

KAPPA SIGMA NU/SIGMA NU - ETA BETA

“How it Began” by James E. Phelps, Jr. with the assistance of Charley White and Lyle Cooper

In the Fall Quarter of 1955, there were no social fraternities and only two service fraternities at East Carolina, Alpha Phi Omega, a national service fraternity, and Sigma Rho Phi, a local service fraternity. These two groups only inducted a very few members each year, and neither seemed to serve a wider cause while promoting a true sense of brotherhood and fellowship. So twenty men gathered for dinner at the Olde Towne Inn to explore the possibility of forming a fraternity to serve both the community and to promote fellowship among its members. They voted to approach the College Administration about forming a fraternity. We were told that East Carolina did not allow social fraternities, but we were welcome to propose a service fraternity that would serve some purpose at EC.

We then got busy to develop a charter that we could submit to the Administration. We got help from some fraternities at N.C. State that Dick Newell had contact with that provided us with various types of fraternity charters that we used as a basis for developing our own. Several of the guys worked on developing this charter including Dickie Newell, Jack Beamon, Charley White, who had contacts with some fraternities at UNC, Roddy Jones, and Jim Phelps. Dick was our cheerleader and he kept us on track any time we felt discouraged. After all members of the group reviewed and approved our draft charter, it was submitted to the ECC Administration. The Administration returned our proposed charter, after some delay, with their recommendations for changes. The objections outlined by them were primarily related to any references to religion. We were happy to accept these changes and redrafted our charter, which we then resubmitted for approval. After some additional delay, it was then approved with the stern reminder that we were to be a true service fraternity and must have a faculty advisor.

We formally organized Kappa Sigma Nu on October 19, 1955. We picked that name as it was available and had the sound of a more widely known fraternity. We hoped it might also help us later if we were to approach Sigma Nu. We saw this as the first step toward our goal of eventually getting social fraternities at East Carolina. We originally selected two faculty advisors, but finally settled on one, Dr. James Stewart the head of the Economics department.

We operated as a fully functioning service fraternity in 1956 and 1957. We had several projects and social events at East Carolina. We also donated a good amount of money that we raised to such causes as CARE and the Red Cross. In the Fall of 1956 we had our first pledge class. Charley White was our pledge master or Warden. During this time, other people saw our success and began to form rival “service” fraternities. The fraternity movement at EC had begun. And we were becoming more anxious to convert to a true social fraternity. However, the college administration was adamant in its opposition to social fraternities.

Facing such strong opposition, we decided to write Mr. E.E. Rawl, a friend of Jim’s family, who had just been appointed to the EC Board of Trustees. Mr. Rawl was a super salesman and we felt that if we could get him to support us we had a chance to make things happen. He called Jim and discussed the reasons for bringing social fraternities and sororities to ECC. He told Jim that he would try to help us. He then contacted Dean Leo Jenkins, who was a supporter of fraternities and served as a behind the scene advisor to him.

In the meantime, the number of local “service fraternities had grown and we decided to form an Inter-fraternity Council. This was in the 1956- 1957 school year. We succeeded in getting Roddy Jones elected to be the first President of the IFC, over the objections of some of the other fraternities that felt we should not have both the IFC and SGA president from the same fraternity in the same year (1957-58).

In October of 1957, several of us were called to the President’s office and were told that the Board had approved social fraternities at ECC. Unfortunately, Mr. Rawl died unexpectedly shortly after getting the Board of Trustees to approve social fraternities and never received the recognition he deserved. We immediately revised our charter to reflect that now we were truly a social fraternity. We became the first social fraternity at EC. This began a mad scramble to affiliate with national social fraternities by all of the local “service/social” fraternities on campus.

Again, the Administration sought to block the formation of national social fraternities and continually placed obstacles in the way of their formation. It took a great deal of hard, determined work and fortitude by all KSN members to overcome the resistance presented by the likes of Dean White and Dean Tucker. Fortunately, we had the support of Dr. Leo Jenkins, who later became President of East Carolina.

Partly because of our name, Kappa Sigma Nu, and because we had contacts with Sigma Nus at UNC through Pat Sawyer, who had been a Sigma Nu at UNC, and Charley White, we decided to apply to Sigma Nu’s national headquarters to become a colony of Sigma Nu. With the help of the Psi chapter of Sigma Nu we submitted our application. However the National Office responded very quickly that Sigma Nu was not interested in having a chapter at East Carolina as we were a “teachers college”. This infuriated our members as we had not been just a “teachers college” in years.

