Chi Omega: Making A Mark 1900-2002

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This history was produced as part of the Society for the Preservation of Greek Housing’s Greek Chapter History Project. The Society was founded in 1988, with the goal of preserving the historic buildings that embody the history of the nation’s largest Greek system, and educating the public about the historical significance of fraternities and sororities on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus. Dues paid by member fraternity and sorority chapters and donations from chapter alumni fund the Society’s work. In keeping with their mission, the Society began the Greek Chapter History Project in May 2000 in conjunction with the University of Illinois Archives. The GCHP aims for nothing less than producing a complete historical record of fraternities and sororities on the University of Illinois campus by employing a graduate assistant to research and write histories of campus chapters. Making the work possible are the extensive collections of the University of Illinois Archives, especially its Student Life and Culture Archival Program. Supported by an endowment from the Stewart S. Howe Foundation, the heart of the SLC Archives is the Stewart S. Howe collection, the world’s largest collection of material related to fraternities and sororities.

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Chi Omega Before Illinois

The University of Illinois (Omicron) chapter of the Chi Omega Fraternity was founded during the national Chi Omega’s initial burst of expansion. Chi Omega Fraternity itself was founded in April 1895 at the University of Arkansas, in Fayetteville, by a group of young women who desired to share the secrecy and camaraderie of the men’s fraternities at the University. The 1890s saw the first real flowering of the Greek system at both the University of Arkansas as well as the University of Illinois, and as men’s organizations grew in number and size, women began to establish their own institutions. National Founder Jobelle Holcombe noted later that male visitors to her rooming house “were most mysterious about their [fraternity] affairs and we women were sorry we couldn’t match them.”¹ Holcombe and her friends Jean Vincenheller, Ina Mae Boles, and Allie Simonds founded Chi Omega with the guidance of Fayetteville dentist and Kappa Sigma Fraternity member, Dr. Charles Richardson. Richardson was, like University of Illinois Dean of Men Thomas A. Clark, a booster of fraternities and sororities, and had introduced Greek organizations to the University of Arkansas in 1894. He not only drafted the first Chi Omega constitution and ritual, he also suggested, based on his extensive knowledge of Greek history and culture, the “Eleusinian Mysteries” as the foundational myth around which the sorority was organized.

Chi Omega’s founding ideals suggest the ideals of the sorority had their basis in Progressive Era conceptions of women’s roles in the public sphere. Holcombe described the ideals of Chi Omega: “the idea of trained intelligence, the principle of social obligations, and social responsibility, all associated with the womanly ideal of striving to

be the best sort of woman.”\(^2\) Student life historian Helen L. Horowitz posits a useful dichotomy for understanding these ideals. She divides early college-going women into two types, “the outsider,” who “entered college to prepare herself for paid work,” spent their time in college largely studying, as opposed to the “college men” and “college women”. This second category, she argues, based their college paths on an intrinsic hostility to their professors and to “outsiders” focus on grades and schooling. These students created fraternities and sororities, and encouraged the development of events like the University of Illinois’ Homecoming and college sports. These “college women” Horowitz describes as middle-class or “relatively affluent,” who “wanted to enjoy their college years and saw them as an extension of the round of parties appropriate to their courting age.”\(^3\)

The women who founded Chi Omega and expanded the fraternity in the early years undermine the opposition Horowitz sets up. Holcombe’s above quotation hints at the complicated marriage of traditional beliefs and Progressive-era reformist impulses which seems to have defined Chi Omega in its early years. For while it clearly implies a acceptance of the Victorian conceptions of gender difference—that women’s natures were softer, empathetic, compassionate—Holcombe also implies that “striving to be the best sort of woman” does not end with marriage and childrearing.\(^4\) Instead, the “best sort of woman” would recognize her “social obligations” and “social responsibility.” This resembles the ideology of many prominent Progressive women activists who based arguments for women’s broader participation in the public sphere on their conceptions of

\(^4\) See Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United
the distinctive contributions women could provide.⁵ These early Chi Omegas, then, combined aspects of both Horowitz’s “college women” and female “outsiders.” They intended to enjoy college life, but did not view it simply “as a way station to a proper marriage.” They also held some sense that the dynamics of group living would function as democracy writ small. Holcombe noted “we would emphasize the influence of group living as a beginning for an understanding of our position in a democracy where people are bound together with a clear understanding and a sympathetic heart.”⁶

**Omicron Chapter**

Omicron was only the ninth chapter of Chi Omega, and the first chapter north of the Mason-Dixon line. The University of Illinois during the two decades on either side of 1900 was a fertile ground for fraternity and sorority expansion. In 1891, the Board of Trustees lifted the so-called “iron-clad pledge,” which required that both upon entering and graduating the University all students were required to sign a statement that they were not affiliated with any secret society.⁷ By the time the Omicron chapter was founded, Illinois was home to nine men’s and four women’s fraternities, and fraternity booster Thomas A. Clark had just taken up the Dean of Men position. At Omicron’s 50th Anniversary celebration, Clara Reasoner remembered that, similar to the founding of Chi Omega’s first chapter, Omicron’s founding was the result of close friendships. She and other Founders Mabel Hopkins, Mabel Schulte, Florence Beebe, and Henrietta Calhoun States, 1880-1917, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.


met as freshmen in 1897, and watched with interest as similar groups of women students founded Illinois chapters of Kappa Kappa Gamma and Alpha Chi Omega in 1899.

