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Sorority Life at Lindenwood College: 1905-1921

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Historical Methods

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In today's society, when many people think of extracurricular activities for women in college, they think of sorority life. Especially in larger schools such as Alabama, these exclusive organizations are often the highlight of the collegiate experience. In the early 20th century, however, sororities had only just begun. It was not a staple in higher education for women at this time as it often is now. Women started college in the late 19th century without any peer social support system created for them. They witnessed the success of men's fraternities so they created and modeled sororities after these. Sororities began in 1870 with Kappa Alpha Theta, and they grew from there. Lindenwood first allowed sororities on campus in 1905, and they were popular with the students. The two on campus the longest (the second established in 1907) were Eta Upsilon Gamma and Sigma Iota Chi. They held annual dances and school-wide receptions. Many members also held various positions in student organizations at Lindenwood, which kept them heavily involved in campus activities. By 1917, though, the campus culture changed due to consistently inappropriate actions by the sorority women. So, in 1920, Lindenwood College administrators banned sororities from campus due to their controversial behaviors during their 15-year existence at the school.

Influential faculty sponsored sororities on campus. Mrs. George Frederic Ayres sponsored Eta Upsilon Gamma¹. In 1918, Mrs. John Roemer was appointed as a faculty member of the college's sorority committee.² At this time, Mrs. Roemer's husband was Lindenwood's president. The Ayres and Roemer legacies on campus are evident, as two buildings are named after these couples. This support shows that sororities were held in high esteem at their beginning on campus.

¹ 1910-1911 *Linden Leaves*, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri, 57.

² 1918 Lindenwood College Faculty Meeting Minutes, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri, 06.

Concerning student involvement at the college, several sorority women were part of other organizations. One student, Florence Finger of Sigma Iota Chi, was a member of her chapter and the treasurer of the Y.W.C.A. This group hosted several Christian events on campus and worked with Dr. Ayres to sell music and organize events.³ In Eta Upsilon Gamma, Eleanor Adele Asdale was an officer of the Sandwich Club.⁴ So, it's noteworthy that sorority women got involved in what they could and took leadership roles. Some women were also bestowed social honors from their peers, such as being voted the sweetest (Katharine Abright of Gamma), best dressed (Bess Christy of Sigma), and best figure (Florence Finger of Sigma).⁵ The student body recognized these women as standouts from their peers, which demonstrates their impact on campus life beyond being members of their fraternal organizations.

The two sororities mentioned also funded and built houses in the middle of what is now considered the old side of campus, in the grassy area across from where Young Hall is located.⁶ Their homes were not like the mansions built on the larger college campuses, but they were enough for the number of girls Lindenwood College had. It likely took several months for the sororities to raise the money, get school approval, and build the houses. The women relied on their strong relationships with upper-level faculty and administration for the existence of their homes. They also relied on sorority membership giving their members a better social and emotional collegiate experience. A Bell Test given at another school in 1942 demonstrated that sorority women were more well-adjusted to college life than non-sorority women.⁷ So, rewarding

³ 1911-1912 *Linden Leaves*, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri, 48.

⁴ 1910-1911 *Linden Leaves*, 79.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶ 1917 Sanborn Insurance Map of Lindenwood College, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri.

⁷ Carol Larson Stone, "Sorority Status and Personality Adjustment," *American Sociological Review* 16 (Aug. 1951): 01.

sororities with houses was a way for Lindenwood to thank them for what they did. All this shows that Eta Upsilon Gamma and Sigma Iota Chi had a positive relationship with the campus, at least for the first half of their existence at Lindenwood.

In the next decade, sororities lost their appeal to students, faculty, and administration. As female enrollment in higher education increased, sororities nationwide developed their image “into one that elevated sociability and grace.”⁸ This meant they created new recruitment ideas, hosted parties and social events, and became more elitist in their member choices. This shift in sorority life extended to Lindenwood. In 1916, Beta Sigma Omnicron came to campus as a third social sorority. Their appearance created a more competitive recruitment process for the other chapters, as they now had another sorority that wanted members. The school imposed rules on the sororities about recruitment, but these rules did not do much to aid the competitiveness of the process. By 1919, the student body became jaded against the sororities. This was made clear in a section of the *Linden Leaves* titled, “The Real Meaning of Our Lodges!” Each sorority chapter had three categories: what they signified, their community standing, how they got the girls, and the members’ ambition in life. This section was overwhelmingly sarcastic and catty. Most noteworthy was the section about the members’ ambitions in life. The following quotes reflect this: Beta Sigma Omicron - “To take in all of Arkansas;” Sigma Iota Chi - “Every member a Phi Theta Kappa” (this was an honor fraternity on campus); Eta Upsilon Gamma - “To get all the girls that any one else wants.”⁹ The negative language used towards Beta Sigma Omicron and Gamma demonstrates the student body’s feelings that the members of these sororities were unfair or shallow. Within just 10 years, students at Lindenwood lost their sweet sentiments towards sorority women that they once felt.

