

NEVADA Silver & Blue

FALL 2006

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University of Nevada, Reno

NEVADA SILVER & BLUE is published quarterly
by the Office of Marketing and Communications,
University of Nevada, Reno.

Vol. XVIII, No. 1 © 2006

www.unr.edu/ur/sb.htm

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Nevada's first fraternity

The mysterious T.H.P.O. was born in a barn

By Michael Fischer, D.D.S., '71 (pre dentistry)

The year is 1891 and the University of Nevada, then known as Nevada State University, is about to graduate its first class, three students.

This is fitting, given that the entire campus consists of three major buildings: Morrill Hall, Stewart Hall and the Agricultural Experiment Station, later known as the Hatch Building. A hole in the ground represents what will become the fourth, the mining building. There's also an old wooden barn behind Morrill where "day" students — those commuting from homes in the Reno area — tie up their horses.

Less than 10 years after relocating to Reno from Elko, Nevada State has many needs and not only the need to enroll more students (there were 189 in 1890-91). Among the more pressing physical deficiencies is a shop for general campus repairs and a building where the mechanical arts can be taught.

Lacking the budget to build one, the regents direct the college's newly hired instructor of mechanical arts,

Richard Brown, to build it himself. That is, Brown is told to hire some students to help him move the old barn behind Morrill to an area northeast of the soon-to-be mining building and then outfit the first floor for a woodworking and machine shop. The second floor will become a *de facto* dormitory for the barn movers and other students, mainly country boys from Nevada and eastern California for whom a commute to classes by horse would take too long.

The space also will become the home of the University's first fraternity.

From its founding soon after the completion of the mechanical arts building until being absorbed into the national fraternity Sigma Alpha Epsilon in 1917, T.H.P.O., the name of the secretive organization founded by the out-of-towners, dominated the leadership of the student body not unlike the famous and mysterious Skull and Bones Society at Yale. And like Skull and Bones, whose members include George W. Bush and

John Kerry, the brotherhood begun by the boys in the barn spawned many prominent public figures.

No one knows for certain how the initials T.H.P.O. were chosen and what they stood for. One story is that all the members' names were placed in a hat and four were drawn. They then used the initial letters to create the name with periods included. Another is that T.H.P.O. stood for Truth, Honor, Purity and Obedience. A Sigma Alpha Epsilon and T.H.P.O. historian, Denver Dickerson (grandson of a Nevada governor of the same name), speculates that this was mere puffery inserted into the group's application to become part of SAE in hopes of impressing the evaluators.

The most popular, and interesting, theory is that the group was founded in the best traditions of mob warfare — for mutual protection.

Residents of Lincoln Hall, circa 1900. The secret T.H.P.O. fraternity reformed in the dormitory after the group's original home, a converted barn, burned down in 1895. Standing at left with hands on the railing is Richard Brown, professor of practical mechanics and the group's informal adviser.



The story goes that the students who had come from afar to study at “the college on the hill” found themselves the target of hazing by the downtowners.

“In order to hold their own,” a student from the early 1900s, Silas Ross '09 recalled many years later, “they got together and formed a little association, and they called it ‘the hill protective organization’” or T.H.P.O. for short.

The animosity between townies and the out-of-townners is evident in an article that appeared in the November 15, 1897, issue of a campus publication, *The Student Record*. The reporter tells of an incident in which Reno public school students began hissing when University students gave the college yell at a local theater. The confrontation was considered dramatic enough that the story was picked up by *The News* of Carson City and the *Nevada State Herald* of Wells.

A year earlier, an article in *The Student Record* — whose editor was a T.H.P.O. member — noted how T.H.P.O.s “held together and aided one another as one man, for in unity is strength.” And the 1900 *Artemisia* yearbook describes T.H.P.O. as a group of men who “band together for purposes of mutual friendship and aid.”

The truth about the group’s origins may never be known because the old mechanical-arts building was destroyed by a fire along with all the fraternity’s early records on November 2, 1895. The residents of the building were moved to temporary quarters and a year later to the newly opened Lincoln Hall.

T.H.P.O. was reorganized within Lincoln. Meetings normally convened in room 6, often at the stroke of midnight, and with secrecy strictly maintained. Initiation ceremonies took place around the campus reservoir (now Manzanita Lake) and the Catholic cemetery (site of Nye and Argenta Halls).

An intriguing, if honorary, member of T.H.P.O. was Clarence Hungerford Mackay, University benefactor and son of the famous Comstock silver baron John Mackay. The story has it that while on campus for the dedication of the original Mackay football field in 1909, he was surreptitiously taken from a reception at the president’s home to a room in



T.H.P.O. members’ photos made into stamps for a scrapbook, circa 1898

Lincoln Hall. There he was disguised as a senior in a flannel shirt and corduroy pants and spent the night on the town with T.H.P.O. members. The group’s 1909 petition for membership in the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity proudly lists Mackay atop a roster of T.H.P.O. alumni.

Around 1900, T.H.P.O. evolved from a protective organization into more of a social organization. The group especially coveted leadership positions in the military and athletic programs, academic support societies and the student government. T.H.P.O.s often ascended to such positions as cadet major of the military, president of the student body, class president, and editor or business manager of the student paper. Athletics posts were also prized, especially team captain in track, football and baseball.

Two T.H.P.O. members in the 1910s became Rhodes Scholars: Floyd S. Bryant '13 and Walter C. Jepson, who started at Nevada in 1912. A third passed the examinations and was eligible for appointment but died prior to being able to attend the prestigious program at England’s University of Oxford.

T.H.P.O. social events were highlights of the academic year on campus. The most important was a social and dance held in the gymnasium on the eve of Washington’s Birthday. The rafters of the gym would be decorated in black and white, the colors of the fraternity.

Another was a hay ride and dance at Huffaker’s Hall, in the south Truckee Meadows. Wagons loaded with hay and drawn by horses would pull up to Manzanita Hall. T.H.P.O. members, dates and chaperones would travel through the night singing along the way. Dancing to live music was the main entertainment with a meal served at midnight. Return was by the same conveyance by the light of the moon.

NOTABLE ALUMNI OF T.H.P.O.

- ▶ **George W. Malone '17** became a U.S. senator.
- ▶ **George W. Springmeyer '02** became U.S. attorney for Nevada.
- ▶ **Nathaniel Estes Wilson**, one of the group’s informal faculty advisers and a professor of chemistry, became mayor of Reno.
- ▶ **Royce A. Hardy '10**, prominent mining engineer for Reno banker and mine manager George Wingfield. Hardy owned the Joseph Giraud House/Hardy House on Flint Street in Reno, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- ▶ **Joseph F. McDonald '15** became a prominent Reno newspaperman.
- ▶ **Albert Wallace Cahlan '96** became an inspector with the Nevada State Police and the state’s first identification expert.

Life for the T.H.P.O. men continued much the same until they were accepted into the realm of Sigma Alpha Epsilon. No less than the immortal Billy Levere, an influential early leader and two-time national president of the fraternity, conducted the ceremony on March 9, 1917.

All in all it was a remarkable journey for a bunch of country kids who just wanted to protect themselves and uphold the honor of the University.

Dr. Michael Fischer, a member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, is a dentist in Gardnerville. He acknowledges that nothing in history writing is as dangerous as calling something “the first,” so he is bracing for letters challenging his assertion that T.H.P.O. was the first fraternity organized on campus. He would like to hear from anyone with further T.H.P.O. history or memorabilia and can be reached at (775) 265-3699.