

## The 1950s: A Rocky Road to Stabilization

By the time the Spring Rush of 1951 took place, the word was out that Kappa Beta was a non-sectarian fraternity that welcomed pledges, whatever their race, religion, or ethnicity. Since KB had a substantial number of enthusiastic, dedicated members and was also located in a good fraternity house, it attracted a substantial number of pledges.

One of these pledges, Kenneth Schoonmaker '54, fondly remembers his connections with Kappa Beta. His reflections reveal typical Albany State fraternity life and fraternity house life as it existed in the early 1950s.

"My earliest memories are, I imagine, standard ones, of rush beer parties. Being a non-alcohol drinker, I stuck to soda for the first few, then armed with a quart of soda, was able to wash down a glass of beer. When I didn't get drunk, I was ready the next week to face a number of steins of suds and became a confirmed drinker the rest of my college career. When fraternity bids came out in February 1951, I can remember rushing to my mailbox in the basement of Richardson to see if the frats we liked also liked us. Then came the period of pledge time. Pledges of KB were expected to grow sideburns, or at least not shave above the lower earline. Pledge time was busy, what with continuing our studies, making paddles, and putting on a show in front of a bank on Pearl Street to raise funds for a charity. During Hell Week I was told to take a live animal everywhere with me for 24 hours. I solved the problem by obtaining a chick from a butcher shop display and carrying him around in a shoe box with holes in it.

"That summer KB moved from its house on Lark Street to one on Ontario Street, next to Brubacher Hall, which was under construction. That fall each of us painted or wallpapered our bedrooms and cooperated in repainting the downstairs rooms. Since for most of us this was our first attempt at developing such a skill, it was surprising how well our efforts paid off. One benefit of the new house was that it came with a player piano. Jerry Roberts '53 had a friend who had quite a collection of unused old piano rolls which he contributed to us. In addition, John Hanevy '54 had a natural talent for being able to sit down at the keyboard and play the accompaniment for any tune one of us suggested for a singalong. With no television in the house at the time, we spent many an evening hour harmonizing in the living room.

"Most of us had to stretch our limited funds and found ways to do so. Since the only phone in the fraternity house was a pay phone in the dining room, it was not uncommon for a line to form in front of the phone of KB brothers waiting to talk with their girl friends. Those of us fortunate enough to have ones with free telephone access would deposit our dimes, dial, let the phone ring twice, then hang up. Our girls would then call us back so that we could chat for nothing. One brother in especially straightened circumstances was Ron Ferguson '54. Fergie lived in the attic at the Ontario Street house. While the rest of us ate our housekeeper-prepared meals communally in the dining room, Fergie cooked his on a hot plate. Like a starter bread, he continually added ingredients to whatever was left over, producing "Fergie Stew." I don't know if he ever ate the entire pot empty.

"We had a coal furnace which provided the hot water for the radiators of our fraternity house.

This meant that a KB brother was responsible for maintaining the fire, stoking it with coal, shaking down the ashes, emptying the ash pit, and doing the other chores which were necessary to keep the house warm. During the Christmas vacation of 1951, with members scattered throughout the four corners of New York State, one brother who did not go home was delegated to keep watch over the furnace. Unfortunately, one night he went out partying on Green Street until the wee hours of the morning and stayed overnight at someone else's house. During his absence, the fire went out, the temperature dropped, and the pipes burst. When we returned in January, we found the ice water had mostly melted and pretty well ruined a lot of the house. It was certainly unliveable, for the radiators couldn't hold their supply of water. The College came to our rescue by allowing those of us who couldn't make other arrangements to sleep on cots in a room at the end of the first floor of Husted Hall until the house was again made liveable. We used a bathroom located on the first floor and found that Husted was very handy when we wanted to sleep late since we didn't have to trek through five blocks of slippery sidewalks from the fraternity house to the campus."

Those were the days.

After two years in the Ontario Street house, Kappa Beta lost its lease. It couldn't have happened at a worse time. The Spring 1952 pledge class was very small—only about six people, and the fraternity was without a house in the Fall of 1953.

I asked Arnie Smith '54, who was President of Kappa Beta in the difficult 1953-54 academic year how and why this low point had been reached, and this is what he had to say.

"We had a large (for KB) pledge class in my freshman year [1950-51]. I don't trust my memory on exact numbers. However, I know we were in the teens, and I'd guess now that it was the mid to high teens. I think a lot of the credit for that pledge class has to go to Bob Barron, who recruited us vigorously and was forever making sure that we got to all the KB events. Once bids were out, he was also instrumental in seeing to it that they got signed.

