

The Beta Spirit

From the Handbook fo Beta Theta Pi 1906

Men are not apt, in this age, to give public expression to their feelings, and it is, therefore, difficult to find many public utterances concerning the fraternity, and none are known to us that have been given expression, other than the frank, outspoken opinion of the speaker at the moment. In the quoted extracts which follow there are expression of opinion from men in all walks in life, but chiefly from those whose prominence gives their tittered expressions weight.

We find nowhere any statement of the value of the fraternity made for the sake of influencing opinion. Our record does not need it. At the convention of 1890 Willis O. Robb, long an ardent worker for the fraternity felicitously phrased its deeper meaning as follows:

Brethren of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity, the fraternal relation that is to some of us so dear a present joy, to others so hallowed a memory, is to all of us something more than we are wont to think it. It consists not in forms or rites, in organization, or hodings of laws; these are mere machinery. Nor does its chief glory lie even in the several friendships it produces and shelters, dear as these are, unrivalled as they must always be in freshness and in youthful ardor. Behind and beneath both these aspects lies its more essential character, its capacity of culture. Its richest gifts are not friends, but the desire, the power and the habit of making friends. These constitute the real "fraternity spirit."

The same speaker, fifteen years afterward when he had broadened his experience expressed his riper judgment in the following happy phrase:

Again, the Beta is distinguishable and distinguished from all other kinds of fraternity men whatsoever by just a little warmer and stronger, just a little tenderer and more enduring fraternity feeling than any of them can attain to. For it was always so. I do not in the least know how it happened, nor why it persisted after it happened, but a long time ago there came into Beta Theta Pi a fraternity spirit that was, and is, and apparently will continue to be, unique. We know it, who are inside, and they see and record it who are outside the Beta pale. Whether young or old, in college or out, from the small school or the great university, we are conscious of a heritage of genuine fraternalism that has not been vouchsafed in like measure — I say it deliberately — to any other of the great college fraternities. And we cannot doubt that in this, as in other respects, our "future will copy fair our past." and that in the world of fifty years from now, as in that of years ago, — as in that that lies around us to-day — the first mark of a Beta will be his Beta spirit.

The Story of John Hanna Gray

Hanover College is a modest private school near Madison, Ind. From a quiet promontory, the campus overlooks the Ohio River and beyond to Kentucky. Founded in 1853, Iota chapter existed sub rosa, like most fraternities at the time. Membership in Beta Theta Pi was cause for expulsion from college.

On June 12, 1856, John Hanna Gray, Hanover 1856, then a sophomore, died and was buried in the college campus cemetery. The Betas erected a marble monument at his grave. To the surprise of the college, the monument contained a facsimile of the chapter seal and a motto in Greek, which disclosed Beta's existence at Hanover.

The action so angered some students that they attempted to desecrate the monument. The Betas formed teams and guarded the monument around the clock for an entire month. Three times the monument was knocked over; and three times, re-erected. Ultimately, the Beta tombstone was kept intact, and this man-size pylon still graces the Hanover cemetery today.

When Gray's father, Daniel L. Gray, a Presbyterian clergyman, arrived from Mississippi, he was so touched by the Betas' respect for his son that he, too, wished to belong to Beta Theta Pi. As a result, he was initiated by the Betas, number 21 on the Hanover roll, joining his son, John Hanna Gray, number 13.