We formed a committee and approached the Registrar’s office and the Alumni office for help. The Registrar, Dr. O. L. Phillips, was a Pi Kappa Alpha and a strong supporter of having national fraternities at East Carolina. Dr. Phillips agreed to compile statistics showing the number of non-teaching graduates and curriculums there were at ECC. His office provided us with the number of AB degrees granted in the last several years, as well as the number of non-teaching BS and Masters degrees granted. Upon receipt of this data, we fired off a rather testy letter to the National office of Sigma Nu informing them that we had not been a teachers college in quite some time and here were the statistics to prove it. We closed the letter by saying that if they were still not interested in us, that was fine by us as there were other fraternities that were very interested in us. We also contacted our friends in Sigma Nu at UNC and N.C. State to see if they could help us. We decided as a chapter that if we did not get a favorable response from Sigma Nu that we would approach other national fraternities including Kappa Sigma.

It was not long before we received a phone call from Richard Fletcher, Executive Secretary of Sigma Nu, apologizing for his first letter. Mr. Fletcher, stated that he had received our “new” information and they, Sigma Nu National headquarters, had no idea just how ECC had grown. We were assured a letter was on the way stating that they would welcome our application to become affiliated with Sigma Nu. Mr. Fletcher had been won over and he became a strong advocate and supporter of Kappa Sigma Nu. Upon receipt of his letter, we began the formal application process.

One of the steps we had to go through was to have visits from existing Sigma Nu chapters and we would need the approval of both for the process of becoming a Sigma Nu chapter to continue. The first visit was from either the UNC Psi chapter. It went very well and we got their recommendation. However, the next visit was from the Sigma Nu colony at Davidson and their delegation arrived quite unexpectedly on a Friday night. Charley White immediately got on the phone desperately trying to find members on such short notice as so many were away for the weekend. Charley arranged for us to meet with them later that night. We rounded up the few members that were around and could be reached, most of them from Greenville. We did meet with the Davidson representatives and from the beginning the meeting did not seem to go well. Their questions were cool and curt and they did not seem receptive to what we felt we had accomplished at ECC. Perhaps, because of this apparent attitude on their part we oversold what we had to offer and wanted to accomplish. Anyway, we were later informed by Sigma Nu National Headquarters that the Davidson chapter refused to recommend that we be accepted as a colony of Sigma Nu.

Once again we were upset. We immediately contacted our friends at UNC and N.C. State for help. We also went to see Mr. J.T. Little, the President of Carolina Sales Corp., a friend of Jim's family and a long time loyal supporter of Sigma Nu at UNC and nationally. His son was a Sigma Nu at the time at Chapel Hill. We informed Mr. Little of our situation and asked if he could assist us. He told us that he would see what he could do and would make "a few phone calls" on our behalf. Mr. Little contacted many loyal Sigma Nu's including Past Grand Chaplain (Bishop) Thomas H. Wright of Wilmington and Past Regent Albert H. Wilson, New Rochelle, N.Y. They all enthusiastically supported KSN becoming a colony of Sigma Nu.

On January 27, 1958 we got a telegram from Executive Secretary Richard Fletcher informing us that, "High Council voted preliminary approval Kappa Sigma Nu petition. Congratulations. Letter Follows." This was very exciting news and assured us that we could proceed with becoming a chapter of Sigma Nu. We were the first local fraternity to receive preliminary approval from a national fraternity. Another "first" for KSN. The only faculty member who was a Sigma Nu at the time was Dr. James E. Poindexter, a well respected Professor of English. He provided support for us also.

We knew we needed a house to qualify to be a ZN chapter. We rented our first house at the corner of 4th and Elizabeth streets in 1957. It was small and basically a place to have meetings and a test to learn if we deserved and could manage a house. In 1958, we knew we would qualify to be awarded a Sigma Nu charter and had to have an acceptable house. Once again, we called on the Little family and with their help in our search and their financial backing, we obtained the beautiful house on 5th Street which became the first home of Sigma Nu's at EC.

Lyle Cooper was the last President or Archon of KSN. The first two were: Jimmy Phelps and Charley White. Pat Sawyer was the first commander of Sigma Nu at EC. Pat was invaluable in directing our administrative efforts, involvement with his Brothers at UNC, and our final acceptance as part of the Sigma Nu family in 1959. His contributions were many.

The success and admiration of KSN was because of the diversity of our Brothers. Yes, we had jocks and Brothers in all areas of academia; however the most perplexed group were our Brothers who had served in the U.S. military. They had a very difficult time dealing with our Pledge requirements and harassment, but we never lost one. KSN was by far the leading fraternity at EC. We set the examples and the other three social fraternities followed. However, they could never compete with us in any manner of academics, sports, service to school and community and definitely not in social activities. However, we were very close to the other fraternities in our efforts to be successful at EC, and Roddy and ensuing inter-fraternity councils played a huge role in helping to direct our efforts.

It is hard to describe just how many contributions were made by so many of our Brothers who made Sigma Nu at ECU happen. It was through the efforts of those determined Kappa Sigma Nus that social fraternities got their start at East Carolina. So all the Eta Beta Sigma Nus can be truly proud of their heritage at ECU! There is no doubt that social fraternities would have come to EC eventually, but this determined band of Brothers made it happen in spite of all the adversities arraigned against them. And we are all indebted to those who helped us along the way.