

THE BETAS TAKE ROOT



The Beginnings of the Alpha Tau
We Know Today

By John C. Whitten

(Front Cover) University Hall, the first building on campus, as it looked at the north end of Lincoln sometime in the 1870s, shortly before the Betas made their first application for a charter at Nebraska. (Photo courtesy of University Archives)

The Founding of the Chapter

The following are excerpts from THESE WERE GOLDEN YEARS by John C. Whitten, a personal history of the first 80 years of the Alpha Tau chapter of Beta Theta Pi at the University of Nebraska).

The Great Parade

The evening of September 13, 1888, was a time of high excitement in Lincoln. This was the occasion of the celebrated "Industrial Parade" staged by Lincoln businessmen, and carefully timed to take advantage of the large crowds attending the Nebraska State Fair. According to the *Nebraska State Journal*, the parade was ninety blocks long and drew nearly 100,000 spectators who lined the streets and cheered as the bands and floats passed by.

There was no small amount of civic pride on exhibit that evening as the *Journal* was quick to point out: "Omaha but recently tried something in this line, and the effort of the capital city . . . brought into sharp contrast the display of the pretentious village on the Big Muddy."

Among those observing the parade that evening were a number of young men with a very different kind of festive occasion on their minds. These young men gathered at Brown's Cafe on 11th Street and watched the parade until about 9 p.m., at which time they returned to their major business: the formal installation of the Alpha Tau chapter.

The Seven Founders

Among Alpha Tau's seven founders were Harry Allen Reese, son of the Chief Justice of the Nebraska Supreme Court; Edward Everett



The members of Alpha Tau circa 1890 (Founders in bold). Front row: George Putnam, Fred E. Barnes, and Burnell Colson. Second row: Frank Henry Woods, **James Boyd McDonald**, Charles D. Chandler, and George Henry Whaley. Third row: **Edward Everett Nicholson**, Jesse Bradford Becher, **Harry Allen Reese**, Paul Colson, and Burt E. Forbes.

Nicholson, son of a distinguished University professor; and James Boyd McDonald, whose uncle would soon be governor of the state. The other four founders included Oscar Van Pelt Stout, who would become Dean of the College of Engineering at the University; Frank Austin Manley, later to be a general manager for Union Pacific; Ralph Platt, from Grand Island; and Conrad Frederick Scharmann, who also worked for Union Pacific and served as a major in the Spanish-

American War. The seven founders were initiated by a delegation from the Alpha Nu Chapter at the University of Kansas.

The Mysterious Mr. Mathewson

The person most responsible for the new chapter, however, was not present that evening. In fact, he was never even initiated. And yet without the efforts of Harley P. Mathewson, Jr., it is doubtful the Beta Convention of 1888 would have granted the Nebraska petitioners their request. Mathewson's name appears first in all the documents related to the Alpha Tau petition. A letter dated March 7, 1888, for example, from the Alpha Nu Chapter at Kansas states, "We recommend the granting of a charter to Harley P. Mathewson, Jr., and his associate petitioners . . ." Identical language appears in other letters of recommendation and in all the communications with General Secretary J. Cal Hanna.

Although his name lead all the rest, Mathewson remains a shadowy and unknown figure today. His father was the superintendent of the Lincoln State Hospital for ten years until 1886 when the family apparently moved to California. Harley, Jr., stayed in Lincoln just long enough to obtain his degree, graduating from the University with a degree in the Classical Course in 1888.

We know that Mathewson

roomed with Ralph Platt at 342 North 11th Street [now the site of the Lied Center] during his senior year. In all likelihood, this address was at least one of the places that Mathewson and Platt, along with their friends Stout, Manley, and Reese, first conceived the notion of founding a Nebraska chapter of Beta Theta Pi. By the following September, however, when the chapter was officially founded, Mathewson was gone.

At the time of the chapter's 50th anniversary celebration in 1938, arrangements were made to bring Mathewson to Lincoln to be initiated. At the last moment, however, he was unable to make the trip; he never became a member of the fraternity whose Nebraska chapter he had had a major part in founding.

