

"I Think We Called It Brotherhood"

By: Neil Rosenberg, LA66

How did the fraternity brothers from Animal House really turn out?

Pretty damn good.

I know. Because in a way, I was one of them.

Pi Lambda Phi. Washington University, Class of 1966. Majoring in political science, purple passion and pajama parties, food fights, chug-a-lug contests, dirty limerick songfests.

All my parents' worst fears.

Harold Ramis, who helped write the screen-play for the movie *National Lampoon's Animal House*, was a Washington University graduate (see cover story, Alumni News, Winter, 1984), also class of 1966, Zeta Beta Tau, our arch rival. Where do you think he got some of those wild and wacky ideas, anyway?

"We took all our experiences," he said in... an interview in the Alumni News, referring to the movie. "We discussed every odd character we'd ever known in college and we shared every anecdote we'd ever heard about any college anywhere, all the fraternity lore we knew."

The result, of course, was movie legend. God help the fraternity system. It did not need any Animal House. If there ever was a safe and secure whipping boy for all the liberal and bleeding hearts out there, it is the fraternity system.

And, of course, fraternities have as their major functions educating their members in sexist attitudes, debauchery of all sorts. Keeping liquor stores in business, Rambo-style macho maneuvering and hanging out of the frat-house window yelling "hubba-hubba" at every passing skirt.

An impressionable youth was better off joining the Merchant Marines than joining a college fraternity!

Not to worry.

I recently returned to St. Louis for my fraternity's first-ever reunion, covering the graduating classes from 1962 to 1967. In the two decades since graduation. I had neither seen nor heard from the vast majority of the nearly 80 frat brothers who returned for the reunion. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't what I found.

Nobody got sick from drinking. Nobody even got drunk. Nobody tore anyone else's clothes off. Nobody fell down on the dance floor. Nobody put their fist through a wall. We didn't even stiff the band. Some of us did eat White Castle hamburgers at four in the morning.

Let me tell you what we've done since we last saw each other.

We quit smoking. About 95% of us smoked in college. Less than a dozen smoke now.

We got healthier. More of us lost weight (excluding me) than put on potbellies. The purple passion party was replaced with a 5 kilometer and 10 kilometer early morning run.

On the night of the formal reunion party, dinner consisted of cleverly carved zucchini, carrots, broccoli, cauliflower and a lump of chicken, which prompted one spouse to ask the waiter which piece of food was the entrée.

We stayed faithful. There were only a handful of divorces in the entire crowd. Of seven couples who were pinned during college and subsequently married, there was not a single divorce.

(For the uninitiated, pinning is a quaint fraternity custom in which the male surrenders his fraternity pin to a female giving her hopes of future marriage and him hopes of at least serious sexual maneuvering that night.)

We became successful. Among the group of 80, there were 22 physicians and dentists, a dozen lawyers and eight presidents or chief executive officers of business firms.

We were generally happy. There were some tales of job dissatisfaction or plans that went awry. But generally speaking, we seemed pleased with our lot in life.

Finally, there was an overwhelming sense of affection and bonding between us all during the weekend. Twenty years ago, I think we called it brotherhood.

Take, for instance, the softball game on Saturday afternoon. Essentially, it was the older guys vs. the younger guys. When we were up to bat, we tried to hit the ball as hard as we could and in the field we tried to get the other guys out.

But gone was the cut-throat competition of two decades earlier. Gone was the hard-edged sarcasm and insulting wit that used to pepper any gathering. The game lasted for hours, only because we didn't want it to end.

We let the older guys win.

At the dinner dance we joined together, without shame or embarrassment, in one last circle of song. We put our arms around each other's shoulders and it felt good. And we had our final moment of ribaldry – a round of dirty limericks.

Don't ask me how or why this sense of brotherhood survived – or even when it may have first developed. Maybe those silly-seeming rituals, slogans and songs that were our rallying cry before trying to beat the Betas at football or the Zebras at baseball actually took root.

Maybe Hell Week taught us something after all. Maybe having a frat brother's shoulder to lean on during the rough spots of growing up was more important than we thought. Maybe having a beer and pizza with guys you really like and have something in common with wasn't so dangerous after all.

This much I know. When my sons go off to college, if they call to ask me whether they can join a fraternity, my answer will be short and easy.

You bet.