



# A Brother's Story

Selected excerpts from the memoirs of  
Lawrence Wellington Wheeler  
Class of 1940



January 18, 1918 – June 12, 2015



edited by Thomas M. Reilly '07



## EDITOR'S NOTE

*In the fall of 1936, a young man from Sterling, Illinois, arrived at Cornell University to begin his freshman year. Within a few weeks, Larry Wheeler embarked on an adventure that would stay with him throughout his long life as he joined the ranks of the newest pledge class of the Cornell Chapter of Alpha Delta Phi.*

*Prior to Brother Wheeler's passing in 2015 at the age of 97, he wrote and published (only to his family) an epic family history and autobiography. Thanks to the generosity of his family, we are pleased to share with you the portion of Larry's story that spans his years at Cornell and his memories of Alpha Delta Phi. Humor, nostalgia, and mischief abound as he regales with tales of the "one-armed bandit," a suspicious concoction known as "purple Jesus," the near-destruction of the Beebe Lake dam, and the perhaps the most exotic pet ever to grace our hallowed halls.*

*Woven throughout these stories is that ever-present sense of brotherhood and camaraderie that we all know so well. While the world has changed much in the 75 years since Larry graduated from Cornell, it seems that life at Alpha Delt has endured more than one might imagine. There is no doubt that we will all find a connection with his experiences and understand how his adventures parallel our own (altogether too brief) time at 777 Stewart Avenue.*

— Thomas Marshall Reilly '07

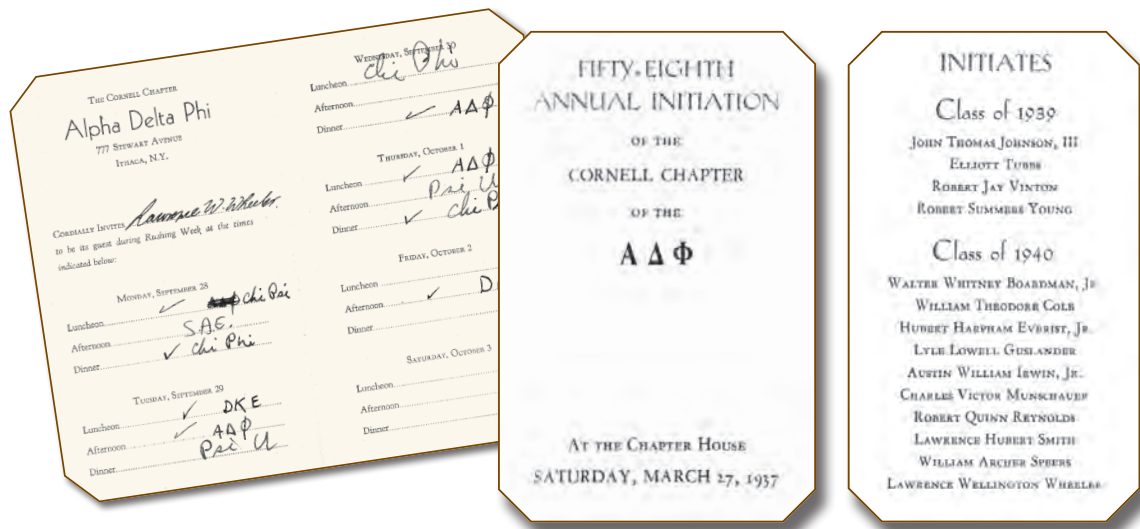


# A Brother's Story

Lawrence Wellington Wheeler '40

HAVING SELECTED CORNELL FOR MY EFFORTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND HAVING been accepted, I drove to Ithaca in the fall of 1936 to begin this adventure. It was the heyday of the Greeks when I was in college. There were 55 fraternities and 13 sororities at Cornell, which had a combined membership of about 2,400, or approximately one-third of the student body (half of the upper-class total, because freshmen couldn't live in a fraternity or sorority house). These organizations solved a big boarding problem because the university only housed freshmen, and those not belonging to fraternities or sororities had to board at random around town. For fraternity members, affiliation with a "house" not only provided room and board, but offered a built-in, ready-made social life, complete with secret handshakes and complicated passwords for some. My father had been a member of Alpha Delta Phi at the University of Chicago, so there was a big incentive for me to join the house, if they bid me.

It was a foregone conclusion, on both Dad's part and mine, that I would become a member of some fraternity, so when rushing began on the first day of registration, I was a prime prospect. Rushing for men was conducted according to rules



established by the Interfraternity Council: rushing was from 8 a.m. to 9:40 p.m., limited to the rushee's room (no meetings on trains or buses, and no more than three fraternity men in a room at one time); rush dates were only for lunches (two hours), afternoons (three hours) and dinners (three hours); and only one date by a fraternity was permitted per rushee per day. Pledging began a week after rushing started. By that time, I had been invited to visit 14 fraternities, and the whole procedure had lost much of its glamor—I was ready to commit; no surprise, it was Alpha Delt.