McArthur's Letter

The seven initiates who were present at the chapter's founding enjoyed a notable evening. That evening was described to Cal Hanna in a letter from William McArthur, a Beta from Ohio Wesleyan who had moved to Lincoln a short time prior and played a key role in the

formation of the chapter. McArthur reported that:

If it had been your pleasure to be in Lincoln on the 13th instl., I think I can truly say that you would have been compelled to admit that no chapter ever started on its career more propitiously than did the Alpha Tau of Beta Theta Pi. Everything passed smoothly. The delegation from Kansas, which consisted of H. F. M. Bedar, W. T. Caywood, and Frank Reed, conducted the ceremony in a pleasing manner and expressed themselves delighted with the new chapter and its prospects. And I think they do not regret their trip or the fact that they recommended the application.

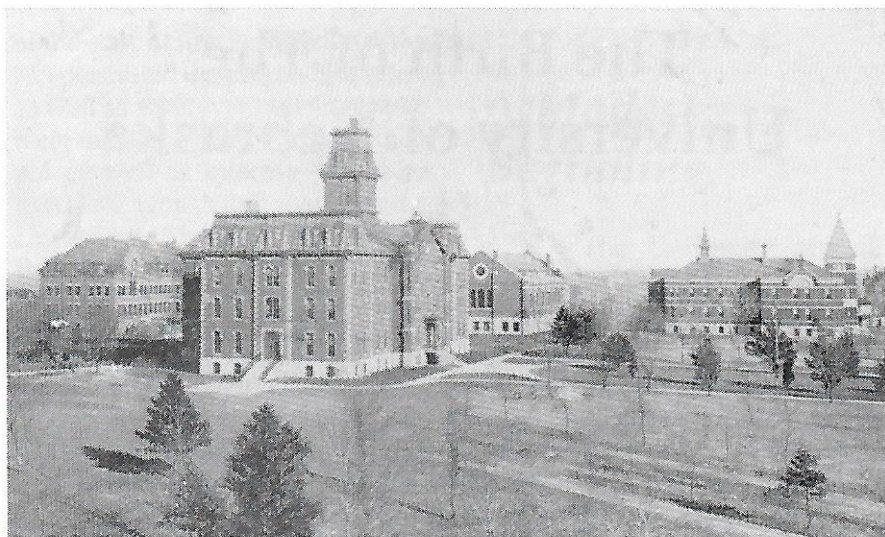
The initiation began at 9:00, at 11:30 after finishing the first degree, we repaired to cafe [now the site of the A. C. Nielsen Building] where an elegantly dressed 'dorg' was devoured; after a few speeches we continued at the hall and administered the second degree. [I] Read your letter of instruction, formed the Mystic Circle, and at 3:00 Friday morning Alpha Tau was duly established and set afloat. And I think she will prove of long life and prosperity.

Three of Alpha Tau's founders were Lincolmites—Manley, Nicholson, and Reese. Stout was from Beatrice, Platt from Grand Island, and Scharmann and McDonald were both from North Platte. McDonald's residence at

1321 O Street [now a downtown bar and grill] even served as the location where the chapter maintained club rooms throughout the 1890s. The building itself is still standing, currently occupied by a submarine sandwich shop.

Hazing and Horseplay

The letter McArthur wrote describing that first Alpha Tau initiation ceremony mentions the "first degree," "second degree" and the strange and somewhat ominous "dorg." Upon inquiring into these matters, one learns that during its first thirty years, Beta Theta Pi had no formal ritual for initiating new members. The "first degree" probably refers to horseplay or embellishments that grew up around the initiation ceremony. Most of these embellishments involved some form of hazing. They were often stunts which included coffins or simulated hangings. Any horseplay of this kind would have concluded by 9 p.m. that initiation evening, setting the stage for the more serious segment of the ritual.



A view of the campus from the 1892 Sombrero showing (left to right) Nebraska Hall, University Hall, Memorial Hall, and the Chemical Laboratory. (Photo courtesy of UNL Archives)

A Serious Ritual

The "second degree" must refer to the more serious and dignified portion of the ritual. This ritual was probably a version of one first prepared by Major Wyllys Ransom, Michigan '48:

It was a beautiful ceremonial It required a letter-perfect, memorized rendition of all speeches . . . to Major Ransom must go the credit for the ritual with its orderly arrangement of initiation features and its interpretations, by

short speeches, of basic ideals and aspirations . . . many of his carefully formed sentences and happy phrases have been preserved by later revisions of the ritual, and continue to stir the hearts of initiates and listeners as well.