Reasoner said that “the five girls began to talk sorority as they wanted to sustain their close relationship even after college days.” Mabel Hopkins, who came from the South, knew of Chi Omega’s “high ideals” and that the sorority was interested in expanding to the North. The 1902 *Illio* (for the 1900-01 school year), lists June 1, 1900 as the chapter’s founding date. The founders, Mabel Hopkins, Clara Reasoner, Mabel Schulte, Florence Beebe, and Henrietta Calhoun, prepared an informal spread of chocolate eclairs and “little pickled onions” to commemorate the event.  

An early financial crisis, likely brought on by a house fire, nearly ended Omicron soon after it began. The chapter’s first house was apparently located on W. Green Street, Champaign, near campus. In 1907, Omicron moved to a new house at 307 E. John Street, Champaign, where they were flanked by Delta Gamma at 305 and Alpha Chi Omega at 309. Both early Chi Omega houses were rented. The 1907 move may have been the source of a financial strain on the chapter. Omicron’s house on Green Street burned down; and although it is not clear when this happened, it seems likely that the fire prompted the move, given the emergency situation which confronted the chapter in 1907. During fall semester of that year, Dean of Students Clark stepped in to keep the sorority

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8 “Chi Omega Reviews 50 Year History,” newspaper clipping, p. 279, Building Association of Omicron of Chi Omega Minutes, ca. 1950, quoted passages are reporter paraphrases; Illio, 1902, p. 192; “History of the Omicron Chapter,” Chi Omega Centennial Celebration Program, box 1, Chi Omega Records, Student Life and Culture Archives, University of Illinois. The program history gives April 5, 1900 as the chapter’s founding date; as that is also the date of Chi Omega’s founding in 1895, my suspicion is that over the years the two dates came to be celebrated together as “Founder’s Day.” The June date is listed in the Illio until it stopped printing founding months and days for fraternities.
9 “History” notes the first house was on Green St. Unfortunately there are no records for this period (pre-1908) in the archives, and the Illio did not begin listing the locations of houses until much later than the 1907 move.
financially afloat. In a December 30, 1907 letter he summarized “what has been done within the last two months to put the sorority into satisfactory financial condition.” What had been done was rather extensive. In addition to borrowing $500 from the Grand Chapter, twenty-seven Omicron alumnae agreed to give $50 notes to the chapter. The letter shows that the chapter had over $600 in unpaid bills. After the Grand Chapter loan and initial receipts from alumnae came in, Clark settled the accounts with his own personal checks. It is possible that something besides the fire was the cause of the chapter’s financial woes, but Clark’s letter does not reference unpaid house bills, and membership in the chapter, while small, did not wildly fluctuate in the chapter’s early years. In any case, with the help of Clark and the alumnae, the bills were paid and Omicron survived what appears to be its only major crisis.\textsuperscript{11} The chapter did not move again until 1920, when it moved into 907 S. Wright Street, Champaign.

Records of chapter life during this period emphasize the tight and cozy sisterhood of the Omicron chapter. Rose Abbott ’11 described their daily routine:

I think, perhaps, the singing is one of the things that help to make the life in the house a little different from any other life. At dinner we always sing, sometimes the latest popular music, sometimes some of the University songs; but we always finish up with one or two Chi Omega songs, ‘to leave a good taste in our mouths.’ After our banquets, when we have danced and talked until we are tired, we all get around the fire, seven or eight of us on the davenport, and rest in a circle on the floor, and put out the lights and sing all our favorites to Chi Omega. It makes you feel more like a big family of sisters, some way, than almost anything else.\textsuperscript{12}

The Omicrons more than made up in companionship what was lacking in the chapter’s material resources. Money must certainly have been tight for the recently founded

sorority still rented property. As the House Corporation was not incorporated until 1925, any alumni assistance would likely have been ad hoc, and the active members themselves supervised the chapter’s business affairs. There is some evidence of this in the Centennial Celebration history; the chapter routinely borrowed quality furniture from local alumni during rush to improve the appearance of their house, then returned the furniture until the next rush period. A set of chapter house photos taken circa 1909 show it amply but sedately furnished, no doubt with alumni furniture, as some of the photos did end up in Chi Omega’s national journal, *The Eleusis*.\(^{13}\)