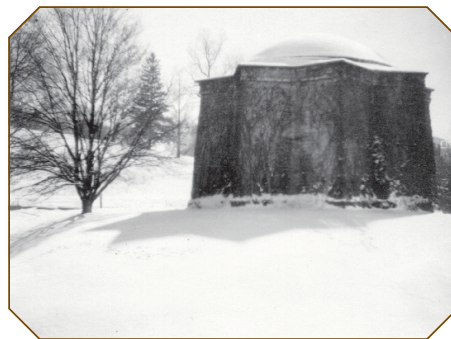
There were 11 in our freshman pledge class, and, of course, all were peachy guys—natch. As a “pledge,” one wore an identifying lapel pledge pin (a small green and white shield), got to eat all meals at the house, and was included in the fraternity's social activities. We drew various duties, according to a schedule kept by the pledge master, such as answering the house phone in the evenings (there were only two phones and one was for kitchen use). Some fraternities took an interest in their pledges' academic endeavors and rode herd, but as far as I could determine, the Alpha Delts didn't have this sort of concern about their neophytes' academic welfare; nor, in fact, much interest on the part of the upperclassmen in their own (with exceptions of course). After a dismal standing in the fraternity academic chain at the time I joined, the Alpha Delts had managed to climb to the top of the “Big Six” fraternities in academic standing by my junior year—not particularly because of my efforts.

I liked this first year of rather tangential fraternity life (still not living in the house), and the social aspects of membership were a definite asset. As a fraternity member, you enjoyed the camaraderie of “the brothers,” had access to other fraternities, and were a part of fraternity-sponsored activities: house parties (two or three a year), beer parties, “smokers,” teas, and dances. When out of doors, freshmen were required to wear a grey felt cap with a red button on top at all times, and, as a fraternity pledge, we were eligible to receive a few whacks with a paddle for infractions (the ignominy, it was with one's own paddle). Paddles were the weapon of choice in fraternities, and Driscoll Bros. advertised in quarter-page ads in the *Cornell Daily Sun*, “Driscoll paddles, all shapes and sizes. If the end is in view, they reach it. Our paddles are most satisfactory, in fact, you'll never forget them.” The fraternity

I joined, I'm glad to say, didn't engage in much corporal punishment and, in fact, rather disdained it. A freshman cap burning was held in May each year (I was on the committee), at which time these ever-present chapeaux were gleefully disposed of.

The two-day fraternity initiation was held in March of freshman year, with the pledges sequestered separately in rooms of the house. Upperclass hazing was rampant, with dire threats to pledges of "not making it" (when in fact they needed every member they could get to help pay the bills). Requirements were imposed, such as writing a theme about "What Alpha Delt Means To Me" (I snowed them under with a 15-page opus, which I still have), but, at least for this fraternity, there was no physical horseplay nor requirements involving imbibing vast amounts of alcohol. In my junior year, one fraternity lost a pledge during initiation when he fell into Cascadilla Gorge and was killed. He slipped the wrong way while being forced to walk on the railing of the fraternity house porch, which extended out over the gorge. After two days of "solitary" and all the pressures the brothers could contrive, the initiation ceremony at Alpha Delt took place, and Dad was there.

Unique at Cornell, Alpha Delta Phi has a separate chapter house, where the fraternity meetings are held. It is a dome-roofed, eight-pointed star-shaped, very handsome, stone building adjacent to the fraternity house and known to the brothers as the "Goat House" (why?). There is no exterior entrance (attention, fire marshal!) and is reached only through a tunnel from the house basement, which is barred with a pad-locked, iron-grilled door. Of course, entrance was limited to the members only, and it was here in the musty (lacked adequate ventilation), high-ceilinged, dimly lighted, and very impressively paneled meeting room that, once a month, the membership assembled in coat and tie to solemnly conduct the business of the fraternity. The Goat House did lend a very formal and impressive note to the evidence of "fraternity," but there was certainly the question of safety: 30-plus men trapped in this tomb with only a long, low, narrow tunnel through which to escape if there had been a fire there or in the main house (smoke would certainly have been a problem), but who was concerned with that sort of thing?



The Alpha Delt fraternity house was one of the newest and nicest on campus. It had been built five years before I arrived, after its predecessor had burned. It is a huge, well-designed, handsome stone building, built on the side of a hill at the door of the campus. The entrance hall is a dramatic two-story room with a floor-to-ceiling broad bay window on the front and a second-floor balcony on three sides above the hall. The recreation room, kitchen, and dining room (plus quarters for three hired help) are on the lower level. The first floor includes the library and living room (both with fireplaces), entrance hall, solarium at the back (mostly unused), and an alumni suite with private bath for guests. The rooms on the second floor for the 20-plus live-in members consisted of suites of two rooms, study, and

bedroom, for each pair of roommates. There was also a suite for the house president and roommate with two bedrooms and a large study. The big, round third-floor tower room at the back of the house could be used for a bedroom/study as well, and two large toilet/shower facilities for everyone were located on the second floor. A visit to the house in the 1990s revealed double the occupancy and none of the luxury of the housing I had experienced. The room charge per school year during my tenure for these very comfortable accommodations was \$200 (about 75 cents per day, and the annual board for three daily meals during the school year \$312 (about \$1.15 per day). The only other fraternity costs, once one was initiated, were annual dues of \$100, a levy of \$15 in advance of each house party, and one's share of long-distance calls (always contested).