The Birth of The University of Nebraska

The University of Nebraska is one of the land grant institutions which were envisioned by Congress in June, 1862, when it passed the Morrill Act. The Act was designed "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life." Colleges taking

advantage of the provisions of the Act had to emphasize agricultural and mechanical studies, although traditional course work would not be ignored.

Under the Morrill Act, Nebraska received 90,000 acres of raw land and, under the Statehood Grant, another 46,000 acres intended for higher education. Some citizens



The city campus as it appeared in 1925 at 12th and R Streets.
(Photo courtesy of University Archives)

of the state at first believed that the Act permitted the proceeds of sales, as well as whatever rents might be received—in other words, principal as well as interest—could be used to establish and maintain the University. These citizens favored the creation of a state university because they felt it would not cost the people of Nebraska anything. Actually, however, the Act required that land sale proceeds be retained as a permanent endowment; thus, sooner or later, the university would need the help of the state's taxpayers.

In fact, soon after the University opened in 1871, it was asking the Legislature for tax support. This renewed the opposition of those who insisted that Nebraska did not need a university; they argued that such an institution was an extravagance beyond the young state's financial capacity. But those who supported the fledgling college persevered.

A Modest Beginning

The University officially opened in September, 1871, with one college—the College of Literature, Mathematics and Natural Sciences (the forerunner of today's College of Arts and Sciences)—and four professors. The University also provided a principal for the Preparatory Department which would provide secondary level training in preparation for college course work. In all, enrollment at the University that first year was 130. Only 20 of those, however, were actually college students; the rest were "preps," students who were not yet ready for full-scale college work.

For the campus, the capital commissioners set aside four square blocks on the north edge of Lincoln from 10th to 12th and R to T Streets. In the words of an early graduate, Miss Edna D. Bullock, "The Commissioners must have selected . . . those four blocks when blindfolded. No good angel whispered to them of seats of learning set upon the hills. The gentle slopes of the Antelope Valley were ignored and a side bordering on the Salt Creek Valley and inevitably in the path of railroads, then imminent, was chosen."

In 1872, the University's second college—Agriculture—was founded to serve an occupation that neither asked for nor wanted the University's help. Few practical-minded people believed that anything worthwhile about farming could be learned in college. But compliance with the objectives of the Morrill Act required an agricultural college. Hence, the young university founded this new college before such a college had anything significant to offer farmers.

Growth and Scandal

By 1876 the faculty had grown to ten, but there had been no comparable growth in enrollment and little or no progress in developing agricultural education. At the

request of Chancellor Fairfield and the Board of Regents, the Legislature combined the agricultural college with "practical science, civil engineering and the mechanic arts" to form the Industrial College. This two-college structure—the new Industrial College and the original College of Arts and Sciences—was still intact in 1888 when the Alpha Tau chapter was formed.

A scandal broke even before the University opened its doors. The Legislature had appropriated \$100,000 to build the "University Building," long known on campus as University or U Hall. Governor Butler and the Commissioners of Public Buildings overspent that budget by \$28,000 and were suspected of other irregularities. Some charged that the building had gone up "hastily and the materials used were frequently of inferior quality." Many believed that the structure would collapse before ever being put to use. Apparently, this was nothing out of the ordinary. All public buildings in pioneer Nebraska, wrote Albert Watkins, "were remarkable in being of a uniform structural type; all of them had to be propped up or burned down to keep them from falling down."

Against all odds, the professional builders called in to inspect the structure reported it to be entirely safe. They did suggest a few modest repairs to the founda-

tion (at a cost of \$747), and soon, University Hall became a campus landmark.

The University in 1888

The Beta petitioners' brochure in 1888 reported that the average number of students in attendance in all departments is about 400. A closer look at that figure, however, reveals that only 178 students were actually enrolled in regular college courses. The remainder of the students, roughly fifty per cent, were enrolled in the Preparatory Department.

