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Doing Sweet Briar History
The Formation of Honorary Societies

A unique part of Sweet Briar College involves the number of honorary societies which have developed over the years. These include Tau Phi, Chung Mungs, Paints and Patches, and Aints and Asses. In the twenties, when these societies were formed, the faculty of the college strongly expressed their disapproval for these so-called student societies. Rules were made forbidding the practices of hazing and initiation. Yet the students still formed these organizations, and one of the most explicit actions taken by them involved elaborate initiation and other club rituals.

What exactly was it about these clubs that made them so desirable and necessary to students even after they were ruled against by the faculty? The probable reason involved a basic social need for the formation of groups within a small community. It was through these societies that the students could obtain status and a superiority very much like those obtained in social groups in general.

By becoming familiar with these organizations at Sweet Briar, one can better understand the relationship between the formation of such groups and the desire for status and attention. This can best be accomplished through the following areas of consideration: the reasons why the organizations were founded, the reasons why the faculty was against them, and the role that initiation and rituals play within these groups.

According to the faculty minutes, as early as October of 1906, students at Sweet Briar had requested permission to form secret societies.¹ A very negative reaction from the faculty followed. President Benedict believed that such organizations tended to inhibit school spirit by putting themselves before the school. Dr. Benedict also felt that secret clubs could destroy the unity of a group so small as the Sweet Briar Community. Instead, the faculty suggested the formation of a general literary and dramatic society with a membership open to all students.²

Because such a literary and dramatic club was open to all, the students wish for a secret society was not yet fulfilled. By 1907, at least four secret clubs had developed although there had been an agreement that no such clubs would exist.³ Also, groups were formed within the literary and dramatic club in which members went through initiation rites to enter. When this was discovered by the faculty, they let it be known that their opinion was decidedly against initiations

as they were practiced at that time. The dramatic club supposedly did away with all initiation which would be objectionable⁴.

This drama club was also known as Paint and Patches, and, in later years, its membership again was limited and those chosen underwent a form of initiation. Initiates were required to wear paint on one cheek, and a patch on the other, and also had to perform a skit for the old club members.

Sweet Briar's only recognized honor society at that time was Tau Phi. Organized in 1921, Tau Phi members, "were juniors and seniors who by their spirit and general attitude had shown themselves eager to uphold the ideals of Sweet Briar, and were chosen principally for their scholastic record".⁵ Initiates of Tau Phi wore long black robes with caps, and paraded through the dormitory halls chanting Latin words.

Shortly after the formation of Paint and Patches and Tau Phi, Sweet Briar students observed the appearance of two "semi-secret" societies; Aints and Asses and Chung Mungs. Their pictures appeared in the Briar Patch as early as 1925, although no explanation of their purpose was given. These groups have been recognized by the Sweet Briar News since 1927 but their club descriptions did not appear in the Student Handbook until 1951. Perhaps the faculty did not accept either group as being worthwhile until then.

Aints and Asses became the antagonists of Paint and Patches, and entertained everyone with their take-offs of the dramatists production. According to the Sweet Briar News at that time, "initiates wore black stockings, tails, and numerous articles that did not add to their personal beauty. The new members were forced to perform skits and stunts that were ruinous to their dignity, but enjoyable to the spectators."⁶

The Chung Mungs are the antagonists of the Tau Phi's. Whereas the Tau Phi's are black-robed, somber figures, the Chung Mungs are "ghostly, white robed figures who love to mimic them. The group consists of those juniors and seniors who have gained recognition their previous two years and who are regarded as leaders in social if not intellectual activities."⁷ The Chung Mungs initiate their new members publicly and also have many rituals. One of the most unusual rituals dealt with the annual May Day celebration.

A group of ghost-like figures gathered in front of the golden stairs. The annual Chung Mung ceremonies of crowning the May Queen with toothbrushes and announcing the election of the new President were taking place.

Both ceremonies took place beneath an imposing white canopy, vaguely resembling a sheet tied to four sticks and held up by four sturdy Chung Mungs as the other members danced about in solemn joy. The few Tau Phi's gathered superciliously about were somewhat amazed to find themselves suddenly surrounded by dancing, whooping Chung Mungs and the campus was kept sleepless far into the night by their usual "ditties."⁸

As evident in the other societies, a large part of the initiation involved the dressing up of the new members in costume. The Chung Mung initiates often "appeared on campus wearing black stockings, mismatched shoes, rather short skirts lengthened by gym bloomers, a black ribbon at the throat, and speechless."⁹

The wearing of initiation costumes was discussed by the faculty in 1943. Because there was indeed a faculty ruling forbidding hazing, the wearing of any initiation costume to class or to the library was prohibited.¹⁰

