the "best" fraternity — the one which has attracted the most prosperous Protestant students of athletic, academic or social distinction.

The "best" fraternity sometimes can make the superficially believable claim that it gets a cross-section of the "best" students. But there can be only one "best" fraternity. Many others are established to assuage the feelings of those who fail to get in the "best" fraternity. If the "ins" organize, so do the "outs." If students, for one of many reasons, are excluded from one fraternity, the thin-skinned ones frequently organize a fraternity of their own.

Thus every student is neatly compartmented on many an American campus, and the main purpose of a college education is, in a sense, defeated. That is the irony of fraternities: they do the most harm to their own members.

In the past, many tears have been shed over the plight of students who aren't asked to join a fraternity. In my opinion these students are lucky. They may have momentarily hurt feelings,

and they may even spend most of their college days feeling themselves to be outcasts, but they do not suffer the invisible injuries inflicted upon those who do become fraternity members. They do not have the stultifying experience of associating only with people of their own kind for their entire college career.

They are not blinded by false pride in having "made" an institution which was not worth making in the first place. They can, once their wounded pride is healed, become one with those very best college students of all: those who wouldn't think of joining a fraternity.

Today more and more students feel that their intelligence is insulted when they are invited to participate in the trick hand-clasps, juvenile insignia, the paddling of posteriors, the abandonment of young boys in the woods at night, and all the rest of it.

For decades many American college students were notorious for their immaturity, but since the war they have shown signs of growing up. The really brilliant students nowadays are taking a hard look at the "advantages" fraternities pretend to offer and are recognizing them as childish frauds.

One of these "advantages" is "brotherhood," which is achieved by denying the fundamental brotherhood of all men, by excluding people of different men or manner.

Mature students are realizing that they do not need Greek letters to have friendship. The veterans of World War II who returned to college found that they could drink beer without being "initiated," and they weren't enthusiastic about being paddled or taken on "scary" expeditions by beardless youths. Most of these ex-servicemen ignored fraternities. They have set a sensible example for their younger brothers and their sons.

Another so-called advantage of fraternities is the development of social ease, or "savoir faire." Apparently a lot of clods who blushed at the thought of asking a woman to dance and who did not know a salad fork from a pitch fork have, over the years, joined fraternities and found enlightenment in the field of modes and manners. Special classes for such poor souls could be provided — if fraternities should die of their own clownishness.

What other advantages do fraternities pretend to offer? A "sense of belonging" is one. Undoubtedly there are a few students on every campus who are afraid to stand up as indi-

viduals. For such people it is not enough to be a member of a family, a church, a college, a nation, and the human race. They like to believe they're something special, because they have achieved membership in an organization which keeps others out. Fortunately, most colleges now have psychiatric clinics for such students.

There is one other "advantage" which fraternities dangle before the eyes of prospective members, but even the fraternity members themselves are sometimes ashamed to boast of it. That is the "advantage" of "contacts" made at college who will later be useful in helping a fraternity member to get a job. It would seem that many of the "brothers" lack confidence in themselves and are afraid they will be unable to get a job as good as they deserve without outside aid.

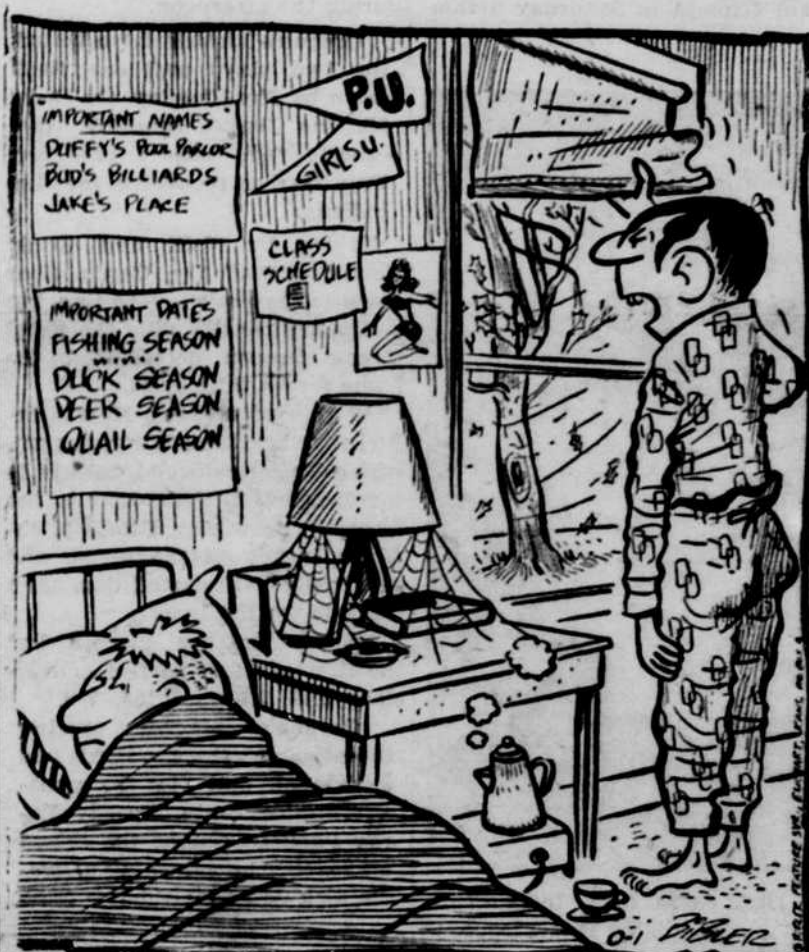
Whatever the reason, fraternity members often show pathetic hope in, and dependence on, one another for help in earning a living. On what frail straws these poor souls lean!

I have been in the hiring business on several occasions, and I have been amazed at the eagerness of many fraternity "brothers" to blackball one another. On many occasions people have said to me something like this: "Jim Jones? He was a member of my fraternity in college, and I knew him well. He's a bum — a real bum!"

In the business world, the accuracy of the recommendations a man gives others greatly affects his own reputation, and no old-school-tie sentiment affects the judgment given by capable and ambitious men. I suppose some jobs are reserved for down-and-outers by their fraternity brothers but, fortunately, government relief programs are relieving fraternities of these responsibilities.

In any case, really capable students don't spend their days on

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WALL DECORATIONS and cobwebs covering the "study" lamp and dusty books of this room by cartoonist Bibler seems to illustrate Wilson's criticism of fraternities. The former University of Buffalo administrator uses the words "stupid," "witless," "juvenile" and "purposeless" to describe the American fraternity system

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