

Nat'l IFC Official Defends Fraternities

(Editor's Note: Reprinted below is the second of the two recent American Weekly articles debating the worth of the fraternity system. Herbert L. Brown, past chairman of the National Interfraternity Conference, answered Sloan Wilson's attack, reprinted in Monday's Emerald, with this defense of the system.)

To prove how vicious college fraternities are, Mr. Sloan Wilson last week used as his prime example a fraternity initiation at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in which a pledge fell through the ice and was drowned in a pond.

I am sure that on sober second thought Mr. Wilson will agree that he has not proved fraternities "stupid," "witless," "juvenile" and "purposeless" (or any of the other angry adjectives he hurled at them), by his single example of tragedy. He should be well aware that several hundred thousand college students are prevented from falling into holes by fraternities—from falling into social awkwardness, failing grades, athletic inertia, and ignorance of group living.

I refuse to reply to Mr. Wilson in the style of his attack; rather I will answer his "arguments" with a defense of fraternities, which I will attempt to make more well-proportioned and level-headed than his broadside.

What would Mr. Wilson find if he would look for the truth about college fraternities? He would find, first of all, that there are 12,000 chapters of Greek-letter societies in the United States with a total membership of four million. If fraternities are "purposeless," why have 225,000 new members joined them in the past three years? If fraternities are "unnecessary," why have 381 new chapters been established in the same period? Would so many young Americans in so many places go into organizations that are "stupid, witless and juvenile"?

If Mr. Wilson believes so, then his faith in the wisdom of the American people is pretty weak. Fraternity life is continuing to flourish because fraternities exist to answer genuine student and college needs, because fraternities help in the attainment of worthy educational, social and personal goals.

"On our campus," says Chancellor Ethan A. H. Stephey of Washington University (St. Louis), "fraternities are a very real asset. I frankly don't know what we would do without their influence and support. We are proud of them and the record they have made." The testimony of dozens of other college presidents—men like George Bowman of Kent State (Ohio), Harlan Hatcher of Michigan, and Milton Eisenhower of Johns Hopkins University—tells the same story: "fraternities are needed."

The reason that the great good in fraternities is so clouded is that, unfortunately, only the freak prank makes the headlines; only the tragic slip arouses righteous indignation. The many valuable things that American fraternities do for their members, their colleges and their communities—their many fine purposes and achievements—go unheralded because activities like working in a community chest drive, or teaching a student how to conduct himself socially, are hardly the stuff of news.

When a student is accidentally hurt in what is usually harmless fun, people are quick to cry out that fraternities should be driven from the land like the plague. But when a student's marks are raised by the help he receives

from his fraternity brothers, when a community Red Cross receives blood from a chapter, when a college is saved from a housing problem by a group with Greek letters, too few people know about it.

Exactly what are the values of American fraternities—to the student, to the school, and to the college community—values that are so often lost behind scare headlines and distorted by attacks like Mr. Wilson's?

Fraternities make important contributions to the minds, characters and personalities of their members.

First, each fraternity has a tutoring system in which members proficient in certain studies help members who are less proficient. It is often the coaching of a fraternity brother that prevents a fraternity man from failing a course.

Mr. Wilson mocks at fraternity's "boy scout code of honor which makes their members fairly burst with pride" but one great source of fraternity pride is the achievement of high scholastic marks by its members. Fraternity brothers do not tutor one another simply to prevent failure in subjects. They exchange knowledge, so that the students in their chapter can make the best marks on the campus.

Ask any fraternity man and he will tell you how often a "seminar" with his brothers the night before an exam raised his marks. If this is a "boy scout" code, then to be out of the "boy scouts" is to enjoy being a moron.

It is an undisputed fact that the social programs of fraternities give members poise and polish which would develop more slowly—and perhaps not at all—if the students were to live alone. Fraternity parties, outings, dances, and sports enable a student to shed his adolescent awkwardness and learn to move with confidence among members of his own and the opposite sex. In addition to helping a man's grades, fraternities help him feel at ease on a dance floor, on the baseball diamond, on a committee—or in any facet of group living.

Fraternities develop qualities of leadership in their members. They inculcate in them standards of good conduct, good manners, good taste, and good sportsmanship. Most important, fraternities teach members to live together in harmony, and understanding.

Mr. Wilson rejoices over the advantage a college student receives when he does not join a fraternity.

Shortly after graduation, most of these students will be asked—with no refusal permitted—to join a larger and less friendly fraternity called the United States Army.

Who does Mr. Wilson think will be better prepared to cope with the trials of group living found in the military service—the "lone wolf" or the fraternity man? The essence of America, as President Eisenhower has so often said, is the team—both in peace and war.

And does Mr. Wilson believe that the "lone wolf" can learn the principles of self-government in his single room? He can read about them in history textbooks; but the fraternity man works with and studies these principles as they are alive in the political organization of his chapter.

Critics like Mr. Wilson are silent about the financial aid that Greek-letter societies constantly provide for students. Through the years, many fraternities have built up foundations to enable needier members to continue higher education. Without frats

from these foundations many boys would never get a college education.

How do fraternities help the colleges? First, and most important, they do so by housing many students. Fraternities furnish high-quality housing facilities which many colleges could never offer. If Mr. Wilson considers this "juvenile" then we must assume that he considers it "adult" for college students to live in tents.

Lest Mr. Wilson think that the only activity of college fraternities is sending students out to fall through icy ponds, here are others that might interest him:

Fraternities throughout America donate blood, work with community chest drives, give children's Christmas parties, entertain orphans and underprivileged children. They operate foreign student exchange programs, sell Easter and Christmas seals, collect clothing for refugees. They raise funds for the fight against polio, cerebral palsy, heart disease, and cancer; assist in the CARE program; and in many other ways help local, American, and world society.

Such activities are typical of fraternities, which Mr. Wilson considers "stupid and purposeless." He and other critics continue to shout: "Yes, but what about 'hell week' and discrimination?"

All right, what about them? The people making the most noise about an occasional "hell week" abuse do not seem to hear—or care—that fraternities themselves are eliminating archaic hazing practices. And no segment of American society has been more shocked or distressed over "hell week" tragedies than the college men and women of Greek-letter societies.

Fraternity members are the first to admit that outmoded hazing practices are a shortcoming in the fraternity system. In the past 10 years, "hell week" has become "help week" on most campuses. Instead of getting lost in the woods, students now spend this initiation period working on chores which improve their fraternity houses, their school and their community.

Fraternities have been further condemned for being selective in choosing their members but can you, Mr. Wilson, name a single social organization in this country that does not practice some type of selectivity in the choice of its members? But just to set the record straight, a few decades ago 44 of the 58 social fraternities in the National Interfraternity Conference at that time had restrictive membership clauses based on race, color or national origin in their constitutions. Today, no more than a dozen of the 61 groups in the Conference have such clauses.

People are innate joiners, Mr. Wilson. If there were no fraternities at colleges, cliques of people with similar interests would, naturally, get together anyway.

In fact, consider what colleges would be without fraternities.

There would be fewer students (for there would be fewer scholarships), lower marks,

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overcrowded dormitories and less effective social, athletic, and self-government programs for great numbers of students.

Fraternities—or groups like them (whether they are called "eating clubs" or "houses" or "societies")—will always exist at colleges because they answer a definite need. Dr. Milton Eisenhower—who has been president of

three colleges and who was recently appointed by his brother Dwight to help make North, Central and South America into one big fraternity—summed it up this way: "Fraternities and sororities are workshops in understanding and cooperation. They are anvils upon which the character of individuals may be fashioned for service beyond self."

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