The interior of this establishment was taken care of by Reginald "Reggie" Lee, a quiet, patient, long-suffering black man who had served the fraternity since 1920 and was respected and depended upon by all. He daily made up all the beds, save those with bodies still in them (changed them once a week), and kept the house looking as respectable as possible, all very unobtrusively. The cooking was done by Rose Reber, whose kitchen was her unchallenged domain. She was a very short, vociferous but good natured, rather unattractive lady with a definite mid-European accent. Single-handedly, she cranked out edible food three times a day, seven days a week during the entire school year, with no breaks for 30-plus hungry brothers (all done without chaining her to the stove in the kitchen). This included hot breakfasts if desired, steak dinners once a week, and a chicken extravaganza on Sundays. Cooking these quantities required large vessels for vegetables. Rose, being quite short, found hand mashing potatoes in quantity was quite a challenge. She would stand on the foot rail, which ran across the front of the cooking range, and, leaning thus over a huge pot, would thrash the contents wildly, and it was no wonder that, from time to time at dinner, a brother would extract a long, black hair from his mashed potatoes—but you can get used to anything.

The semi-circular, low-ceilinged, tile-floored, dining room on the lower level was rather dramatic. There were continuous windows around the semi-circle, and the long, single table formed a large shallow V, with the house president sitting at the apex, seniors and juniors at left and right, and freshmen and sophomores opposite.



The specially-made large wooden chairs had been saved from the old house that burned and had plain, high-tapered, single-plank backs that extended above the heads of the seated diners. The meals were served by white-jacketed waiters, who were students working for meals and modest pay and who were supervised by Jim Cole, a student who had a room



in the lower level of the house near those of Reggie and Rose. Breakfast was from 7:00 to 9:00 (sometimes possible to squeeze out something a little later), lunch at noon, and dinner at 6:00 (coat and ties) with coffee afterward upstairs in the living room—altogether a pretty genteel setup. Dinner was the time for announcements of one sort or another and usually for a song or two (always started by a senior). Wednesday night was “steak night” and consequently the occasion for inviting a guest (no extra charge). Upperclassmen were permitted one guest a week, but there were seldom more than two or three present. The guest might be a friend from another fraternity, a visitor, or a faculty member. Young, single, underpaid faculty sought this opportunity at any of the fraternities, for it meant a good, free meal with maybe a drink beforehand (liquor was allowed in fraternity houses) and a solicitous, respectful environment. All this was pretty sophisticated to a lad from the Midwest, but I enjoyed it and didn’t have any trouble getting used to it.

For reasons not understood by arriving freshmen or anyone else, most fraternities frowned on their pledges dating coeds or evens being seen outside of class with them. The University Women’s Panhellenic Council established some pretty interesting rules, which further minimized coed availability: only two nights out a week later than class hours; sign out to a definite place and sign in by 12:00; register the name of a chaperone if you were going to a man’s room or to a fraternity house (optimist); and get permission for being out of town over three hours (five-mile limit). Any coed dating infractions by Alpha Delta pledges (if discovered) were rewarded with “tubbing.” This ritual involved preparing a bathtub (there was one in the alumni suite) by filling it with cracked ice and water (slushy snow in winter) and submerging the offender until he reached the required shade of blue or began to have trouble breathing. Tubbing was a great deterrent to coed liaisons, so female companionship was limited to “townies” (very limited selection and always a rather wary group), Ithaca College coeds (a step up, but again, very limited), or Wells girls (top of the line). Wells College is located on Cayuga Lake about 20 miles from Ithaca, and this small women’s college harbored an untold treasure of desirable dates—the 40-plus-mile round trip was as nothing.

I found social life at Cornell very different from anything I had experienced. House parties were completely new to me and were frequently held jointly, with two or three fraternities pooling their resources to hire a band for dancing at one

of the houses—Jimmy Lunceford’s well-known New York orchestra, for example, at Alpha Delt during Junior Week. These occasions and fall formals were all opportunities for “putting on the dog,” and with everyone so dressed, it did lend an exciting and sophisticated note to the festivities. Not all gatherings were “dress up,” however, for there were totally informal dances, beer parties, and “smokers” interspersed throughout the year—Cornell had something of a “party school” reputation, and I had no objection. The real beer party season came with spring, when these celebrations could be held outdoors. A grassy field off campus with a view out over the lake was ideal. Dates were arranged (some affairs were stag), snacks procured, blankets spread, kegs of Canandaigua or Ballantine’s beer tapped, and Bacchus summoned. These were always jolly affairs, singing songs, horsing around, and often creating quite a mess. A note from the owner of a venue used for a Big Six beer party (six fraternities self-designated as “the Big Six”) read “*Please* clean up the mess, and why did you cut down the tree?”



Drinking was part of the fraternity way of life, and it would have been easy to fall into the pattern—down to Jim’s or Zinck’s in the evenings, getting soused at beer picnics, and overindulging at house parties—there were many who did. Probably because it had never been a part of my experience, and also because I was in

training for track, it was nothing that particularly interested me. I drank a few beers now and then and joined in at house parties with some scotch and a celebratory bottle of champagne, but that was about it. There were those hardy souls who imbibed freely on weekends in the local bistros and spent house parties in an alcoholic haze, but, except for that which accompanied the parties, there was little drinking in the fraternity house. Occasionally, an overwhelming thirst would prompt some roisterers to mix up a deadly preparation known as a “purple Jesus.” This lethal beverage was created by having all participants dump in whatever liquid remnants they had squirreled away—bourbon, scotch, gin, vodka, liqueurs, wine, and anything that was available—and then lightly diluting the potion with Welsh’s grape juice: a real vintage concoction that guaranteed to produce an enormous head.

