



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

The Great Piano Drop of 1962

The Great Piano Drop of 1962 and the Great Hall fire of 1961 were connected events. The demonstration of a new butane cigarette lighter ignited the blaze that set fire to the decorations for the Blue Formal in December 1961. Much of the furniture in the Great Hall had been removed, but not the baby grand piano, which was seriously damaged in the fire.

In the process of restoring the Great Hall, the piano was declared to be a total loss. Efforts were made to sell the piano, although nobody expected a favorable outcome. Further efforts were made to place the piano with a charity or residence where it might contribute to the quality of life there. Again, no success.

An Idea Emerges

At last someone concocted the idea to disassemble the instrument, hoist its components to the flat roof above what was then called the "Junior Dorm" – a sleeping porch at the south end of the third floor. With the reassembled piano now resting on the top of the JD, it was decided to seek some attention – not altogether favorable, in retrospect – by pushing the baby grand piano off the roof to a resounding clang three stories below – evoking lyrics of "The Hamburg Zoo," a ditty regularly sung by the brothers at occasional Friday evening stag events.



Students engaged in dopey stunts to attract attention in that era – piling into a phone booth, lifting someone's Volkswagen beetle onto the porch of the Fiji house, or, as the Betas did to us, releasing several pigeons in the Great Hall while we were at dinner, very much intriguing our Weimaraner, Duke.

Sigma Chi Fraternity, Purdue University 1963 "Debris" Yearbook



Back Row: Bill Weigel, Jim Latham, Burt Jepson, Jim Haunty, Ray Urban, Jim Hawkins, Bob Altschuler, Jeff Blackburn, Jim Shelby. *Third Row:* Fred Schafer, Jon Andersen, Bob Kessler, Tom Bager, Nick Fritsch, Jim McNeely, Jim Crosbie, William Morris. *Second Row:* Walt

Taylor, Stan Collins, Tom Jenkins, Donn Griffith, Len Griffiths, Bill Vahle, Jim Lopeman, Dick Stall. *Front Row:* Tom Heller, Russ Grover, Ralph Kuhnert, Bill Duff, John Pomeroy, Doug Wilton, Eugene Kuzma, James R. Ritchie.

Credit: Purdue Debris 1963: Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries.

Through fraternal association the brothers above were all complicit in the events surrounding the "Great Piano Drop of 1962".

Showcasing the Brothers Skills

The Great Piano Drop started out as a well-planned event, calculated to show that the Fraternity could combine the brothers' engineering and artistic skills to good effect and perhaps with maximum exposure. The fact that the Brothers were tiring of winter may have also entered into the equation. The less mechanically-inclined brothers began to consider and diagram a method for recording the sounds that might emanate if the grand piano made a grand exit to the driveway below.

Other non-engineers began to consider how the deconstructed piano could be turned into party favors or, perhaps, auctioned off with values assigned to particular strings and white vs. black keys. As always, elaborate plans were developed for turning a seemingly haphazard event into a

coed social and educational experience.

Some more sensitive sorts even contemplated whether the landing sound would be harmonic or discordant, expanding that to a variation on the philosophical tree-falling-in-the-forest theme. Alas, however, a few of the more strictly literal brothers applied for a permit with the Dean of Men and were met with predictable skepticism, even after mentioning the possibility of nationwide media coverage. Once again, the Fraternity was prevented from reaching its true potential.

Hurling Earthward

So on the JD roof the piano sat ... until one autumn evening when a well-meaning alum decided to stage a peremptory piano drop on his own. Access to the JD roof required acceptance of some risk. A ladder of sorts had been fashioned by nailing scrap boards to a vine that grew up the side of the house. The steps yielded a bit in each direction when one's weight was applied, both on the way up and on the way down. The risk was compounded when one was carrying a mattress up or down – an act that occurred not infrequently when nice weather graced a spring or early autumn night. But we digress.

The alum somehow reached the JD roof safely and gave the piano enough of a shove to send it hurtling earthward. It is indeed fortunate that no one was standing below, and unfortunate that whatever resonance the crash produced was not heard by a crowd of witnesses. The instrument did inflict some damage to the roof during its descent. The cost of repairs were said to have been borne happily by the alum.

In retrospect, we were lucky that it was a baby grand; but, the sound would have been a perfect accompaniment for University Sing.