Dr. Hudson Nicholson, Professor of Chemistry and father of founder Edward Everett Nicholson, gave this description of the campus when he became a member of the faculty in 1882: "The outward symbol of the institution consisted of a single building now known as University Hall. This building was situated in the center of a patch of raw prairie reminding one of a cow pasture rather than a college campus. The limits of this 'campus' were marked by a thin, scraggly hedge whose ugliness repelled rather than invited entrance."

The campus contained just four buildings. Two of these, Sci-

ence Hall (later known as Stout Hall for Oscar Van Pelt Stout, Alpha Tau #1), and the Armory or Memorial Hall, were still under construction. The other two were U Hall and the Chemical Laboratory—a small red brick building on the southeast corner of the campus, erected in 1885 largely through the efforts of Dr. Nicholson.

At any rate, the late Eighties were boom years for Nebraska. The railroads played a huge role in Nebraska's burgeoning growth in population and prosperity. In 1880, there were 1,868 miles of railroad. By 1890, there were 5,144 miles, nearly three times as many. Lincoln's population leaped from 13,000 in 1880 to 55,000 in 1890.

Three Western Outposts

In the mid-1880s, the Western outposts of Beta Theta Pi consisted of just three chapters: Kansas, California, and Texas. When the national fraternity began to consider whether or not to establish a chapter at the University of Nebraska, they must have weighed

the small size of the institution against the opportunity to get a foothold in one of the fastest growing areas of the country. This offered a chance to get in the ground floor. At the very least, there was clearly enough confidence in the future of the state and its university to offset the disadvantages of mod-

A New Chapter House

est enrollment and limited resources. Nebraska was young and inexperienced—but eager to get started.

The 1924 initiation banquet marked the first of many visits President Francis Shepardson would pay the chapter over the next few years. Perhaps more importantly, Shepardson was instrumental in launching the campaign which eventually resulted in a beautiful new chapter house. At the banquet, Shepardson praised Alpha Tau for its accomplishments, but challenged the alumni to replace its most noticeable handicap—a house that was unpleasant, uncomfortable, and a competitive millstone. “Why don’t you take these youngsters out of this wretched old house and put them in a chapter home worthy of them and worthy of you?”

The need for a better chapter

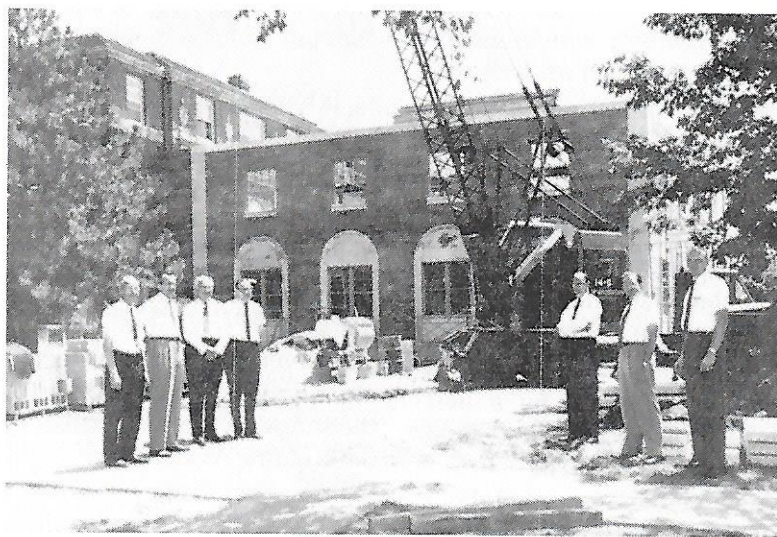
house had been recognized for some time, but it took Shepardson’s speech to give the building project the impetus it needed. Everyone agreed a new chapter house should be as close to campus as possible. The responsibility for the new house project belonged to the Beta Theta Pi Building Association whose Board members included Lowe Ricketts, Ernest Ames, George Holmes, R. H. Harrison, John Rosborough, Max Meyer, William Ritchie, E. L. Stancliff, Don W. Steward, Kenneth S. Wherry, Warren H. Howard, John L. Hastings, William H. Larned, Arthur S. Whitworth, and John C. Whitten.

