You've Been Tapped!
Student Initiations and Clubs at Sweet Briar College, 1940-1965

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Doing Sweet Briar History

I pledge, Jenny Lynn
Students at colleges across the country have been holding initiations for new students for decades. Women's colleges in particular, being smaller than co-educational universities, are known for having clubs with odd traditions. While some people argue that these clubs are forms of student bonding, others argue that these clubs are frivolous and are really means of hazing. Small women's colleges tend to have sisterly bonds between freshmen and junior classes as well as sophomore and junior classes. Class rivalries tend to extend into sports as well as within student clubs.

In studying the beginnings of the women's college institutions, Amy McCandless argues that the women's college was a "pedestal" for women in the American South between 1900 and 1930. The southern woman in particular was unable to really express her true ideas because of the restrictions placed on her. Therefore, the idea of a club with silly initiation practices was hindering the female students' advancement in society. By taking part in these activities, females would be repressed into domesticity and subordination, as well as adopting infantile behavior that would need a man to curb. Another approach made by scholars is to look at the benefits of student clubs. Lynn Gordon approaches the idea of freshmen initiation as a gentle harassment from the sophomores. It became a way of incorporating the new freshmen into the community and to allow them to earn the privileges the upperclassmen had. "Class customs are significant, rather than frivolous, helping women find places and status in a public, nondomestic world."

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3 Gordon, 36
From the beginning of Sweet Briar College, freshmen have been the butt of upperclassmen jokes. In a scrapbook of a student from the class of 1923, a poem entitled “Comin’ Through the Hall,” which had a stanza written about each class, pokes fun at the freshmen by stating: “Each Freshie new (not just a few), Has hopes which buds must fall, Of course a pest – so were the rest, Comin’ through the hall.”

Freshmen were required to make aprons, which are mentioned in the 1919-1920 Student Handbook. Aprons, green hair ribbons on pigtails, and green beads became the symbol of the freshmen class. The aprons were made at an apron-making party held at the beginning of the school year. Freshmen were required to collect the signatures of their classmates on the aprons, with their own name displayed predominantly on the front. The apron was worn for the first three weeks of school until Founder’s Day. If freshmen wanted to go into the city for the day, then they had to wear a necklace of green beads, which would signify them as being a freshman at Sweet Briar College. This tradition continued for the next twenty years.

Freshmen were considered the new and inexperienced members of the Sweet Briar Community. The upper-class women were quick to try and include them in Sweet Briar activities, but that came after initiation. In the Student Handbook, which one student jokingly labeled “the Freshmen Bible,” a list of traditions is given for the incoming freshmen. All of the “traditions” are basically what the freshmen cannot do. Freshmen are instructed not to sit on the Golden Stairs, the Junior Bench, or the Sophomore wall. Freshmen must stand back for an upperclassman in line at the Post Office, Book Shop, the Boxwood Inn, and all doorways. Freshmen would also have to learn the entire Senior class’ names. Freshmen initiation is even recorded in the Student Handbook, continuing into the 1940s, where it states, “At the end of

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4 Klooz, M. 1919 - 1923 Scrapbook. Sweet Briar Archives. Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA.
5 They could walk to Amherst, but only under supervision of an upper classman.
6 Klooz, 1919-1920 copy of the Student Handbook.
three weeks, there shall be a day set aside as Freshman-Sophomore Day, run by the
Sophomores.\textsuperscript{7}

In the beginning of the 1940s, the United States faced the onset of World War II in both
the Pacific and European theaters. Even though Sweet Briar students were aware of the
impending seriousness and adversity, they continued on with their initiations and clubs. If
anything, the war became a theme associated with events like freshman initiation.\textsuperscript{8}

