

The Story of Chi Omega's Founding...

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS, FAYETTEVILLE, ARKANSAS. 1895

Secrets. Fraternity men recently acquired secrets and talked of nothing else. Women did not have any and enviously observed the fun and camaraderie the shared mysteries provided their male acquaintances. Determined to have the same sense of belonging and status the fraternity men enjoyed, one small band of young women, with the help of a local dentist, established the secrets, symbolism and rites that today bind together over 300,000 women from over 170 campuses and in more than 250 alumnae chapters.

In 1894-95, men's fraternities were established at the University of Arkansas and interest in Greek organizations was high among students. The new members of Kappa Sigma, Sigma Alpha Epsilon and Kappa Alpha fraternities were most mysterious about the affairs of these new societies with their secret passwords, handshakes and cryptic lapel pins. On Sunday afternoons, the men would call on their young women friends who lived together in rooming houses near the university for there were no dormitories for women at that time. One of the women on whom they called was Jobelle Holcombe.

THE STORY OF CHI OMEGA'S FOUNDING AS TOLD BY ONE OF OUR FOUNDERS, JOBELLE HOLCOMBE.

We were just ordinary schoolgirls...Not one of us was over 18 years of age. Most of the talk of those Sunday afternoon gentlemen callers was fraternity talk. The men were most mysterious about their affairs, and we women were sorry we could not match them. So three of us said we'd organize a sorority of our own, and we said we had a badge and secrets but we didn't. The only secret was that we didn't have any secrets. So we wore a badge, which we constructed ourselves and declared ourselves a sorority. Jean (Vincenheller) and I went to town to select this badge from the ribbon counter-the satin and sheen ribbon was olive and crushed plum. Why? Because they were the ugliest colors we found and when we tied them together in little bows and pinned them on our blouses, they were really very pretty! So, our little group organized and teased the boys, not letting them wear our colors on their lapels because they were very sacred. That went on for several months.

Dr. Richardson, a local dentist and friend of the University and its students, proposed that if our little group of girls was interested, he thought there was room in the college world for another sorority and he'd help us. We were interested, of course.

With the desire to make this new organization radically distinctive and not a copy of similar institutions, Dr. Richardson drafted the Constitution and the Ritual and brought them to us and we were thrilled-Ina, Jean, and I. Dr. Richardson felt we needed an older girl or an upperclassman. I'd been studying Spanish and German with Allie Simonds and had come to know her pretty well...proposed her to be the fourth...the others agreed. And when we asked her to join us she said yes.

NOW THE WORK BEGAN...

After the Constitution and the Ritual were drafted, the Founders began the even more difficult task of selecting distinctive signs, insignia, emblems and names of officers. For a name for the Fraternity, anything other than a group of Greek letters could not be considered. Not knowing the Greek language, the four young women cut cardboard into the shapes of Greek letters, shuffled, arranged and rearranged them on the floor until they found the monogram, CHI OMEGA. They liked the combination-Jobelle said it reminded them of the emblems classically used by secret societies-and they decided Chi Omega would be the name of the sorority.

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Dr. Richardson approved of the name and took the monogram to his dental office where he made the two Greek letters out of scraps of gold leaf. He polished the metal until it shone and then welded a stickpin onto the back of the gold monogram.

“When we looked upon that pin,” said Jobelle; “our hearts then opened up to Chi Omega. Even though we were very young, we must have realized something about the spirit of fraternity...” Early members took turns wearing the one Chi Omega badge in rotation. The women were limited to one week at a time with the coveted symbol of their sisterhood. Much like our present badge, this was the first pin made and was worn until jewelers produced one for each member. In the selection of the names of officers, Dr. Richardson found that nearly one or more other fraternities had preempted everything and here, as in other things, he felt that Chi Omega must be in a class by herself. After consideration and rejection of a number of sets of names, chance directed his attention to the Eleusinian Mysteries (or ceremonies), the most ancient, elaborate and imposing of all Greek mystic rites, ancient or modern. The names of Chi Omega's officers were taken from these venerable rituals.

Because it was one of the colors of the University of Arkansas, the young founders at Psi Chapter thought the color cardinal should be one of Chi Omega's colors, too. According to Jobelle, “in our youthful foolishness, silliness and lack of understanding, we decided to let each chapter select a color that would compliment it. Psi selected straw. Upon realizing there weren't enough unique colors in the rainbow to go around, the early members declared that the colors of the sorority would be cardinal and straw.” Happily, the colors fit well with the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The red poppy and the yellow jonquil are the flowers most sacred to these Greek goddesses featured in the Eleusinian Mysteries.

MAKING IT OFFICIAL...

With the plan of organization complete, on the evening of April 5, 1895, Dr. Richardson met the Founders in the parlor of Jobelle Holcombe's home, read to them what he had prepared and explained the methods of procedure. They adopted the plan, signed the Constitution and Chi Omega was born. The next day, April 6, Psi Chapter held its first meeting. To select the leadership of the new sorority, the names of the officers were put in an old felt hat belonging to Jobelle's father and each Founder drew the name of the office she was to hold. At the second meeting, on April 13, Ina May Boles presented the mysteries of Initiation to her new sisters. After that, the Founders decided to ask ten other girls to join them and all accepted. Carefully chosen, they were representative of the best young women at the University. Of the ten, five were initiated on April 27 and five on May 4, 1895. Five were natives of Arkansas, and five were born in other states: Tennessee, Alabama, Missouri. These charter members were initiated within one month of the Fraternity's founding and provided the first opportunity to use the Initiation ritual. The four Founders were not initiated. Many years later, at their request, Jobelle and Jean were initiated in formal ceremonies on separate occasions. Ina and Allie were never initiated.

Not long after this, according to Jobelle, “We began to discuss the meaning of our organization and we arrived at what we thought were good ideals—the idea of trained intelligence, the principle of social obligations, and social responsibility, all associated with the womanly ideal of striving to be the best sort of woman.”

Jobelle and one of Psi's first new members, Clara Earle, thought Chi Omega should have a Greek meaning. By good fortune, “Chi Omega” fit easily to an appropriate Greek motto. Clara was an instructor at the University and her father was a very learned Greek scholar. “Not knowing Greek,” said Jobelle, “Clara took her father's Greek dictionary and ran through it until we found,

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under “omega” and “chi,” some words that meant well to us. We asked Clara’s father for advice on the correct grammatical construction, not telling him what we were up to, of course. So, he gave us the grammatical construction and that’s how Chi Omega came to have a meaning—one that carries out the ideals that we settled on earlier.”

I emphasize, said Jobelle, that even though we were very young, we were a sincere group of young women who had very definite ideas of the womanly ideal and definite ideas of what an intelligently trained woman could do in society. We thought often of our privileges in the social order and of our responsibilities to our fellow students and indefinitely to our society in the large. If we were discussing our ideals and our purposes in life, we would emphasize the influence of group living as a beginning for understanding our position in a democracy where people are bound together with a clear understanding and a sympathetic heart.