The dances, parties, and formal extravaganzas were all very new and exciting, and as a fraternity member, one was automatically included. Hedonistic as it seemed, it all fit in with college at the time and, while assuredly a distraction from academic endeavor, was a welcome and accepted part of the scene. I enthusiastically participated and enjoyed it. Campus life agreed with me, and I was glad that I had come to Cornell. I was thrilled with the beautiful campus, enjoyed the excitement of continually unfolding new experiences, reveled in the freedom

of being independent—away from home and on my own and challenged by the choices and options that were part of this new life.

Sophomore year meant finding a roommate and moving into the fraternity house. During my pledge year, I had developed a close friendship with a fellow Alpha Delt pledge, William Archer “Arch” Speers. Arch came from Bedford Hills, New York; his mother was English, and his father Danish. He had gone to Andover, taken Greek and Latin, smoked cigarettes, could ski, liked classical music, and was very sophisticated. None of these characteristics applied to me, and in the beginning, I didn’t aspire to any of his pastimes or avocations; we just got on well with each other; both had a sense of humor and had a good time. We became roommates for the next three years. Our relationship was not just compatible, it was a great success and contributed to our mutual enjoyment of four years of college. Arch was an unforgettable part of my life. Since we both had an interest in photography, we set up our own darkroom in the trunk storage room in the basement of the house. The whole set-up was pretty primitive, and all the negative and print washing had to be done in the washbowl upstairs in the bathroom—not too handy.

As roommates, during our sophomore and junior years, we were housed in the corner suite at the head of the stairs on the second floor of the Alpha Delt house (a choice location acquired by arriving before school started). During senior year, we had the president’s suite, but that comes later. Of our first digs, one room was the study with our desks, bookcase, easy chair, etc., and the other with our beds, dressers, and a closet. When one stepped out of the room, it was onto the balcony that overlooked the entrance hall, and just a little way down the hall at the corner was a closet, a cubbyhole of great significance. Over the summer of 1937, I had purchased a five-cent slot machine for \$25, it went with me to school that fall and was housed in the upstairs closet near our room in the fraternity.

The upperclassmen seemed to have no objection to my having this gambling device in the house and, in fact, became my best customers—two or three standing about at any hour plugging in nickels. The clunk of the arm, the whirl of the wheels, and clatter of coins provided background music for those who studied (a flush of coins paying out, together with the accompanying whoops, always brought them



out of their rooms—talk about a distraction!). The payout percentage was fairly generous (nickel jackpots were \$6 or \$8), and the machine became quite a popular pastime. However, because of all this activity, in which house guests sometimes indulged, I was beginning to feel rather apprehensive regarding the university's learning of the presence of this gambling den on campus. There had been no problem thus far, but the “one-armed bandit” was no longer a secret, and it was just possible that the university proctor, Mr. Manning, might pay me a visit with who knew what result (probation?). Finally, after six months of successful operation, business had dropped off, and I felt I was pushing my luck with the administration, so I sold the machine to an underclassman. Two weeks later, someone stole it from him (not me). My total profit from the venture was \$302 (6,040 nickels, *one term's tuition*) and a lot of experience. I was glad to escape without having been apprehended.

About once a week, one of Ithaca's clothing merchants would visit the fraternity house to show his wares. After we came up from dinner to have coffee in the living room, there on the long center table would be a tempting array of haberdashery (shoes, shirts, ties, hats, jackets, slacks) displayed by Browning King, Finchley, Tripler, or the Sport Shop. It was always tempting to indulge, but usually modest budgets made it possible to resist the most blatant blandishments. There were “clothes horses” of course, and I remember one brother, Austin Erwin (later a New York Supreme Court Judge), seriously explaining to me that “clothes make the man” and that a proper wardrobe was essential—turns out all he needed was a robe.

We were also visited each night about 10 o'clock, when dinner had worn off, by Frenchy, a huckster of sandwiches, fruit, candy bars, and soft drinks. He arrived in an old panel truck guarded by a huge, chained but ferocious, red-eyed beast, whose snarling, lunging, and barking discouraged any raiding of the truck while Frenchy was occupied inside. He would burst through the front door with his hamper of goodies and blow a police whistle, which would bring the brothers running from the farthest reaches of the house. Sandwiches were 15 cents, and Frenchy pushed “peanut butter-jel” and did a good business. Later at night, perhaps after the late movies—who was studying?—or, if you had been hitting the books and needed a break, it was off to that very popular all-night rendezvous, Johnnie's, in Collegetown for a 15-cent hamburger.



During Junior Week in February, the brothers would evacuate the house and turn it over to their dates. In order to have a place to sleep (not much of this) and change clothes (lots of this), the men moved in with freshman pledges in the dorms or had some arrangement with another fraternity that wasn't having a house party. In preparation for the big event, the fraternity house was cleaned up as best possible, which always left something to be desired: things thrown away



or hidden that should be, goldfish put into the bowls of the wall urinals (they were not going to be used), and clothing and extra bedding moved out. Guests began to arrive as early as Thursday for the weekend, and festivities began immediately. The girls were paired in the rooms, hopefully compatibly, and the upstairs was completely their domain, off limits to the brothers. The Interfraternity Council published this caveat in an effort to clear their skirts: “It is up to every man to see that all rules of good conduct and morality are maintained, to the exclusion of all forms of disorderly conduct, excessive drinking, and all actions ill-befitting the name of Cornell.”

The parents of some upper-class brothers were drafted as chaperones and occupied the alumni suite at the house. There was always a question as to just how the chaperones were supposed to enforce the above injunction: keep the brothers from getting drunk (futile undertaking), preserve the young ladies’ chastity (opportunities for ravishing maidens seemed rather remote), insist on people getting some sleep (out of the question), or just ensure general decorum (this seemed to be the only practical possibility, but not a problem, for mostly the brothers were gentlemen). I think that, while they were always apprehensive and sort of “running along behind,” the chaperones enjoyed the experience and everyone catered to them.

Gala dinners were held at the fraternity, with singing and carrying on; every night was dress-up time with dates resplendent in corsages and finery, males preening themselves in white tie and tails, and some with Chesterfields, top hats, and grey gloves—all pretty dodgy and recorded for posterity in the inevitable house party pictures. On Sunday morning, the last day of Junior Week (and none too soon, for inevitable exhaustion always set in), milk punch heavily laced with rum was the standard fare, and then the exodus began, with the trains out of Ithaca laden with exhausted but happy bodies, cars returning to Wells and elsewhere, and the brothers



once again moving back into the house to crash (notorious absence from classes on Monday).

The Alpha Delt house was only five years old when I moved in, and, while some of the furniture had been saved from the 1929 fire and more purchased later, the solarium and recreation room had never been furnished.

The rec room was a large room with a stone fireplace on the lower level of the house, and during my junior year, the underclassmen undertook the job of refurbishing it. I had brought some English tavern prints back from a summer trip, and we framed those for the walls. Dad's hardware company contributed several gallons of paint, the tile floor was scrubbed, and a highly habitable room emerged. Arch designed a map to be painted on the wall above the fireplace, which graphically showed the location and distance to all the women's colleges in the east—a handy reference for the brothers for house party dates. Some durable (we hoped) chrome and plastic-covered furniture was financed by a house assessment, and a glad party christened the new “playground.” It was a welcome addition for entertaining, particularly at house-party time. We never got around to dealing with the solarium, a beautiful window-encircled, round room at the west of the house off the living room; it was destined, while I was there, to be used for storage. Another restoration project was the rehabilitation of the tennis court. This clay court was located on fraternity property, just below the house on Stewart Avenue. We labored in reconditioning the surface and repairing the high wire screens on the avenue side and managed to finance a new net, but despite its rebirth, it didn't get much use.

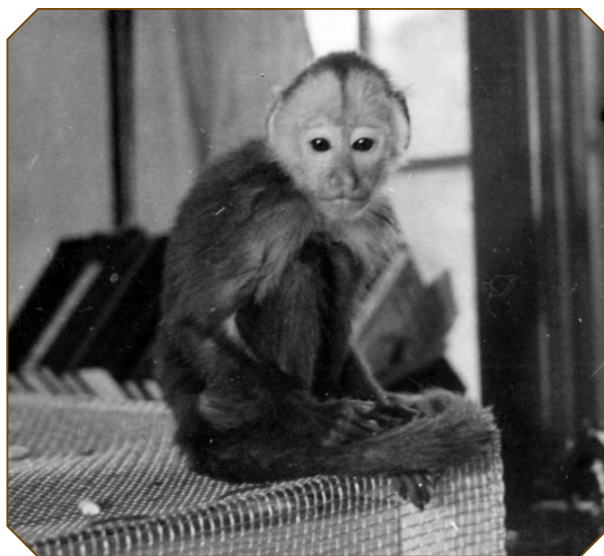
In November of my junior year, a note appeared on the bulletin board above the mail table in the entrance hall of the fraternity: “Seven More Days 'til William.” The curiosity increased as the countdown continued “Six More Days 'til William”... Questions flew: “Who is William?”, and speculation included a dog, a skunk, a parrot, and a younger brother. The fact was, Speers and Wheeler were responsible for this suspense, and, when construction began of a wire cage about the size of a desk (2×2s and galvanized hardware cloth with a small door on one side), it becomes apparent that a small animal of some sort was about to join the house—bets were taken.

On the appointed day, William arrived, was ceremoniously introduced to the brothers, and became a full-fledged Alpha Delt. He was a nine-month-old, prehensile, cinnamon ringtail monkey (from the Ithaca Pet Shop). He hailed from Mexico, was a little darker than cinnamon color, and had a white face and a nasty disposition. We provided him with a little red leather collar and a removable leash to make him portable and installed him in his new quarters, the newly built cage between our desks in our study room. William had little contact with people before joining us (short stay at the pet shop), and handling him required donning leather gloves to cushion his retaliatory bites (he never bit anything but hands and never scratched faces—good monkey). He wasn't enthused about the collar but in time gave up tugging at it and relapsed into sitting with one finger hung in the ample loop beneath his chin, as though fingering his pearls.

William's cage contained, in addition to his water bowl and food pan, a shelf on which to sit and contemplate his roommates and a bar to use for tricks and acrobatics. He spent a lot of time just cruising on the wire walls of the cage, making monkey sounds. His prescribed diet included bananas (logically, in our limited knowledge of monkeys), eggs, apples, and milk. Simians deal with bananas differently from the way we humans do. Whereas, in eating a banana, we peel it down part way, leaving a wrapper by which to hold it, William would whip off all the peel, put one end of the banana against the side of the cage and the other end in his mouth, and, pushing gently forward, would slowly engulf and masticate it—I never tried that approach. Eggs were a major part of his diet, and he would sit on his shelf to eat them. He'd carefully tap one end to break the shell, pick off the broken pieces, throw back his head and drink the contents with great relish. We found it very entertaining to substitute a ping-pong ball for his regular egg ration (how devious!). Williams would snatch it up, mount to his shelf and tap it gently on the edge to break it. After a few tentative and increasingly anxious tries, with loud shrieks on frustration, he'd beat "the egg" on the shelf and throw it around the cage—"What the hell kind of a bird laid this?"