The early history of Illinois Chi Omega suggests that as Omicron quickly became integral to the University’s Greek system. Chapter reports in *The Eleusis* and the chapter’s 1908-1920 guest book portray a gradual formalization of the Illinois Greek system as it grew. Rose Abbott ’11 portrayed an informal setting for Chi Omega parties in 1909, noting that “every night after dinner the Freshmen put back the rugs, and everybody dances for fifteen or twenty minutes. … Early in the year, sometimes, we have one of the fraternities come over right after dinner and dance till eight o’clock, to get the Freshmen acquainted.”\(^{14}\) The chapter reports mostly reflect this type of activity. The only regular events mentioned are an annual formal party, held in the spring in conjunction with Founder’s Day, an annual dinner celebrating the graduating seniors, and an annual breakfast picnic held at Crystal Lake. The chapter also routinely held a “stocking party” at Christmas.\(^{15}\) Omicron occasionally reported participation in fraternity events, for example, the Gamma Phi Beta installation in 1913. But the guest book shows

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the degree to which, even at a comparatively early stage in the Illinois Greek system, fraternities and sororities mostly socialized with each other. For example, at a November 1910 function a guest list of over 75 men included only a handful that did not list fraternity affiliation; the vast majority of guests were members of Kappa Sigma, Alpha Tau Omega, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, or Beta Theta Pi. Even as early as 1912 the Chi Omegas held huge social events; an “At Home” party given September 29, 1912 had over 120 guests sign in, again with a handful of exceptions all were members of fraternities.

As the Omicron chapter grew in size and prominence, it also began to fulfill what Jobele Holcombe called their “social responsibilities.” In 1913 the chapter began a philanthropic tradition that would last well over 50 years by holding a “story hour” at the Urbana Orphans’ Home. They also became active in campus government. Omicrons Nell Kirkpatrick ’14 and Alice Dietzer ’15 participated in the Woman’s League, an association composed of all the women students at Illinois, when it petitioned the University to re-constitute a student government.16 Members of the chapter also began participating in settlement house work in the area. The chapter’s increasing activity list seems to have received impetus from a rule passed at the 1912 Chi Omega convention, which stated that every member must be affiliated with at least two campus activities. By 1915 Chi Os could be found participating in all University activities. A report from that year lists members involved in intramural sports, YWCA, the Illio, the Alethenai Literary Society, campus government, intersorority organizations, making bandages for the Red Cross, and hosting local disadvantaged children at a Christmas party.17 Thus, as

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17 The Eleusis 17:1 (February 1915), p. 13, 90.
members of the Omicron chapter became a significant part of Greek life at Illinois, they also expanded the scope of their activities.

**Omicron Settles on Wright Street**

Although the first World War may not have forced Omicron to close as some fraternities did, Chi Omegas still were concerned about the war and felt its effects. Above I noted their report of helping the Red Cross make bandages well before the United States entered the War. While the guest book is the only source for the war period, it seems safe to assume that the chapter continued to do what it could to aid the war effort. Campus social life did not appear to provide any distraction. On April 7, 1917, the day after the U.S. officially declared war on Germany, the chapter had what they called an “Easter Leftover Party,” whose purpose was “To eat and cuss Germany.” The party was clearly planned with a humorous bent; the menu items, including such “Germanic” foods as potatoes, beer, and sauerkraut, were listed as “absent,” while the subject of the “prayer,” to be delivered by “Rev. Bromo Selzer” (a Phi Sigma Kappa ’18) was to be “A poor meal is better than none.” But between this party and Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, the chapter held only three functions, when it had held at least three major parties per semester. Only one of these had more than five attendees. This should not be surprising, as those fraternity men who did not enlist or return home to farm were enrolled in the highly unpopular Student Army Training Corps, and were required to wear uniforms and live in barracks for the duration. The first parties recorded after the Armistice illustrate both the growth of the Greek system and the importance of Chi Omega within it. The October 4, 1919 “Open House” had over 200 guests, again
predominantly fraternity members. Nearly all of Illinois 37 fraternities were represented at the affair, including: Sigma Chi, Beta Theta Pi, Phi Sigma Kappa, Sigma Pi, Alpha Gamma Rho, Tau Kappa Epsilon, Delta Upsilon, Zeta Beta Tau, Acacia, and Kappa Sigma. 

While there is little information about the 1920s, one major event happened during that decade. Omicron moved from John Street to their current residence at 907 S. Wright Street, Champaign in the fall of 1919. At the time the house was called Osborne Hall, and was a girls’ rooming house run by the Episcopal Church. Omicron rented the house until the summer of 1925, but in 1923 the chapter began making plans to buy it. With some difficulty the chapter managed to secure enough alumni support for a house loan; the Omicron Owl noted in 1934 that buying the house “looked like a hopeless task at that time [1923] but by the united effort of the alumnae” enough money was raised for a down payment. In March 1925, the Alumni Association of Chi Omega incorporated the “Building Association of Omicron of Chi Omega.” At the Building Association’s June 4, 1925 meeting, the group passed a resolution authorizing the purchase of Osborne Hall for the sum of $40,000. They agreed to make a $1000 down payment, supplied by Pearl Tiley ’12. Tiley, Gladys Rose ’20, and Elizabeth Voss ’14 comprised the Board of Directors of the Building Association. When the chapter began planning for the purchase in 1923 they also hired their first housemother, Mrs. Anna Lourie. Lourie’s hiring may have been in part related to the house drive, as she took over the day-to-day financial responsibilities from the girls.