One initiation, in particular, stands out. The sophomore class was in charge of the
initiation, which began 10:00 pm on Friday 16, 1942\textsuperscript{9}. The sophomores first posted their
instructions for the freshmen on school bulletin boards. These instructions included, "13 pigtails
– red stripe down the middle of the face – 3 worms in a jar – a bird’s nest on a string." After the
freshmen scrambled to find all this, the sophomores appeared on the freshman halls to the sound
of a funeral march, dressed in black. "They looked, sounded, and acted like the Gestapo,”
reports the Sweet Briar News. The freshmen were ordered on their knees, faces to the floor. The
head sophomore, referred to as Miss Hall, then requested an essay on "Why and Because” and
six mushy love letters on her desk, one at 5 am, the next at 7 am, respectively. As the freshmen
were being ordered around by the sophomores, the juniors, the sister class of the freshmen, came
to their rescue. The sophomores left the freshmen to their scrounging for the objects. At 6 am,
the freshmen were assembled outside to await their next instructions.\textsuperscript{10} The activities were all
for the amusement of the sophomores, apparently, as the freshmen were requested to make fools
of themselves. From the freshmen class, eight students were chosen to perform various silly

\textsuperscript{7} Student Handbook (1906-present). Years 1939 until 1944.
\textsuperscript{8} It is interesting to note the references being made to “air raids” and “the Gestapo” is used since the United States
had just entered World War II only a year prior to this particular initiation.
\textsuperscript{9} “Traditional Initiation of Freshman Class is Educational and Entertaining for S.B.” Sweet Briar News. Vol. XVI,
No. 4. (October 21, 1942) 3
\textsuperscript{10} Here the freshmen are referred to as "rats,” a term used at the Virginia Military Institute in reference to first-year
cadets.
tasks, and, as they did so, the rest of the freshmen were ordered on their knees, facing the wall. At 7 am, the freshmen were paraded through the Refectory, singing "the Goon Song," dragging their bird's nests. Until the Freshmen Circus was performed Saturday evening, the freshmen had to run to the dell in between classes, reciting Seniors' names, laying flat on the ground for "air raids," and "holding funerals."

The sophomores in 1944 are the first to speak up about the annual initiation. In an editorial from October 11, 1944, a sophomore writes on behalf of Members of '47, "Those who disapprove of this letter must remember that at a meeting last year at which we discussed initiation, many of us voted against it as it now stands." This particular sophomore feels that the initiation process is silly and is not the point of being at college. She claims that, among the sophomore class, the sophomores who make the freshmen perform acts of subordination accuse those who don't of lacking class or school spirit. She believes that psychologists might label the sophomores who participate in the initiation of freshmen are "getting a necessary outlet for childish emotions." Although freshmen, she says, say they will never forget the initiation, they "feel that some sophomores get pleasure out of tormenting them. These sophomores," she continues, "are teaching a wonderful lesson on how not to win friends and influence people."

Her letter, she hopes, will not cause any trouble.

However, it is met the next week by two letters to the Editor. Both letters are written by anonymous freshmen who took part in the initiation. These freshmen both feel that the sophomores did nothing wrong and were not acting childishy. "We do not believe that any such forms of hazing have been going on during the initiation," says the second letter. The first letter

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11 This challenge of the fun side of student life comes four months after the D-day Invasion at Normandy, which occurred on June 6, 1944. The attitude of this student could be interpreted as taking things seriously, especially during a time of war. Her attitude also reflects those ideas of McCandless, who suggests the idea of frivolity versus education.

12 "Yours Truly...the Public." Sweet Briar News. Vol. XVII No. 4 (October 18, 1944)
asserts that “initiation has been a deciding factor in getting everyone acquainted. It has helped [the freshmen] unite more than anything else could.” Every class before them had to go through the same as well, so these freshmen see the initiation as a rite of passage. Both letters also assert that no freshmen were touched or harmed during the initiation and if the participants took most of it “with a grain of salt.”