A Key Trade

Choice locations near campus, however, rarely came on the market and when they did, the prices, by the standards of those days, were very high. Eventually, the chapter purchased a narrow 67-foot frontage on North 16th Street for \$7,250. That purchase became a blessing in disguise a short time later when the Board of Regents decided to restrict

the east side of North 16th Street to women's housing. In order to acquire our property, the Regents traded us an 84-foot frontage on R Street just east of 15th Street, property valued at \$16,000. Our new location—1515 R Street—had the immediate advantage of being close to campus. Now we were two blocks away instead of fifteen. And the property had great potential as well. No wonder that a brochure issued by the Building Association described our property as "perhaps the finest site in Lincoln for a fraternity house."

The house architect was Edward



Foundation President Max Meyer, District Chief Burt Folsom, Architecture Chairman Burr Smith, Chapter Advisor William Swanson, Treasurer Gene Tallman, Foundation Director Lowe Folsom and Chapter Financial Advisor James Hewitt inspect progress of new Chapter House addition in 1963.

G. Schaumberg, Illinois '17, who would also design the new wing, added in 1963 to celebrate the chapter's 75th Anniversary. "Buzz" Schaumberg donated his services and even refused to accept payment for out-of-pocket expenses. According to the brochure, "every member of Alpha Tau is under a lasting obligation for his fine loyalty to the fraternity and his self-sacrifice in the interest of a chapter not his own. We are happy to report that in later years, Schaumberg's sons, Edward G., Jr., and William H., followed their father into the Beta fold as members of the Nebraska chapter."

Cost: \$70,000

The house and equipment eventually cost about \$70,000, of which \$35,000 was obtained by a first mortgage through The First Trust Company of Lincoln. The contractor, W. J. Assenmacher, carried about \$8,000 on a second mortgage which was gradually—very gradually—paid off. The first mortgage, too, was gradually reduced according to schedule, and even during the

dreariest days of the '30s, the chapter was never in default for payment of interest or taxes.

Valuable help was supplied by Harry H. Nugent, Cornell '15, manager of one of Lincoln's department stores. He provided the kitchen equipment and many other items at absolute cost and charged no interest.

A Vision of the Future

It took a visionary, however, to imagine what R Street would someday look like. In 1925, R Street was a narrow lane with a streetcar line running down the middle, embedded in rough brick pavement. From 14th Street east, on the south side, the ground rose gradually until it was several feet above street level. The city authorities decided to bring the sidewalk down to street level; the Building Association recognized that the Beta property should also be graded down to sidewalk level even though that meant that for some years the adjoining properties, both to the east and west, would be at a higher level.

In 1926 Dr. Shepardson made two more visits to Nebraska—in March to participate again in our initiation banquet and eight months later, on November 13, to dedicate the beautiful new chapter house. Nebraska played Kansas State in football that afternoon and Shep sat with the chapter through a hard rain. He made no complaints, nor did any of the Nebraska Betas (Ne-

braska finally won, 3-0) because it was far too big a day for the Betas to let anything dampen our spirits.

Buzz Schaumberg's insistence on the sturdiest type of construction was surely a wise decision, for after 60 years, the house on 1515 R Street stands solid as a rock, its Georgian facade retaining its dignified and attractive appearance. The house is an impressive monument to his

A Vision of The Future

good taste, sound architectural judgment, and perhaps most impressive, his great generosity to the Alpha Tau chapter.

Something to be proud of

The new home was by far the chapter's greatest group achievement to that point; it put the chapter in the kind of housing that was essential to survival as a Nebraska leader. As important as the house itself was the spirit of loyalty and support which it embodied. Alpha Tau had been through some difficult years, but it brought itself out of those problems, won the support and confidence of the national fraternity, and found that its alumni were strong.

It would be many years before the Betas fully realized the good fortune of our location resulting from that exchange of real estate back in 1925. In the '50s the Building Association was able to buy the Bessey family home immediately to the west of the Beta house, which provided the ground for the 1963 addition. And the creation of the Centennial Mall, with the fountains and mall adjoining our property just to the west, made those words of 1925 finally ring true—"the finest site in Lincoln for a fraternity."