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18 Guest Book, 1908-1920, Chi Omega Records.
19 While the “History” in the Centennial Program states the chapter moved in 1920, the 1920 Illio, covering the 1918-19 academic year, has the Wright Street house pictured.
20 “Chapter House Free From Debt: Alumnae Helped,” Omicron Owl 5:3 (March 1934), p. 2; The Eleusis
While the chapter was quite active in campus activities during the 1930s, settling the housing question occupied a considerable amount of their attention as well. There are some indications that relatively early in the purchase process the actives and alumni realized that, when financially possible, the house at 907 S. Wright would need a major remodel. In 1930 the Building Association replanted the rear yard of the house, and began discussions of major repairs and redecorations needed. By that time, the Building Association’s debt was low enough that they could contemplate remodelling the house. At the April 12, 1931 Founder’s Day Banquet, plans for the remodel were unveiled. The chapter was particularly interested in the distinctive change to the exterior of the house. The utilitarian porch was to be replaced by two-story white columns, “giving the house a distinct southern atmosphere,” especially important given Chi Omega’s southern origins. Although the plans were to be put on hold until the chapter had cleared its debts, the chapter, with funding from a Mom’s Day gift from the alumni, began redecorating the interior. In 1934, the Building Association announced that the chapter’s debt had been cleared. But by this time, finding financing for such a project was a difficult proposition. Bank closings had increased every year of the Depression until 1933, and, as a result, the chapter’s newsletter *The Omicron Owl* noted “the unsettled financial condition of the country makes it impossible to get a loan sufficiently large enough to cover all the work needed.” The chapter used the unexpected delay to do more redecorating in anticipation of the major project. “In view of the fact that we cannot rebuild at present, we decided to make the old house look its best,” wrote Fanny D. DeWolf, President of the Alumni Association. With the help of a timely gift from Chicago alumni, all the bedrooms were supplied with new furniture and the rooms repainted under the direction of Rose, “a well-

51:3 (September 1949), p. 429.
known interior decorator.” It was not until the spring of 1936 that Omicron was able to revisit the remodelling plans. By January 1937 the financial details of the project were worked out, and the Building Association voted to seek a $50,000 loan to finance it. The remodel was ambitious. In addition to the exterior modifications an entirely new wing, for a dining area, was added, the walls and floors were reinforced with steel beams, and the main staircase completely replaced, as was all the house’s wiring and plumbing. As one of the workmen said, “This is a good house; nothing has been skimped about it.”

The work was so substantial the actives moved for spring semester 1937 into a temporary home at 202 E. Green, Champaign. Omicron moved into its newly remodeled home in the fall of 1937. The remodel paid immediate dividends during rush. Eighteen girls were rushed, including one anyonymous freshman who apparently told her hosts at another sorority’s rush tea, “Your house is very nice, but oh, the Chi Omega house is luxurious [sic]!”

Throughout the 1930s the actives were involved in a wide variety of campus activities. It is likely that their activities in that decade were very similar to those of the 1920s, but lacking sources it is difficult to say. A typical list of activities for the period is in the October 1937 *Owl*, and shows members holding leadership positions in several honorary fraternities, including Theta Sigma Phi (women’s journalism), Zeta Phi Eta (speech/rhetoric), and Sigma Alpha Iota (music); serving as chairs of the Homecoming Stunt Show and Dad’s Day Celebration committees; working on the *Illio*; and

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participating in the YWCA, as well as in campus honoraries Shi-Ai and Mortar Board. Drama was a mainstay of the chapter’s activities during the 1930s—in addition to serving on Star Course (the student group which managed shows appearing on campus), Omicrons regularly acted, sang, and helped organize campus productions. For example, the 1933 Illini Theatre Guild production “Gold in the Hills” boasted Julia Lake ’36 as its second lead, and Sunny Kennedy ’35, Eleanor Erzinger ’36, and Phyllis Gray ’35 on the production staff. There are scattered notices as well of Omicrons participating in intramural sports. The Chi Omega bowling team, for example, placed second in the 1939 Illini Union Sorority Bowling League Tournament. They also entered a team in the 1939 Women’s Athletic Association basketball tournament. The chapter’s high level of involvement is attested to by the success Omicrons had in the University-wide popularity contests in the 1930s, in which students actually voted for the people who they believed to be most popular. Chi Os Dorothy Randall, Wanda Spencer ’38, and Peggy Laughlin ’40 won the contests in 1935, 1936, and 1939 respectively. Laughlin served as May Queen for the 1940 Mom’s Day Celebration.