In December, 1944, freshmen initiation came to a halt. President Meta Glass addressed “the problem” of freshmen initiation with the student body after a meeting with the faculty. A ruling from 1906 was addressed, in which it was stated that there should be no hazing at Sweet Briar. It seems that Dr. Glass was looking towards the best interest of the students and went first to the freshmen class. After meeting with the freshmen, Dr. Glass then met with the entire student body. It was decided that, even though “[1944’s] initiation was generally conceded to have been one of the best regulated initiations...” it would be in the better interest of the college to change the procedure. The students decided that it would be alright to keep some of the elements of the past initiations, but it would be better to “obtain them in some other way.” The Student Government Association was then put in charge of coming up with something new. Three months later, an Orientation Committee is formed, comprised of five seniors, six juniors, and seven sophomores.

This intervention of the faculty was once again placing Sweet Briar students back on their “pedestal.” The frivolity of initiation was apparently distracting the young women from their studies. While the administration assumed the role of creating an orientation committee,

13 "Yours Truly... the Public." Sweet Briar News. Vol. XVII No. 4 (October 18, 1944) 4
14 "Freshmen of Future Undergo No Initiation." Sweet Briar News. Vol. XVII, No. 11. (December 6, 1944) 1
15 Even though the article states “Board of Directors,” I think the author of the article meant “faculty.”
16 Dr. Benedict supported the idea of a society “embracing all the students, while allowing the girls to group themselves into chapters according to their affinities.”
17 "Orientation Announced!" Sweet Briar News. Vol. XVIII, No. 25. (May 9, 1945) 1

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students readjusted themselves without their three week long initiation. Freshmen would be on their own while the upperclassmen began honing their clubs.

While Sweet Briar does not have any sororities, it does have small student clubs consisting from ten to twenty members. The tap clubs each have different traditions that make each one unique – which started as ways of identifying members. They all entail some sort of initiation and an initiation period. The ritual of the “tappings,” or the initiation into the club, was passed down from one generation of members to the next. Each initiation is significant to the club and is usually kept secret to the general public. Only students who were tapped knew what really happened – uniting them. New student inductees were known as “babies” and they were chosen by a current member of the club, referred to as their “mom.” Lineages within the club also flourished. Nicknames were given to the new members, which reflected their personalities as well as their “club ancestry.” Each club had rules and officers, who were selected by their fellow students, as well as faculty advisors, who oversaw the actions of the tap clubs. In effect, tap clubs formed a self-governing method that continues to this day. As one student commented, “...the clubs definitely serve a purpose of creating higher ideals and upholding traditions.”18 In effect, the honorary clubs consist of outstanding members of the Sweet Briar community. These girls are placed on a pedestal for all to see.

For every tap club, there is always a rival tap club. Rivalries among clubs can be traced back to class rivalries.19 The oldest tap club at Sweet Briar is Paint & Patches, which was the student literary society in question at the 1906 faculty meeting. Their rival, the Ain’ts ‘n’ Asses, performs parodies or farces to combat the serious dramatic presence of the Paints & Patches. In 1923, another group on campus that gained a rival club was Tau Phi, whose serious nature

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19 Class rivalries still occur between sister classes, as well as with the Rock and Hitching Post fight.

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became rivaled by the Chung Mungs. The Q.V.s did not gain a rival club, the Bum Chums, until 1943, making it one of the more recent rivalries. When freshmen initiation was turned over to the Orientation Committee for the 1945-'46 school year, tap clubs continued the traditions of freshmen initiation. The rival clubs balance out the honorary tap clubs. While not being quite so perfect, they are the humiliating side of the Sweet Briar Community. These rival clubs draw attention away from the pedestal ideology and could be labeled as frivolous. However, most are still charitable in nature and "…supply interest and activity for the whole campus…not just themselves."