⁸ Diana B. Turk, *Bound by a Mighty Vow* (New York University: New York University Press, 2004), 48.

⁹ 1919-1920 *Linden Leaves*, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri, 128.

Faculty shared these opinions, as meeting minutes from January 15, 1920, indicate that they began the movement on campus to abolish sororities during Lindenwood's transition to a four-year institution.¹⁰ Dr. Roemer pushed the idea off to the Board of Directors. In their subsequent meeting minutes, the Board noted that recruitment had become a rule-less process. In the 1917-1918 academic year, the sororities had been instructed not to indulge in rushing "before February and no one invited prior to that month. None of the sororities observed the rule."¹¹ This strained the student body, as the girls who did not get bids from sororities were upset and disappointed. As one journal article said, "Women may become intensely focused on sorority affiliation and personal appearance in order to gain status."¹² This played out at Lindenwood and hurt the student body in academics and social compatibility. The minutes also commented that President Roemer was "not a sorority enthusiast."¹³ This combination of negative student, faculty, and administration sentiment towards the three social sororities at Lindenwood was enough for the President and Board to ban them when the college officially earned its four-year accreditation status in 1920.

Lindenwood was not the only college with recruitment problems. Sororities nationwide were losing their reputation and appeal due to unfair practices. Thus, "the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) was established...to assist collegiate...chapters of the NPC member organizations in cooperating with colleges and universities to foster interfraternal relationships."¹⁴ In plain language, their mission was to have collaboration between members of

¹⁰ 1920 Faculty Meeting Minutes, 50.

¹¹ 1917-1918 Lindenwood College Board of Directors Miscellaneous Loose Papers, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri, 13.

¹² Jenny Stuber, Joshua Klugman, Caitlin Daniel, "Gender, Social Class, and Exclusion: Collegiate Peer Cultures and Social Reproduction," *Sociological Perspectives* 54, no. 3 (August 1951): 16.

¹³ 1917-1918 Lindenwood College Board of Directors Miscellaneous Loose Papers, 13.

¹⁴ National Panhellenic Conference, "Mission, Vision, and Purpose," National Panhellenic Conference, <https://npcwomen.org/about/mission-vision-and-purpose/> (accessed April 21, 2024).

all sororities. The love for Panhellenic sisterhood was not supposed to die in recruitment, once women joined a specific organization. It is clear that, at Lindenwood, that love was lost by 1919. In addition, NPC's vision was to be the "premier advocacy and support organization for the advancement of the sorority experience."¹⁵ They wanted to be the resource for sororities to gain their reputations and allure back. Despite this, for unknown reasons, Lindenwood did not invite any Panhellenic member sororities to its campus until 1992.

After the decision to ban sororities was made, it was clear that something had to be done with their buildings. One concern at a larger school - the University of Chicago, specifically - for their students was that "the formation of national sorority chapters... would exacerbate social-class divisions among women students."¹⁶ This division could be applied to Lindenwood because of the houses. The school could not give them to other students, as this would be exclusionary to those who could not afford to live there. To solve this issue, Lindenwood granted \$2000 to the sororities as repayment for their houses.¹⁷ They also repurposed the buildings into the Students' Tea Room and a home for the Y.W.C.A.¹⁸

In summary, sororities in the early years of Lindenwood College were a great way for women to get involved. They provided a family away from home, helped the women adjust to college life, and hosted parties and events that involved the entire campus. Sorority women built themselves up within their student communities and worked with faculty and administration to further their goals. Over time, their actions caused more harm than good on campus, and they had to leave. It took several decades for Lindenwood to allow sororities back on campus, likely due to the bad taste they left in the mouth of the school when they were banned.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (Library of Congress, 1990), 105.

¹⁷ 1917-1918 Lindenwood College Board of Directors Miscellaneous Loose Papers, 13.

¹⁸ 1921 Lindenwood College Viewbook, Mary E. Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, Missouri, 16-17.

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