We soon found that William was an early riser and, as the sun rose, so did William. In the glow of the sunrise, he'd grab the wire side of the cage and, shaking it violently, would utter his piercing jungle call to greet the day. This reveille was most disturbing to his roommates, who had no intention of greeting the day for several hours yet. His unwelcome habit was cured by covering his cage with a blanket to simulate darkness, and when it was removed at a more civilized hour, William would still go through his Tarzan act. After a couple weeks of acclimatization, we experimented with letting him out of his cage to circulate about on his own in our two rooms. A sign was hung outside on our door—"William At Large" —to avoid anyone opening the door and, heaven forbid, letting William loose in the rest of the house. He found this new freedom very rewarding and checked everything thoroughly. This included standing on top of our dressers, leaning over the front, opening the small upper dresser drawers and throwing their contents on the floor. He also found he could perform arboreal antics at ceiling height by going hand-over-hand around the room on the picture molding.

Above my desk, I had built a corner shelf on which I'd placed my collection of German beer steins. On one early release to roam about the room, this shelf proved an irresistible attraction to William. He mounted the wall to the shelf, inspected the mugs, and at once hurled one to the floor, smashing it. This was completely unacceptable, so I attached the



mugs to the shelf with a wire run through the handle and, despite his tugs, was able to salvage the rest. He still liked the shelf, however, and would crouch up there among the mugs over the student lamp on my desk. This lamp had a big three-way bulb and a frosted glass bowl that reflected both light and heat upward, providing a very cozy, warm monkey perch above. He spoiled this sanctuary, however, by one evening standing up in full height and peeing directly into the bowl of the lamp below, shorting it out in a fountain of sparks and a cloud of steam from the hot bulb. William was not a sanitary beast, and it was disappointing that we were unable to housebreak him, but we learned that this was just not in the cards.

We boarded William at the pet shop over Christmas vacation, and the bill was addressed to “Billie da Monk” at the fraternity house. Everyone liked William, and he was a great source of entertainment to his roommates. His large cage filled the space between my desk and Arch’s, and it was virtually impossible to look over at him and not find his bright, beady eyes scrutinizing you; even when we were both looking at him at once, he somehow paid attention to us both simultaneously. As time went on, he became known outside the fraternity (although we never took him outdoors—much too cold, and William had to be kept warm), and we became accustomed to responding to “How is William?” and discussing his health and activities as though he were a member of the family. One coed even knit him a very snappy little frosh cap and muffler, which he disdained to wear (but not because it was made by a coed). He also received a coconut by mail from Florida (addressed to William Wheeler Speers), which he also had nothing to do with because it was huge (he couldn’t even lift it), and he had never seen one in his life. To keep him warm in the winter, we got a little portable electric heater, which, day and night, was focused into his cage. The house electric bill went up considerably during those months, but the treasurer fortunately didn’t connect the rise with the “William heater.” William did catch a cold once, and the vet suggested putting “a little bourbon” in his milk as a tonic. William liked this very much and, while reeling around, added some rather spectacular tricks to his exercise bar repertoire. Long after the cold was gone, particularly at party time, and at his request, we supplemented his milk a bit—what the heck, everyone else was having some!

When the spring came and the summer vacation loomed, it became apparent that we’d have to make some new arrangements for William. We placed classified ads in the *Ithaca Journal* and *Cornell Daily Sun* “Have you a monkey in your home? We have—Monkey For Sale. Inquire Speers or Wheeler 2476”. This effort didn’t generate a single phone call; apparently Ithaca wasn’t “into monkeys,” and students were not prepared for the challenge. So, when Arch and I went on a rather extended spring vacation, we took William back to be boarded at the Ithaca Pet Shop where we had purchased him. When we returned, the board bill was such that we decided he had better just stay where he was in lieu of payment (and the proprietor was willing). This, of course, solved the summer problem too. While William was a fascinating experience, we never developed a real affection for him as one might for a dog (he was so darn dirty), and I have had no desire to get back into the monkey business—ever.

As college progressed, the tempo seemed to increase; everything ratcheted up a notch or two. I was running hurdles in all the meets for the track team, I began to be really involved in the day-to-day activities of two student publications, *The Cornell Widow* and *The Cornell Almanac*, I had been elected to the Junior Honor Society, and there were the regular fraternity meetings as well. The best time to reach anyone to communicate about these organizations was during the lunch hour. Since I was frequently on tap, I found that, rather than continually jumping up from the table in the dining room to answer the phone in the kitchen, it was better to eat

### *Resident Chapter During 1938-39*



BACK ROW, left to right: Morrow, C. Smith, Eddison, Campbell, Lynch, Rohn, Ziegler, Entenman, Miller, Bullard, Taylor, H. Gerhauser, Herbert, Hall, Second row: Reynolds, Ackerman, Wheeler, Boardman, Robinson, Easter, J. Smith, Hermann, Peterson, Richardson, R. Munschauer, Drew. Front: C. Munschauer, Everist, Erwin, M. Gerhauser, Bayly, Luke, Johnson, Cole, Speers.