After the controversy over freshman initiation arose, the faculty requested that all student-run organizations submit a list of current members at the beginning of the 1947-'48 fall semester. This new policy conflicted especially with the core concept of the Q.V. tap club. New Q.V.'s could not be revealed to the school until Spring Step Singing of their sophomore year. The current Q.V. policy at this time had been to elect new members at end of the spring semester and tap them before fall semester began. If the new rule for the publishing of member names was to go into effect, the new members' identities would be revealed, completely defeating the purpose of the Q.V.s' secrecy. The faculty also declared that, if the club was not willing to publish a list of new members, it would be deemed a "secret organization," and would therefore be deemed illegal according to the college by-laws. The challenging of the Q.V. policy really touched a chord with the students at Sweet Briar. This was a club that they had created and honored. The Board's intrusion upon the "rules" had challenged the tradition that the students

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21 For every Sweet Tone, there is an off-key Earphone.
22 Brewer, 2
23 The May 8, 1947 edition of the Sweet Briar News published three articles on the policy and secret organizations from the student point of view. In the "Letters to the Editors" section, students began proposing new ways of allowing the Q.V.s to continue their secretive work without being revealed publicly. By moving the election date of the new inductees to the beginning of their sophomore fall semester, then the new members could be announced at Spring Step Singing without fearing their identities being revealed.
had worked hard to keep going. The students took this tradition very seriously. The fact that students stood up and spoke out against publishing the list of Q.V.s, prior to revealing at Spring Step Singing shows, that they did not consider the club a frivolous accoutrement of the women’s college. They were reflecting their liberal arts education as well by challenging the college authorities. "The Q.V.s function to maintain as much unity and class spirit as possible during sophomore year..." stated two Q.V.s. According to them, the club served a purpose rather than just being an inane secret society. This challenging of the pedestal ideology eventually allowed the students to keep their club.

So did all of these traditions really cause college girls to regress into childish behavior? Most of the clubs at Sweet Briar became community oriented rather than remaining secret. During the late 1940s into the 1950s, the Bum Chums manned the Coke machines on campus. The Chung Mungs were recorded in 1965 as selling boxwood plants and cookies to students. With their profits, they would purchase something for the college, like a book shelf in Reid Pit in 1966. While the clubs may have seemed silly and lacking purpose, they actually were helping the community. World War Two also brought out the patriotism of the clubs at Sweet Briar. Throughout the 1940s, clubs organized themselves into helping with the war effort. The Bum Chums were the main organizers of a doll drive for orphans in Britain in 1944, as well as managing the Red Cross bandage rolling that went on throughout the school year. Students, whether they belonged to the club or not, were invited to help. Students wanted their tap clubs and they wanted to keep them around.

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24 Gordon, 36
28 Bum Chum Scrapbook (1968-1969) Sweet Briar Museum. Sweet Briar College
Amy McCandless' "pedestal ideology" gave forth the notion of young Southern women who were placed at a higher level than the rest of society. These young women went off to college in order to broaden their knowledge and to delve deeper into academia. While they were at college, they created numerous traditions, including those traditions of freshman initiation and student clubs. With traditions like initiation, they created a communal bond that would last for their four years at the institution and maybe even longer. When challenged by the faculty of the college, it can be noted that these young women stood up for what they wanted – something to unify all the classes and create a community. Their student-run clubs established their own small pedestals that gave way to opposing versions of the "pedestal club." Faculty, attempting to intervene and take control and put these students back on their pedestals, were met with a backlash of outspoken women who would rather sacrifice themselves to "childish behavior" and still get their education.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:


This source really explained a lot about the activities and actions of the club. Letters from the original founding members explain how they came up with traditions. Also included were scripts from the Bum Chum Inn.


This source included articles from the Sweet Briar News, which expressed views of the club as well as the activities of the club members on campus. There are also explanations of the Chung Mung and Tau Phi rivalry.


This source was helpful in looking at early versions of the freshmen initiation. There was evidence of freshman aprons and beads. There was also a poem about all the classes.


This source proved to be very useful. Student opinions, as well as faculty decisions, were published. Student editorials were usually answered weekly. Tap club tapings and new club member lists were also published.


The student handbook provides an example of changes over time in the rules and regulations. The changes in attitudes that were displayed in the Sweet Briar News were reflected in the handbook. The handbook didn’t really express student opinion, either.

Secondary Source:
