

Cornell Alpha Delt Fire of 1929

by John Eells Kelly, class of 1931*

Introduction

It was a brisk, winter's evening of February 11, 1929. The chapter was snugly ensconced in the brick mansion that had been its home for some 26 years. Dinner was over and the time had come to climb the stairs to the card table or to the library.

An attitude of depression prevailed among the undergraduates for Junior Week had just ended, and the next day would bring the tedium of a new semester. Relaxation was in order and was best found inside on a cold, wintry night such as this.

The Alarm is Sounded

But, hear, what was that call? From the opening of the second floor in the front of the house came the voice of Charley McGavern '31 calling "Fire! Fire!" Everyone looked up in astonishment. Was it possible? How could a fire start in this brick house, and who could have started it?

A rush of feet headed toward the second floor from where the crack of flames consuming dry wood in the attic could be heard. Quickly the trapdoor to the space above was opened, revealing a roaring mass of flames billowing around the opening. Thoughts occurred to several that there was a fire which must be attended to immediately or serious trouble might result. A harmless switchbox in the vicinity of the trapdoor showed signs of being the miscreant responsible for the blaze; but action was necessary now, and all must cooperate to extinguish the growing inferno.

A hand-pumped fire extinguisher was discovered after some searching and was applied to the flames. Applied is hardly the correct word, for how could one pump a liquid up the side of the wall while standing on a ladder when the pump leaked, smarting chemicals down into the eyes of the pumper?

Cheers Greet Waterhose

Considerable good spirits were still felt, nevertheless, by the younger boys that that such an exciting event should turn up. Amid much cheering, the imposing waterhose was dragged from its holder on the second floor, the first act of motion it had experienced in many a year. Everyone present felt sure that now the fire would be shown who was master at 777 Stewart Avenue.

A stream of water from the hose nearly two inches in diameter would make short work of this growing menace. Much advice was handed out as to directing the stream—in fact, advice was

the one thing that came fluently during the fire. When several boys were ready with a firm stance in the closet beneath the trapdoor, directions were given to open the water valve. The valve was turned—but not so much as a drop of water appeared.

Awaiting the Fire Company

Real concern was felt now since the second-floor hose had been relied upon as a certain remedy for the fire. Questions were raised whether the fire company was on its way yet. In the meantime the first-floor hose was pulled up the stairwell only to be found too short.

This indeed was a serious state of affairs; now it was felt certain the whole roof would burn up—a severe loss. On the outside of the house smoke could be seen curling out from the eaves and escaping from between the shingles. Laments were made upon the slowness of the fire department in reaching the scene.

Suddenly they arrived—a crew of gallant fighters though deprived of adequate tools. The experienced chief at once announced that everything possible should be removed from the house since the situation looked bad. At this junction the Alpha Delt fire ceased to be solely a chapter issue—it quickly attracted the interest of the University and town.

Conflagration Grows

Fire bells had been ringing; with the realization that the blaze was on the Hill, students came flocking to the property by the thousands. Scarcely 20 minutes had elapsed since the discovery of the fire when all knew that a real catastrophe was destined. Flames now broke through the roof, ascending 20 feet and more into the air. The hillside was lighted as if by searchlights, revealing milling people who were slipping and sliding on snow and ice.

While firemen were preparing their equipment the work of saving furniture began. The first floor seemed to be the center of attraction at the time, so all chapter members set to work with a will to clear out as much as possible. Then spectators were called in and things really began to fly. Books sailed through the Library window by the armfuls. The grand piano was carried out by three fellows who proceeded to lose control of it going through the doorway, dropped it, smashing all of the legs.

However, such slight damages were overlooked and the furniture was hustled down the roadway away from the house. Alpha Delts suddenly remembered they should be attending to their own belongings—but almost too late. Flames were well through the ceiling of the second floor making it too dangerous to work up there. Several escaped the fireman's vigilance and got to their rooms, throwing out of the windows the first objects within reach which unfortunately were such trifles as neckties and toilet articles. Praise goes to a few who entered closets and threw out armfuls of suits.

The Damage is Assessed

But, for the most part, those living in the house lost all of their personal possessions. On the first floor better luck resulted, for practically all of the furniture had been removed within 15 or 20 minutes. People worked like demons to accomplish the task before the fire hazard cut them off.

On the outside of the building the firemen had their difficulties. Water pressure to the Hill was nil, so a pump wagon had to be depended upon entirely. It was a long time before this began to function. Nothing was more ludicrous to the crowd than the city's bravest standing beside this raging furnace spraying a stream fit only for a garden hose.

By the time pressure was secured to make any effect, the building was well burned down. The stone walls remained standing, but the floors were eaten completely through. Within an hour the Alpha Delt house was no more.

A Scene of Desolation

Nothing could have been more overwhelming or dumbfounding; to have eaten a meal in a house in complete security, and within an hour to be viewing its ruins. The flames had been visible for miles up and down the valley; it had been one of the "best" fires in Ithaca in years.

As late evening came on, a scene of desolation came over the hillside which had been home to so many generations of Alpha Deltas. An irreparable loss; the loss of a house pronounced by so many visitors as the ideal fraternity home because of its unique style.

Happy Memories Linger

In contrast to the seriousness were the amusing complications which occurred. For one, Ben Gale '29, president of the house, had temporarily left his rescued clothing at the Tri Delt house. On the following morning the Tri Deltas called to tell him he had better come over to claim a pair of trousers he left there.

What was the proud home of Cornell Alpha Deltas has gone, but a new house will rise to take its place; a house modeled on the same general plans of the famous old structure, and one which certainly will assume all of the glory and tradition that existed. All success to the new venture.

*This history of the great Alpha Delt fire first appeared in the form of Brother Kelly's senior essay and was read aloud during chapter meetings in the early 1930s. The essay was stored in the archives and later serialized in three issues of the "Cornell Alpha Delt" newsletter in 1938 and 1939.