"So what happened the next year? That's tougher to answer. When Bob Barron was a senior and went off campus in the Fall of 1951 to do his student teaching, we lost a recruiting machine. I also know that in at least a couple of instances, prejudice was involved. I had a couple of people whom I worked hard to recruit tell me that they couldn't bring themselves to join a Jewish fraternity, even if it had opened. I wasn't supposed to take that personally. But I was terribly disappointed by those comments. Still, that can't be the whole story. The great majority of the pledge class that I was in was non-Jewish. It may be that we were better at joining than we were at recruiting people. Or maybe it was a case of we didn't know how important our participation in the recruiting process was. I know we did a lot of soul searching about that in the spring of my sophomore year. I don't know if we ever really decided, but there were a lot of vows to work harder the next year, and we did do much better in the next two years. I don't know if we were smart enough to make a formal assessment of what went wrong and what went right. It's a highly subjective thing. Maybe if more of us had been future advertising executives, we'd have done better.

"When we lost our lease at the end of my junior year, I had just been elected president. I recruited whoever was going to summer school that year to be the house search committee. In the fall, we didn't have anything. The KB brothers who had been appointed as house search committee that summer had followed some leads, but nobody wanted to rent to a college fraternity. I remember running into the same sort of thing all that fall while we continued looking. We didn't reject houses. Potential landlords rejected us. I guess you can't blame them.

"During the search process, Ainarad Gelbond '42, Financial Secretary for the College and a KB alumnus, was exceptionally helpful. Abel Blattman '53, who preceded me as president, told me about him. I guess he'd gotten the word from Jerry Roberts '53 who got it from Joe Friedman '51, etc. Ainarad was always a source of wisdom and down-to-earth good advice when we ran into troubles. I remember that when we finally found the house at 471 State St., I had a lot of trepidation about signing the lease. I'd never done that before, and I wasn't sure what kind of liability I was taking on. Ainarad reassured me that things like this had gone on before, so that I should be OK. He did suggest incorporating Kappa Beta to protect the officers from liability. The problem with incorporating was that it cost money. I think it happened eventually but not on my watch. The fraternity had to build up its membership so that it could afford to incorporate.

"I can't remember how we found out about 471 State St. I vaguely remember viewing the house and being impressed with what I saw. I remember specifically meeting downtown with Mr. Porter (the owner) in his office. Another fraternity brother accompanied me. I remember that Mr. Porter was reluctant to rent to us, and when we heard the rental rate (\$300 per month), much more than we had been paying for our previous house, we were highly reluctant to ask him to. After a considerable amount of soul searching on both sides and a number of phone calls, both sides made the commitment, and we moved in at the beginning of our second semester [Spring 1954]."

My own fond memories of Kappa Beta intersect and extend from this same period in the middle of the 1950s.

When I arrived at Albany State in the Fall of 1952, a naive, somewhat divergent soul, I had a negative preconception of college fraternities, thinking of them as havens for anti-intellectual, athletic, alcoholic, party loving, conformist students, people with whom I would not be comfortable. Kappa Beta broke all of these stereotypes. Since I had been born into a non-practicing Jewish family and raised a liberal Baha'i, the fraternity's Jewish flavor appealed to me. The fact that some of its members were thoughtful, intellectually gifted students who were not afraid to admit it also appealed to me. I believed I was receiving an excellent, academically stimulating, inexpensive education at Albany State, and I was happy to find kindred spirits in Kappa Beta who felt the same way.

I found it appealing that Kappa Beta, at a time when homophobia was rampant, implicitly opened its doors to gay men, one of whom was a member of the small pledge class of 1955. A then recent graduate, Harvey Milk '51, who had served in the military during World War II, attracted enormous publicity when in 1977 he became one of the first openly gay persons to be elected to public office in the United States. He was elected to serve on the San Francisco Board



of Supervisors (City Council). He was a gay rights activist who fought to secure a place for homosexuals in society as equals, not as people who were at worst, persecuted, or at best, grudgingly tolerated. Harvey Milk, whose official name, Glimpy Milch, reflected his Lithuanian-Jewish ancestry, was tragically assassinated on November 27, 1978 by a homophobic former City Supervisor. When death threats multiplied after his election to public office, Harvey spoke often of the probability that he would be assassinated. He made a will naming acceptable successors to his seat which contained the famous line: "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door." In 1999, he made Time magazine's list of the most influential people in the 20th century, and in the Fall of 2004, he was honored by the New York City School System when the Harvey Milk High School, an alternative school for gay and transgender students, was opened.

I also approved of Kappa Beta's becoming somewhat multiculturally diverse long before the phrase had been invented. Initiated in the small Class of 1955 were Al Peachey, an African-American, and Gregorio Carrera, a Latino, both older students and both among the very few minority students enrolled at Albany State in the mid-1950s. Al, a man in his 30s but young at heart, occasionally played intramural basketball for our Kappa Beta team and played drums in the dance band that provided music for the Kappa Beta formal dances in 1956 and 1957. Greg, who had served as a cook in the U.S. Navy for several years prior to enrolling at Albany State, kept very different hours from the rest of us who lived in the fraternity house at 471 State St. His habits, which he developed in the Navy, had accustomed him to work at night and sleep during the day, which he did, in modified form, as a student who earned his B.A. and M.A. at Albany. He must have modified his habits even further when he accepted a teaching position in the Syracuse public school system after graduating from Albany.

Therefore, when Bob Barron recruited me in the Fall of 1952, I enthusiastically accepted a bid to join KB in the Spring of 1953.

Arnie Smith has already described some of the difficulties that Kappa Beta was struggling with in the Summer and Fall of 1953 when it was in the process of searching for a new fraternity house. I remember as a freshman pledge in the Spring of 1953 signing up to live in the fraternity house in the Fall of 1953 and finding to my dismay, when I returned to college in the Fall of 1953, that a KB fraternity house did not exist. I ended up having to accept a last minute room assignment in the Barracks with a graduate student. The Barracks, leftover World War II quonset huts that served as "temporary" housing, were not comfortable and were probably fire traps. I remember meetings of Kappa Beta held that fall in which progress or the lack of it in renting a fraternity house was discussed, including one distressing meeting at which a formal motion was made to disband the fraternity. I believe that a small group of the newer members felt that Kappa Beta did not have a future and believed that disbanding would provide a graceful exit for them to move on and, perhaps, seek a bid from one of the other three fraternities. With strong, united opposition from the older members of Kappa Beta, who valued the close brotherhood they had established over the years, and several emotional appeals from this constituency, the motion was defeated handily, and Kappa Beta soon after rented a house. I immediately signed up to live in the house, got early pickings, and was therefore able to claim a tiny single room on the third floor of the row house we had rented at 471 State St. I painted the room and lived happily in the

fraternity house for the next two-and-a-half years until I completed my undergraduate degree in the Spring of 1956.

The acquisition of a place of our own helped immeasurably, I believe, in the recruiting of new members. Despite a late start, Kappa Beta in the Spring of 1954 was able to pledge approximately 15 new freshmen from the Class of 1957. KB then went on to pledge approximately 17 the next year from the Class of 1958 and then about 27 from the Class of 1959. Kappa Beta was back on its feet. Under the direction of Richard Erbacher '57, Kappa Beta won the annual Christmas Sing in 1956 and 1957, thus establishing the fraternity as a strongly musical one, a tradition that continued for a number of years and which helped in the recruitment of new members who had musical talent and interests.

Most of us who graduated in the 1950s initially secured teaching positions in secondary schools, with some of us moving on to college and university teaching or administrative posts in education. Thankfully, anti-Semitic hiring practices had declined dramatically and Civil Rights legislation protecting racial and ethnic groups and women from employment discrimination was beginning to take root. However, a moderate number of Kappa Beta graduates, with their excellent education at Albany State Teachers College, chose to use their talents in jobs and professions other than teaching. For instance, Irwin Baumel '50, became an electrical contractor; Ralph Moot '54 worked for the State of New York Highway Engineers; Richard Siegal became a Methods, Planning, and Time Standard Specialist for General Electric; Jerry Cuba '55, became a labor investigator; Marvin Goldstein '56 became a research chemist at Cyanamid Corporation; Raymond Milnarik '56 ran a successful insurance business; Fred Rudisch '56 became an optometrist; Russell Hunt '57 became an anesthetist with a specialty in tropical medicine; George Van den Houten '59 became a professional actor. And the list could go on. New York State College for Teachers, staffed by excellent faculty and offering a fine educational program, was already in the process of broadening its program and approaching the time when it would become an energetic university in an upgraded, revamped State University of New York system.

Two Kappa Beta brothers who stayed in teaching became distinguished in their fields in quite different ways.

Mark Berger '50 earned his doctorate from Columbia University and in 1956 started teaching at Albany where he remained until his recent retirement. Mark had a long and distinguished career in teaching and research, becoming a nationally and internationally known authority on ethical and political theory as it pertains to education. He was a Visiting Scholar at the University of London, Contributing Editor of The Review of Education, Fulbright Scholar, and Education Advisor to the Ministries of Education in Cyprus and Somalia. He was appointed a Collins Fellow in 1990. In 1994, he received the Outstanding Professor Award from the Graduate Student Organization of the State University of New York, and in 1996, he received the Distinguished Teaching Award from the State University of New York at Albany. He published several books and numerous articles in his field.