Chapter social events and the daily routine were roughly congruent with the prewar era. Omicron actives and alumni celebrated Homecoming, Dad’s Day, Mom’s Day, and Founder’s Day annually. But unique chapter traditions survived as well. The annual breakfast picnic, held at Crystal Lake in the first decade of the century, had been rechristened the “Kentucky Breakfast” and moved to the Urbana Country Club by the 1930s. The 1936 breakfast was an all day event, beginning with a morning meal

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22 Omicron Owl 9:1 (October 1937), p. 2. See also activity reports in The Eleusis during the 1930s.  
accompanied by “Lang Thompson’s orchestra” and ending with a buffet lunch at the chapter house.\textsuperscript{25} The chapter also continued to hold formal and informal dances, and it’s Christmas celebration. Alumna Wanda Spencer Larson ’38 remembers, as earlier Chi Os did, the close friendship that formal dinners and singing helped create: “the system where classes don’t go at every hour of the night, you really build up more of a spirit of friendship and closeness where, we sang songs and so forth after dinner, maybe as long as a half hour or 45 minutes . . . you’d learn all of the songs of the school as well and then of other houses and they, in turn, would be doing the same thing.”\textsuperscript{26}

The one area in which the chapter seemed to suffer in the 1930s, however, was scholarship. No doubt many alumni are familiar with the chapter’s World War II scholarship, since the chapter won the Scholarship Cup ten out of eleven consecutive semesters, from Spring 1941 through Fall 1946. Although Omicron had one or two members initiated into Phi Beta Kappa and Alpha Lambda Delta (freshman women’s scholarship honorary) every year, the scholarship of the chapter as a whole was not reported in either the \textit{Omicron Owl} or the \textit{Eleusis} for much of the 1930s. The Centennial history states that the low point came during spring semester 1937, when the chapter lived at 202 E. Green. The chapter finished 27\textsuperscript{th} out of 29 sororities. The last scholarship report in the \textit{Owl} dates from 1932. The newsletter noted the chapter had made a “substantial gain” and was among the top 15 sororities on campus. However, the article noted, in hopes of higher placement “scholarship will be stressed more than in the past.”\textsuperscript{27}

The alumni intervened in the wake of 1937’s poor placing, and hired a local high school

\textsuperscript{25} Omicron Owl 7:3 (May 1936).
\textsuperscript{26} Ellen Swain interview of Wanda Spencer Larson, 1/9/01, University Student Life, 1928-38: Oral History Project. Transcript in Student Life and Culture Archives.
\textsuperscript{27} Omicron Owl 4: 1 (October 1932), p. 4.
teacher to tutor the girls. In 1940 the Chicago South Side Alumni Association also stepped in, and offered cash awards to the three girls who improved their scholarship the most over the preceding semester. The alumni help and good rushing paid off. The year prior to 1940-41, in which the chapter won its first scholarship cup, it improved to third place overall among the campus’s 23 sororities, while the Omicron pledges won their own scholarship trophy. Even the National noticed that the Chi O’s success, and awarded the Council Loving Cup to Omicron at the 1940 and 1942 conventions. While an uncharitable observer might point out that for many of the years that the chapter won the cup the campus was almost entirely devoid of men, it is important to note that the onset of World War II spurred Omicron to new efforts. The *Owl* noted in 1942 that each active “spends at least one hour a week rolling bandages for the Red Cross,” and many Chi Os were active in the campus USO. Omicrons also enrolled in the Women’s Auxiliary Training Corps, an ROTC-equivalent, and in 1943 entertained the soldiers from Chanute Field. Even government restrictions on travel, and declining college enrollments for both men and women, didn’t hinder the chapter during rush. In both 1942 and 1943 the Chapter rushed over twenty new pledges.28

The five years after World War II saw Omicron celebrate three milestones on three important Founder’s Days. One hundred Chi Omega chapters across the country celebrated the sorority’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and Omicron was no exception. On April 5, 1945 approximately 200 guests celebrated at a banquet at the Urbana-Lincoln Hotel. Dean of Men Fred Turner and Dean of Women Maria Leonard both spoke at the event.

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Leonard spoke of the “1000 or more Chi Omegas, who have lived and lived with loyalty their Alma Mater,” and credited the sorority with mingling “its ideals and visions for young womanhood with those of its Alma Mater.” Those ideals and visions bear a striking resemblance to the sketch outlined by Jobelle Holcombe: “Seek and find three ways to emphasize what life is for—first, a high moral force, to overcome the brutality of war; second, a way to make our world a happy neighborhood; and lastly, to find a Faith which will reveal the Fatherhood of God.”