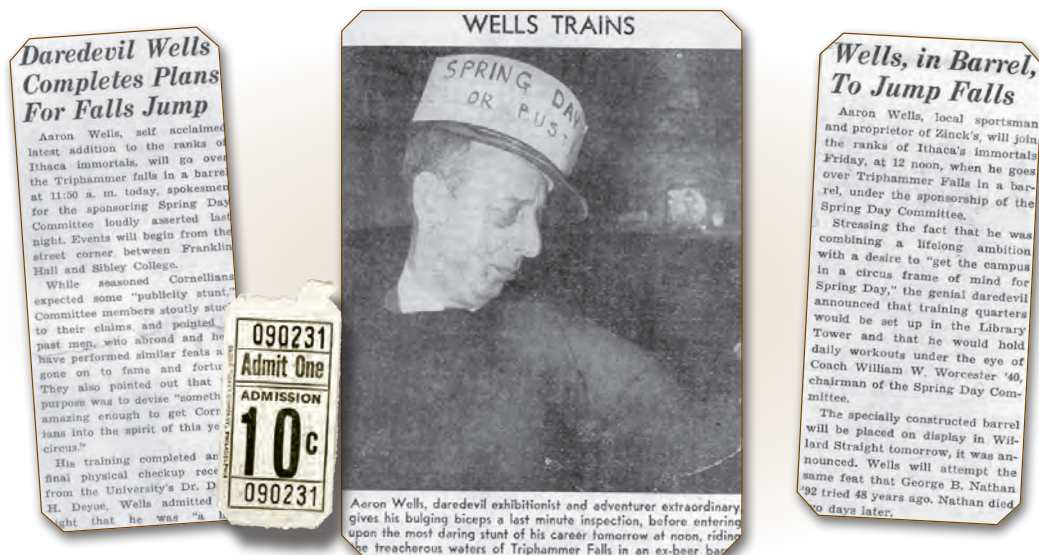
my noon meal out there, and Rosie went along with it (also very handy for having seconds). Of course, there were also the not-to-be-missed campus and fraternity social activities and the increasingly regular (and priority) trips to Wells College to see a young woman named Helen, who would later become my wife and mother of our four children. Late in the year, I ran for Student Council and was elected, and I also became president of the Cornell Chapter of Alpha Delta Phi. These both added their pleasures and responsibilities. It was a busy, exciting time.

By senior year, Arch and I had moved into the president's suite at the fraternity: two bedrooms and a large study and no cage for the now-absent William. Social activities continued and included the usual round of parties and dances, with Helen present for them all: Fall House Party, Junior Week (featuring Glen Gray's Casa Loma Orchestra) and Spring Day. I was treasurer of the 1940 Spring Day Committee, and while my responsibilities centered on money, I had been unable to stay away from promotion, and, with Arch (my never failing partner-in-crime), we worked out a scheme to promote advance interest in the Spring Day program. Aaron Wells was the proprietor of Zinck's ("We'll all have drinks at Theodore Zinck's when I get back next fall"), the popular student watering hole and a well-known, well-liked fixture in the campus community. We connived with him (and he didn't resist) to enter into a daredevil, guaranteed-to-attract-attention publicity stunt. With proper hoopla and ballyhoo, Aaron was to plunge over

foaming Triphammer Falls in a beer barrel—how's that for a grabber?

The advance publicity began with Aaron going through a period of physical conditioning to prepare him for the rigors of this undertaking, with daily workouts at the Library Tower under the supervision of his appointed coach (press coverage on hand), ending with his being certified by the university doctor as being able to handle the rigors of this feat. He was provided with “special equipment” (football helmet and shoulder pads), and a picture and article in the *Cornell Daily Sun* declared that “the daredevil exhibitionist and adventurer extraordinary,” though “a little nervous,” was ready to “face the falls.” The plan was to have Aaron arrive at the launching point on Beebe Lake above the falls a couple days before Spring Day. He would be transported on a short parade through the campus on a decorated float and accompanied by a band. Aaron, in helmet and shoulder pads, would be standing in an open-topped beer barrel waving to the crowd and acknowledging the cheers. The barrel was to be placed on a raised platform on the float and the platform sides draped in bunting so you couldn't see underneath. At the launching point, after a short address concerning his courage in facing the impending plunge in the torrent of Triphammer Falls, Aaron would be squashed down into the barrel and, to the cheers of the multitude, the top would be attached and the barrel pitched into the lake as the crowd held its breath, the band played and the drum rolled. Actually, Aaron would slip down through a trapdoor in the bottom of the barrel to safety where he was concealed under the platform, the bottom of the barrel would be replaced, and the barrel would then be set adrift without its passenger.

There was something else, however, that was calculated to be the *apogée extraordinaire!* I had secured a small stick of dynamite with a five-minute fuse from a quarry near town. The idea was to slip this charge into the barrel, light the fuse, attach the bottom and then set the barrel adrift. According to the plan, the barrel would float out on the lake and before reaching the dam to begin its descent over the falls would blow up, Aaron would reappear on the float, the band would play, the crowd would be astonished, and the pre-Spring Day circus atmosphere



would be established—a truly dramatic and spectacular plan. Everything went as arranged—in the beginning. Aaron arrived and, to the cheers of the throng, disappeared into the barrel, the fuse was lighted, the bottom replaced and, to the drum roll, the barrel was launched. To my horror, however, the wind caught it and, instead of drifting casually out on the lake well above the dam, it was borne rapidly away and soon lodged against the top of the dam instead of going where the water was pouring over—the five minute fuse still sizzling inside.