Marvin Chernoff '54 earned his doctorate from Hunter College in New York City and went on to achieve distinction as a college and university professor, retiring in 2002 as Professor of

Counseling Psychology at California State University in Northridge. However, the intense interest in Theater that he had developed at Albany State never diminished. He has written a number of plays, the best known of them CHIAM'S Love Song published by Samuel French, a leading publisher of plays. CHIAM'S Love Song has played an 18-week run at the Broward Stage Door Theatre in Coral Springs, Florida, has run 208 performances Off-Broadway in New York City, and in 2002 had a four-week run in summer stock at the International City Theatre in Long Beach, California. In 2004, Marv had two one-act psychological parodies performed by the Group Repertory Theatre in Los Angeles.

By the time Dom DeCecco '57, now an Albany County legislator, sent out an appeal in February of 1960 as President of the Kappa Beta Alumni Association requesting the annual \$2.00 membership fee and asking for news and information to include in the next KB Newsletter, he could proudly and confidently say, "The fraternity has progressed rapidly so that we now are the largest fraternity on campus as well as the best. KB again won the Christmas sing and last May won the scholarship trophy." Kappa Beta, near collapse in 1953, had stabilized and was poised to enter its period of greatest growth and to become a more traditional fraternity than it had been up to this point.

## An Afterward to the 1950s

(The following page of memories from Doug Nielsen '53 arrived shortly after I had had the rest of the History of Kappa Beta photocopied. However, I found the memories so interesting that I decided to include them as a kind of insert. In an informal way, they summarize the life of Kappa Beta in the 1950s.)

When I was initiated into Kappa Beta in 1950, it occupied a house on South St. Shortly afterwards, the fraternity moved to the old group house, Sayles Annex, at 203 Ontario St. I took a series of pictures of Brubacher Hall being built from the back third floor window of that house. It was our fraternity house, rented from the College, for a couple of years and was the scene of many an activity. For one year, our house mother was a lady named Mrs. Clem. She had to put up with a lot of grief from us, and we had to put up with some of her straight-laced ways. We may have been the first fraternity on campus that had a television set in its house. My parents bought a new one, and I brought our old one to the fraternity house where it remained for two years. We used to watch the Red Skelton show and many others from that era. I was drafted into military service at the height of the Korean Conflict and as a result, missed several years of school. When I returned to Albany State in January 1956, the fraternity house was located on State St.

In the Fall of 1956, we moved to a house on Washington Ave. across from Beverwyck Park. I have two outstanding memories from that semester. First, we won the Christmas Chorus competition among male group houses, thanks to having a good song arranger and some good singers, and second, we gained high esteem from the sororities because we were the only fraternity to hike up to AEPHi and serenade them with Christmas carols. The custom was for all the frats to visit all the women's group houses, sing some carols, and be invited in for some refreshments. We had saved AEPHi for last and almost decided not to go, since it was so late, past 10 p.m., and we wouldn't be invited in for cookies. But AEPHi was our sister sorority, so up the road we went. When we got there, the lights were off, and we figured everyone had gone to bed. As it turned out, the girls had turned in, greatly disappointed because no one had come to serenade them. We started singing, the lights were turned on, and the girls came to the windows to watch and listen. We knew we were there after hours and were about to leave when the house mother came to the door and invited us in. Most of the girls were in nightclothes, but she let us in, anyhow. It was then that we learned that no one else had come to the AEPHi house to sing. We enjoyed the refreshments and, the next day, learned that word had gotten around to the other women's houses that the rest of the guys had skipped AEPHi. Their names were MUD.

I remember that we did pretty well in athletics and very well in the scholarship competitions. I loved playing third base and batting in softball. The games on old Page Field were always a challenge. If a ball got by the right fielder untouched and rolled into Western Ave., the batter was awarded a ground-rule double. If the right fielder touched it, the batter could expect a home run. The traffic did NOT stop for a softball rolling onto the road.

That's a quick resume of my memories. Since we are talking 50 years ago, there may be errors and certainly are omissions, but I hope this helps.





Upper Left: Harold Goldstein Gould '47  
Lower Left: Harvey Milk '51.  
Upper Right: Walter "Bud" Gates '68.  
Lower Right: Robert Peterkin '66.  
(From Birr's History of Excellence and  
The Bolton Breeze.)