House director Anna Lourie described “watching the vast procession of starry eyed young girls grow into fine women, eager to have a place in the scheme of things.” The dinner closed after the audience sang “I Love You Truly,” and Louise Cole read the Chi Omega Symphony. Mrs. Lourie’s anniversary dinner speech served as a fitting memorial to her years of service, as Lourie decided to retire in 1949. On that year’s Founder’s Day Omicron honored Lourie with a banquet at the Urbana-Lincoln Hotel. Among the gifts given to Lourie was a leatherbound book filled with letters from Omicron alumni throughout the world praising Lourie’s work with the chapter. After her retirement, Lourie still attended the two important events for Omicron in 1950. She was present at the burning of the mortgage, taken to cover the extensive house remodelling in 1937, at the Founder’s Day Celebration. She was also a featured guest at a tea held to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Omicron chapter, December 17 at the chapter house. Mrs. Theodosia Ross, Lourie’s replacement, was also in attendance.29

29 Omicron Owl 16:3 (June 1945), p. 1-2; The Eleusis 47:3 (September 1945), p. 444-46; Account of 50th Anniversary dinner, Building Association of Omicron of Chi Omega Minutes, Chi Omega Records; “Gifts Shower Mrs. Lourie,” undated newspaper clipping in Building Association minutes, Chi Omega Records; The Eleusis 51:3 (September 1949), p. 429; May 1950 Building Association Minutes, Chi Omega Records; “Chi Omega Reviews 50 Year History” 1950 newspaper clipping, Building Association Minutes, Chi Omega Records.
After World War II: Traditions Re-Imagined

Omicron continued to be involved in a dizzying array of campus activities during the 1950s and 1960s. Chi Os joined campus honorary fraternities in a wide variety of disciplines: psychology, journalism, political science, education, advertising, home economics, French, Spanish, rhetoric, business management, art, sociology, and commerce. They continued their involvement in dramatics, participating in Star Course and Theater Guild, and Omicron occasionally had actives join the National Collegiate Players. Chapter members served annually on the committees planning University functions such as Homecoming, Dad’s Day, and Mom’s Day. Scholarship was still a priority for the chapter, and they boasted members of both Alpha Lambda Delta and Phi Beta Kappa, as well as Phi Kappa Phi. The chapter’s scholarship was so strong over the period that in 1967 the chapter reported that in only two semesters since World War II had Omicron finished below the first quartile in sorority scholarship. The chapter also had a scholarship cup streak in the 1960s; between Fall 1960 and Spring 1966 they won the cup ten out of twelve semesters. Interfraternity activities were also high on the chapter’s list; they participated annually in the Mom’s Day Sing, Spring Carnival, and Homecoming Stunt Show. The chapter’s social calendar contained frequent exchanges with fraternities as well. Chi Os served as queens at a variety of University events, including Homecoming and the Dolphin Queens show on Dad’s Day, and at events such as the Interfraternity Ball. Given the wide range of activities it comes as no surprise that Omicrons were also routinely honored by memberships in Torch, Shi-Ai, Mortar Board, and Shorter Board (a similar society for seniors).30

30 These activities were all routinely reported in The Eleusis v. 49-75, which covers the period 1948-1973 and did not change much over that time. See also scrapbooks and photos in Chi Omega Records covering
But what fraternity members throughout the Greek system seem to value most are the friendships they form and the supportive environment of their chapter. Anita Gaston ’62 remembers that with a pledge class of only twelve, “You knew everyone.” She also remembered the involvement of alumni, the housemother, and older actives in helping pledges adjust to college life. Upperclasswomen would help shepherd pledges through the registration maze at the Armory, and an older active supervised a mandatory study hall for freshmen, 7-10pm weeknights. The chapter, as it had done throughout its existence, had a formal dinner every weeknight with plenty of singing. “We did a lot of singing,” Gaston remembers “We would sing grace before dinner. There was lots of singing during dinner, after dinner, and at closing.” She also testified to the prominent role of Theodosia Ross in setting the tone for the house: “Every time the housemother came into the room we would stand . . . Quite a dignified lady. We did whatever she said. She educated us in manners and morals. . . . She was very strict about table manners and social graces. . . . It was a different time. We didn’t mind having authority over us. We worried about our [house’s] reputation.” Alumnus Carole Ackerman (Stackhouse) ’60, remembered this a little differently. As chair of the Personnel Committee she remembered Ross enforcing the rule mandating dates in the house living room have both feet on the floor at all times. “For some reason,” Ackerman wrote, “the room was never very crowded; but the parking lot was full.” Even the “pledge education” Gaston remembered seemed to bring the Omicrons closer together. “We learned the history of the sorority. We had to learn the hometown and major of every person in the house, also learned their boyfriend’s name, their fraternity, and the

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fraternity song of every boyfriend. We would be called upon at dinner to “relate this information about every member seated at their table.”"31

