

James A. Collins

UCLA '50

Oxford Cup Roll No. 061

While others may consider their golden years a time for quiet contemplation or general relaxation, James A. Collins, *UCLA '50*, serves as the epitome of philanthropy at age 78. Collins, who retired in Aug. 1999 as chairman of Worldwide Restaurant Concepts, Inc., is having the time of his life.

The quintessential storyteller, Collins can spend hours recounting tales of his childhood, his days in the U.S. Navy, college experiences at Miami University and UCLA, and his colorful journey through the maze of fast-food service. Through all of his experiences, Collins claims that many of his accomplishments are due to good fortune. "Being in the right place at the right time has been a really big part of my success," he explains. "The other parts are hard work and enthusiasm." Collins attributes his strong work ethic to his father, while clearly indicating that his spirit comes from his mother.

After passing his Naval exam, Collins was called for service in August of 1944. Following boot camp in Jacksonville, Fla., his next stop was Norman, Okla., where he started in the V-6 program. He passed the V-5 exam and moved on to Miami University in the fall of 1945, where he pledged the Alpha chapter. Collins was discharged from the Navy in July 1946 and enrolled at UCLA the following fall to be closer to home.

As UCLA did not have a civil engineering degree at the time, Collins and five of his friends transferred to California-Berkeley in the fall of 1949. This allowed him to graduate from UCLA in January of 1950. In a stroke of good fortune, Collins became involved with the Naval Civil Engineering Corp. and did not get called up for duty in Korea. Instead, he went to work for a construction company, building Catholic churches and schools.

In 1952, Collins was working on building a coffee shop with his father-in-law in Culver City, Calif., when Vern Goode of the Edison Company approached him. "He asked me if I had time to take a ride to San Bernadino with him the next day, where I met Dick and Maurice McDonald." The McDonald brothers had introduced the idea of fast food service, and Collins was taken aback when he saw people lined up for 15 cent hamburgers and 10 cent drinks.

Collins brought his father-in-law to witness the spectacle first-hand the following day, and within short order, the coffee shop at Centinela and Sepulveda became the "Hamburger Handout." A second stand was opened in 1957, followed by a third in 1958 and a fourth in 1960.

A friend encouraged Collins to go to Louisville, Ky., to meet Colonel Sanders in 1960. Sanders was selling franchises for take-home KFC chicken and Collins saw room for potential growth. "By 1961, the Colonel was calling me to teach new franchisees how to prepare the mashed potatoes, and, by 1962, I had convinced him to hire me to be the exclusive agent in Southern California." In just six years, Collins had established more than 240 stores.

In July 1967, Collins and two of his UCLA Beta brothers, Walter McBee, Jr. '52 and Rushton O. (Ross) Backer '51, purchased the Sizzler chain of restaurants. On November 15, 1968, Collins Foods, International became a public company. Opening day shares sold at \$18 each and closed at \$31 per share. By the end of January, the stock was worth \$46 per share.

The company grew to include some 270 Kentucky Fried Chicken stores and 700 Sizzler restaurants in the United States and Australia. The company's name changed to Sizzler in April 1991 (later Worldwide Restaurant Concepts, Inc.), and Collins negotiated a tax-free exchange of PepsiCo. shares for the US-based KFC stores.

Since his retirement in 1999, Collins spends much of his time finding ways to give back to his community and provide opportunity for others. "I made my living based on the food service industry, so it is my pleasure to give back." When driving through Venice, Calif., it is virtually impossible not to spot the James A. Collins Youth Center. The center is home to the Boys and Girls Club of Venice and serves some 1,800 youth.

Collins and his wife Carol reside in the Los Angeles area. The couple recently celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary. They have four children and five grandchildren.

— Thomas C. Olver, *Central Michigan '98*, editor, *The Beta Theta Pi*