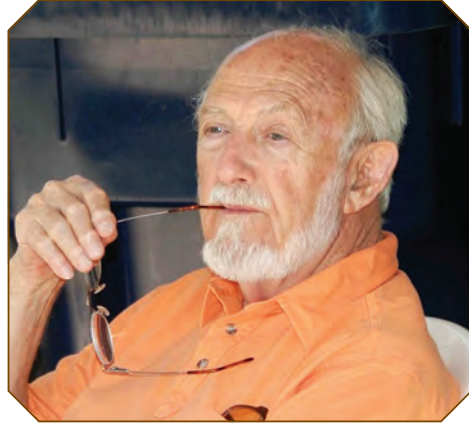
Images flashed before my eyes of a huge explosion, with the dam cracking and collapsing and Beebe Lake pouring down Fall Creek Gorge in a torrent to flood the town of Ithaca below. While the crowd was oblivious of this, my apprehensions mounted as the minutes passed, and I pictured the devastation with Beebe Lake drained, the gorge gutted, and Ithaca's lower town in ruins, to say nothing of my expulsion from school and jail sentence for causing this life-and-property-threatening disaster. However, time went by without an explosion, we resurrected Aaron from beneath the platform, the band played and, while certainly not as spectacular a climax, the promotion ended. About an hour later I got a canoe at the Johnny Parsons Club on the lake shore, and Arch and I paddled over to the dam to retrieve the barrel. The fuse was out because the barrel had (fortunately) leaked. Even if it had gone off, it would probably not have seriously damaged the dam, but it would no doubt have been enough of a disturbance to bring down the wrath of the administration. I've never had anything to do with dynamite since.

On a much smaller entertainment scale, the Rice brothers (Alpha Delt alumni) from nearby Trumansburg held their annual chicken fry for the brothers. Being in the "egg and apple" farm business, they invited the brothers each year to their farm, where they barbecued quantities of spring fryers on the outside charcoal fires and fed us bountifully at a very nice and much-enjoyed fraternity affair. Each year, the university sponsored a "musician in residence." During my senior year, this was Egon Petri, an internationally acclaimed pianist. While he was there, the university provided him with quarters, and the guest house happened to be just at the end of the driveway to the Alpha Delt house. In walking past there, we could often hear him "practicing" inside and, during the spring weather with the windows open, we could attend a free concert by just sitting quietly on the lawn outside—nice neighbor.

As one of my final responsibilities as president of the house, I turned in the 1940 annual report, which, among other things, showed a total of 39 active members (22 living in the house and 32 eating there), annual dues were \$100 and monthly board \$39, the chapter house was valued at \$170,000 (less a \$70,000 mortgage). I had also represented the Cornell Alpha Delt at the annual fraternity convention in Baltimore. The gathering was quite festive, with the required "business" being summarily dispatched and much more memorable activities thoroughly enjoyed—a dinner aboard an alumnus's yacht on Chesapeake Bay, multiple cocktail parties in alumni brothers' homes, and a gala affair at the country club before returning once again to the groves of academe and final exams.

## Epilogue

Our family has a rich history at Cornell and its environs. Both my oldest brother (Peter) and I (John) attended Cornell, and while we each rushed Alpha Delt, we both ultimately succumbed to the lure of Phi Delta Theta. My mother and sister both attended Wells, and both married Cornell men. Dad regaled us with stories of Cornell and Alpha Delt for many years before he committed those stories, and others, to a series of three leather-bound volumes about his life, from youth through college. He published many photos into these volumes (including many of Cornell) which, unfortunately, are not of sufficient quality to reproduce here.



After a brief detour in 1940 working for the Armstrong Cork Company in Dallas, Dad attended the Harvard Business School and then joined the Army after Pearl Harbor in early 1942. During these war years, Larry and Helen were blessed with two sons, Peter and David.

After the war, they returned to Sterling, Illinois, and Dad created a wholesale distributing enterprise, providing electric home products to most of Illinois and Iowa until his retirement from business in 1970. During this 25-year period, Larry and Helen were blessed with two more children, Ann and John.

Upon retirement from the world of business, Dad attended Northern Illinois University, received his master's degree in philosophy, and began teaching philosophy and business at Northern, and then at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, Carroll College in Helena, Montana, and finally through the University of Maryland on military bases in Japan, Okinawa, Taiwan, Germany, Spain, and Crete for military personnel and their families.

In 1980, Larry and Helen returned to the United States and built a home in Santa Fe, New Mexico. For the next 32 years in Santa Fe, he volunteered for many community-based organizations, becoming the executive director of the Santa Fe Community Foundation and then organizing and serving as the first president of the Golden Apple Foundation of New Mexico, providing opportunities for academic enrichment for teachers and encouraging positive change in New Mexico classrooms. He is a father, and a brother, to be proud of. He would be thrilled to have the opportunity to share these stories of Cornell and Alpha Delt with you.

—John Lawrence Wheeler '72





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