



SIGMA CHI FRATERNITY

Delta Delta Chapter

Leadership, Scholarship, Brotherhood

PURDUE UNIVERSITY



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"I will endeavor to retain
the spirit of youth"
~Sigma Chi Creed, George
Ade ΔΔ 1887

Blue Formal Fire of 1961

Blue Formal, Delta Delta's annual winter formal, has been going on as long as any living alumnus can remember. Tradition has dictated that brothers decorate the Great Hall and other public rooms in a similar fashion that transforms the chapter house into a winter wonderland. So for generations Delta Delta brothers and their dates have shared a common experience as they danced the night away in the Great Hall. The highlight of the evening was the selection of one special young lady as the chapter's sweetheart and in her honor singing the "Sweetheart of Sigma Chi" to her.

But in December of 1961 things got a little hot the night of Blue Formal. Below are the collective recollections of several brothers of the Class of '63 of the events of that evening when a butane lighter inadvertently "set the night on fire". Editors note: It is also very interesting to read about the different chapter rules and social expectations that were in place at this time.

Blue Formal 1961 Began Like Any Other

In December 1961 the brothers set out to transform the chapter house into a holiday wonderland for the annual Blue Formal dance. To create a ballroom, the Great Hall was cleared (except for the baby grand piano), and much of its furniture was arranged in the game room to form a cozy seating area, complete with a Christmas tree and Johnny Mathis holiday music emanating from a stereo on loan from one of the brothers.



The Great Hall awaits its guests for the annual Blue Formal dance.

Public rooms on the first and second floor were decked out in holiday décor. Many brothers also decorated their study rooms, transforming them from their everyday function to dimly lit lounges in order to take advantage of the fact that the Blue Formal was one of the very few occasions during the year when women were permitted above the second floor, and when consumption of alcoholic beverages was permitted in the house – and then only in private rooms.

Clouds, Firs and a White Cross

For the occasion, the Great Hall sported a blue, cloud-festooned sky by means of a gauze-like fabric attached to the walls about ten feet above the floor, and extending to the ceiling such that the view to and from the balcony was obscured. The perimeter of the fabric "sky" was lined with small fir trees. For the 1961 Blue Formal, someone came up with an idea for a dramatic entrance through the front doors leading to the balcony. Chicken wire was tacked around a wooden frame that transformed the rectangular entry into a human-size opening in the shape of a White Cross. Every opening in the chicken wire was stuffed with white tissue paper, thereby creating a textured White Cross tunnel.

The party itself came off without incident. A few hours later, most of the brothers had returned after squiring their dates back to their housing units, sorority or otherwise, in order to meet the university-imposed curfew known as "hours", and many had retired for the night. But a few stragglers were walking through the White Cross entrance tunnel when one decided to demonstrate his new butane cigarette lighter.

Flash Fire Engulfs Great Hall

The folly of decorating with extremely flammable materials became immediately apparent. The flame from the butane lighter ignited the tissue-paper entry tunnel, and the fire quickly spread to the gauze ceiling and to the perimeter of fir trees. The fabric sky, reported to be "flame retardant", was fully engulfed in about 7 seconds.

Several brothers fought the fire briefly from the balcony, but were forced to retreat to the Senior Wing. Brother Grady Skeoch is reported to have thrown a fire extinguisher into the raging fire, while Bill Vahle recalls exiting Room 2 or 3 through a window on the underside of the fire escape and then climbing around to the top side.

Fortunately Damage Was Superficial (and No One Was Hurt)

Fortunately, the conflagration was a flash fire, and damage to the Great Hall was superficial, not structural. No one was injured, although there was one close call. As the alarm spread, brothers started to evacuate. Lee Purcifull made his way through the smoke to his room, grabbed his ROTC uniform, and headed for the Senior Dorm, the porch at the north end of the house. He threw his uniform to safety on the ground one storey below and leapt down himself...fortunately without injury. Some of the brothers slept in the living room of the Phi Gamma Delta house that night, which occasioned some chuckling among their brothers, including references to Smokey the Bear.

Repairs to the Great Hall were completed during the holiday and semester breaks.

Two additional tales were to ensue from this near tragedy...

1. What to do with the charred but functional baby grand piano—that became the object of the 1962 Great Piano Drop, and
2. The travails of the Sigma Chi Crest located above the Great Hall fireplace.

More to come in future Chapter Updates.



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