Although the upheavals of the late 1960s certainly had their effect on Omicrons, it again seems to undercut any easy dichotomies. The chapter continued to be active in traditional areas. A 1969-70 scrapbook shows Chi Os running for Student Senate, participating in Star Course, selected as Illio beauties, included in the annual 100 banquet, being selected to Mortar Board, and so on. Alumna Ruth Truelove (Masterson) ’69 remembers “We usually always had members who were cheerleaders, Homecoming Court, Mortar Board, Shorter Board, Torch…Star Course….” Truelove also remembered the traditional deference shown to the House Mother, noting that at every meal she was seated first, and left before the members. One of the traditions she remembered most was the ceremony the chapter performed to celebrate pinnings or engagements. The House Mother would be notified first, then “she would ring a bell and everyone (usually in PJ’s) would form a circle in the living room. With lights off, we would sing a song & pass a lighted candle. The one who was pinned or engaged that night would blow out the candle when it came to here. There would be screams, hugs & excitement.”32

At the same time changes did occur. Gaston remembered that “Toward the late 60s—I had a sense that the girls were tired of their image of studying hard; studybugs. Everything changed in the late 60s; the sororities weren’t as strong then; there were different things they looked at during rush…People were sort of tired of being considered study bugs.” Some Chi Os became involved in protests, which contemporary observers and historians have viewed as antithetical to fraternities. Diane Sautter Campbell ’72, for

example, remembered participating extensively in Omicron activities, including taking the post of Pledge Trainer, and being a member of the Alpha Gamma Rho little sisters’ group. But Campbell turned her prodigious energy towards protest in the wake of the killing of four Kent State students by the National Guard in 1970. Campbell, along with five other Illinois students from Highland, Illinois, composed a call for a national students’ strike. Truelove remembered the drastic effect the student protests had even a year earlier, in 1969. She noted National Guard soldiers were posted on campus, and the chapter “had to blackout the front to our house at night—shades and drapes closed, no lights on. My roommate & I used a blue bulb at night.”

Sources for the chapter’s activities are slim for the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s and consist of scrapbooks, mostly pledge scrapbooks. The scrapbooks show, though, that even as the sorority grew—pledge classes in the 1980s were typically over 40 women—the kind of closeness and friendship described by earlier Chi Os remained the foundation of the sorority. Kim Schwieghart ’92 noted that although the house was usually one of the largest on campus, “even if you didn’t have a house the girls would still jell. They love to brag about themselves. There’s always some kind of banner; room four on the balcony” celebrating chapter or member achievements. The chapter, though, did not rely on its members’ innate compatibility, but instead encouraged the development of friendship through new and traditional activities.

Perhaps as a response to increasing pledge classes, Omicron instituted a pledge retreat in 1979. The retreat gave pledges a chance to bond in an informal setting, the 1979 pledges remembering “all the food, hot chocolate, dirty songs, and crazy stories”

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33 Gaston interview; Masterson questionnaire; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1968-69, Chi Omega Records;
from the event. Another new event was the Senior-Pledge mixer, which in 1985 featured a murder mystery theme. Traditional activities changed as well to accommodate the changing times. The “manners and morals meeting,” which, as Gaston notes, was a very serious part of pledge education up through the early 1960s, reappears in the 1970s and 1980s as the “M & M” meeting, marked in scrapbooks by a M & M candy wrapper. While much the same message certainly got across in the reworked version, pledges no doubt felt more comfortable knowing that a trip to Kam’s (a campus bar) followed the meeting’s conclusion. 34 Bid Night, when fraternities would hold exchanges celebrating sororities’ newly-minted pledge classes, also seemed to become a much more involved affair than in previous years. Omicron’s 1985 pledges, for example, all received Chi O t-shirts as well as shorts featuring the letters of Phi Kappa Tau, the chapter’s Bid Night host that year. Kim Schweighart remembered Bid Night as an especially fun and important night as it combined both sisterly bonding and getting together with fraternities. “The Bid Night parties had a theme, like carnival with games. The pledges each got a champagne bottle that was decorated by the actives. You only have sisterhood night now. They did get out of hand. But it was fun having 25 carnivals going on at one time!” 35

But despite some superficial changes, the focus on campus achievement which was a founding element of Chi Omega remained. A 1990 list for pledges labeled “14 Pearls” illustrates the degree to which Omicron continued to focus on developing their

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34 Chi Omega scrapbook 1979-80, Box 2, Chi Omega Records.
35 Kim Schweighart interview 5/10/2001; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1979-80, Box 2, Chi Omega Scrapbook 1982-83, Box 9; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1983-84, Box 9; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1984-85, Box 10; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1985 (Pledge Class of 1989), Box 10; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1988, Box 10; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1990-91, Box 10; all in Chi Omega Records.
members into well-rounded, accomplished women. In addition to “pearls” for maintaining a high GPA and attending pledge study sessions, participation in campus activities and the campus Panhellenic, as well as Chi Omega activities and philanthropy was encouraged. Under “career development,” the chapter urged pledges to “Write a resume and a short paragraph explaining what you see yourself doing in 5-10 years.”