In 1928, a letter was printed in the Sweet Briar News from a student who suggested that all societies conduct their initiations privately rather than in places such as in front of the golden stairs or in dormitory halls. The reply to this letter, from another student, is an excellent example of the role that initiations and rituals play in these organizations, and of the reasons that they first came into existence:

.....To those who think that the golden stairs may be defiled by initiations, let me answer, first that the customs of the societies are almost as old as the traditions of the golden stairs. Secondly, the organizations which initiate in this sacred locality are those attained by merit. Hence, to be initiated in such a place by such an organization - far from being degrading either to the steps or the "pledge", is an honor. As for the parading through the halls, this is never done at quiet hours. Anyone not interested may shut the door and rest perfectly assured that she will not be pursued.¹¹

By closely examining this letter, one can see the possible reasons for the students' need for such societies. The writer first points out for her support of public initiations the fact that the custom is almost as old as that of the golden stairs. Her second reason, that being initiated by such an organization in such a place is an honor, is a way of expressing the amount of status that is received in such an elite group. By holding such initiations and rituals in front of the student body, those members of the group can show to those who are not members just how superior and special they are to be included in such a group. The poor students who don't get the status and attention that our organization does!

In any small community, the inhabitants eventually find a need to form groups which recognize them as being different or superior to the others in one way or another. It is possible that this is why the first honorary organizations at Sweet Briar were founded. Also, it is curious to note the pairing of these clubs. They seem to come in opposing groups: Tau Phi and Chung Mungs and Paint and Patches with Aints and Asses. This trait is also found in organizations at Sweet Briar which were founded in the years to follow. This includes Q.V.~~III~~ and Bum Chums as well as the Sweet Tones and the Earphones. Perhaps this could best be explained as a means of releasing pressures and jealousies that could build up in those who are less exceptional academically or theatrically. By creating these counter-groups they can act out their jealousy in a joking manner.

The main reason then, for the students' strong desire to form their own societies stemmed from their need to be in groups which made them appear superior and special to the other students. Whether it was in Tau Phi with an intellectual superiority, or in Chung Mungs for a more social status depended on the individual. Both Paint and Patches and Aints and Asses also gave their members the status and attention that they were looking for.

Notes

- ¹Faculty Minutes (Sweet Briar College), October 17, 1906.
- ²Faculty Minutes (Sweet Briar College), November 16, 1906.
- ³Martha Lou Lemmon Stohlman, The Story of Sweet Briar College. (Princeton Univ. Press, 1956), p. 122.
- ⁴Executive Minutes (Sweet Briar College), October 20, 1920.
- ⁵Sweet Briar News, 29 September 1932. p. 2
- ⁶Sweet Briar News, 1 June 1933. p. 1
- ⁷Ibid., p. 4.
- ⁸Sweet Briar News 9 May 1935. p. 1
- ⁹Sweet Briar News 4 October 1934. p. 1.
- ¹⁰Faculty Minutes (Sweet Briar College), October 6, 1943.
- ¹¹"Open Letter." Sweet Briar News, 17 October 1928, p. 2.

Bibliography

- Briar Patch. Vol. 1-68 (1910 - 1978). Found in room 2 of Sweet Briar Archives, right side, first and second shelves. The Briar Patches contain pictures and accounts of the societies which made it possible to see the actual initiation costumes and to determine the approximate origin of the clubs. I looked at years 1925 - 1950.
- Executive Minutes. Vol. 1-13 (1911 - 1956). Found in room 1 of Sweet Briar Archives, on right, bottom shelf. The Executive Minutes told of action that was taken against some of these societies. I looked at years 1911 - 1920.
- Faculty Minutes. Vol. 1-13 (1906 - 1956). Found in room 1 of Sweet Briar Archives, on right, bottom shelf. The Faculty Minutes were more helpful than Executive Minutes in that they dealt more with the faculty's view towards the societies and with the decisions regarding their action. I looked at years 1906 - 20 and 1943.
- Stohlman, Martha. The Story of Sweet Briar College. Princeton University Press, 1956.
- Student Handbooks. 1-62 (1916 - 1978). Found in room 2 of Sweet Briar Archives, right side, second shelf. Handbooks give a description of the honorary societies which changes through the years. They can be useful in determining when the faculty accepted certain societies and also reflect Sweet Briar's changing ideals of the societies. I looked through years 1916 - 1976.
- Sweet Briar News. Vol. 1-41. (Oct. 5, 1927 - May 17, 1968). Weekly. Microfilm: Vol. 1-37 (1927-1964). Both newspapers and microfilm found in room 2 of Sweet Briar Archives, right side, second and third shelves. The News contained many articles on the various organizations' activities and initiation rites. It was also very useful because of the letters to the editor which reflected the students views toward the societies. I looked at years 1927-1942.