It comes as no surprise then that Omicrons, as throughout their history, made their influence felt in a broad variety of campus activities. Chi Os served as members of the Homecoming court, on student government, and in academic honorary societies, all resulting in frequent memberships in campus activity honoraries. For example, in 1982-83 Jane Novak ’84 served as president of Omicron and Torch, as well as co-director of another campus organization, V.I.P.; she was involved in Sachem, on Student Senate, played intramural soccer, was treasurer of Communications Unlimited, a Communications student organization, and was an Illinette. It also appears that the chapter was more involved in athletics than in the past, as the scrapbooks all have clippings recording Chi O teams in various tournaments, including a 1983 Championship in intramural football. Although both Gaston and Schweighart note that scholarship has fluctuated within the chapter, Chi Os still participated in the many academic honorary fraternities on campus. Schweighart stated that during her time as an active from 1989-92, the chapter focused more on social activities in general than on scholarship. Still, Omicron never fell as far as they did in the 1930s in overall ranking. And they did boast a full social calendar. Continuing to hold parties for Christmas and a Spring Formal, in 1969 Omicron began a new tradition with a fall barn dance, later named “Woodsy.”

36 Chi Omega Scrapbook, 1990-91, Chi Omega Records.
37 “Jane Novak—Involvement takes a new meaning,” undated clipping from Daily Illini ca. 1982-83, Chi
Other one-time events, frequent exchanges with fraternities—in 1988 the chapter had six exchanges during the fall semester alone—and annual events like Bid Night, Greek Week, and Sigma Chi fraternity’s Derby Days made for a full calendar.38

While there are some indications of regular work on the chapter house before 1980, during the past twenty years the house corporation continually put money into the house to keep it competitive. Gaston noted that when she became involved in alumni activities in 1979, the chapter was still using the same furniture as during her days in the house. “There was no major work [done], until recently the house was exactly as it was. When I got on the Board they were using the same furniture and it needed work.” Some work was done during 1989-90. However, the house has needed several major project in the 1990s. Gaston noted “We did a lot of redecorating, we had to take the paint down to the wood, redid the bathrooms, and the same needed to be done to the kitchen. We also did work in the basement, made a computer room and updated the study room, and enlarged a room down there for a social room.” Schweighart noted that the outstanding financial condition of the chapter has been crucial in maintaining the house, and with it, the sorority. Although the chapter has spent around $400,000 on projects since 1994, including a new study room, a computer room, an updated kitchen and bathrooms, Schweighart said “If the chapter doesn’t find the money they don’t fill to capacity.”39

As the chapter’s centennial approached Omicron of Chi Omega had come a considerable way from its beginnings in 1900. It demonstrated its importance by making

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38 Chi Omega scrapbook, 1973-74; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1979-80, Box 2, Chi Omega Scrapbook 1982-83, Box 9; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1983-84, Box 9; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1984-85, Box 10; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1985 (Pledge Class of 1989), Box 10; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1988, Box 10; Chi Omega Scrapbook 1990-91, Box 10; all in Chi Omega Records.
39 Gaston interview; Schweighart interview.
a large gift to the University of Illinois—the largest ever made to the school by a fraternity. The chapter raised enough money to provide for the construction of Chi Omega Plaza, a landscaped walkway between Lincoln Hall and the English Building, linking the Quad and Omicron’s chapter house on Wright Street. Not only did they provide an endowed maintenance fund for the plaze, Omicron also provided money for an endowed scholarship at the University in the chapter’s name. Both actives and alumni worked diligently to raise the money, the first time Omicron had done an alumni fundraising drive.⁴⁰

**Conclusion:**

In many ways Chi Omega seems to be a model sorority. The length of their tenure at the University of Illinois has enabled Omicron to establish an extraordinarily strong financial footing. But the continual success of actives in choosing pledges who view Chi Omega’s past accomplishments and ideals as markers for their own success has been just as important. Obviously today’s Chi Omega actives are quite different from the founders in many ways, but they clearly share with the founders a desire to use their energy and gifts to benefit society as a whole.

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Bibliography:

The current holdings of Chi Omega records, while not voluminous, nevertheless provided ample material for this study. The Chi Omega Records collection consists mostly of scrapbooks, which contain in addition to photographs, newspaper clippings, chapter newsletters, and assorted memorabilia. However, it does have complete minute books of the Building Association of Omicron of Chi Omega covering 1923-65. In addition to minutes of all Building Association meetings the books also include a great many newspaper clippings about key Chi Omega events. Three interviews were conducted to supplement these materials, of Anita Gaston ’62, Elizabeth MacDonald ’85, and Kim Schweighart ’92, and I used as well an interview of Wanda (Larson) Spencer ’38, which was conducted by Student Life and Culture Archivist Ellen Swain for her Student Life in the 1930s Oral History Project.

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