Beta Sigma Phi HISTORY

History of Beta Sigma Phi's Founding

In the beginning there was a dream – the dream of a young man, Walter W. Ross. He was born in Kansas City, Missouri on April 8, 1900. His mother was born in the town of Memphis in northern Missouri. Her people were devout Methodists and practically every branch of Walter's family can boast at least one Methodist minister. His father, Walter W. Ross, Sr., was born in England of Scottish parents who migrated from Ross-shire to Fleetwood, England. His father migrated to Canada and then to San Francisco when it was a vigorous boom town. From his father's youth he was a hard worker and his first job was delivering messages in San Francisco. The family moved to Missouri and settled on a small farm where Walter W. Ross' own two sons played when they were children.

From the small house which his family built on the outskirts of Kansas City, Walter W. Ross' life grew through family, church and school ties. He was a good student, particularly interested in drama, debate, track and basketball. As a student at Northeast High School, he was Junior Class President and a member and leader in every worthwhile organization.

From high school, he went directly into the Navy. He was in Destroyer Service in European waters through World War I, and served on the staff of Admiral Simms in London at the war's end. In this duty he was privileged to read and categorize for permanent Naval records the letters and messages and documents of some of the world's great men.

He returned from the Navy and married his high school sweetheart, Dorothy Eagle. They were married in the home of Walter's Methodist minister, Reverend Needles, a saintly man who greatly influenced Walter's young life.

Then started an ascending progression of jobs, each more challenging than the last. In the beginning they called heavily upon his remarkable proficiency as a typist. As he progressed, they called more and more upon his renowned ability to work with people. He developed an intimate knowledge of the publishing business, starting as a salesman and advancing to managerial work. In later years he was a Director of the Grolier Society, which published the *Book of Knowledge* and the *Americana Encyclopedia* and was the largest publishing company in the world.

He began to travel for the publishing company, working in the division that provided reference books to schools. As the sales manager for the Book of Knowledge in the Kansas City Branch Office, which operated in nine states, his job was to call on clubs for women and ask them to help schools purchase the books they needed for the children, as local groups often helped the schools acquire texts.

Walter's work with the *Book of Knowledge* brought him very close to the communities in which he worked and it was while traveling for the Grolier Society that the idea of Beta Sigma Phi was born out of a group of literary clubs formed in Texas and Oklahoma in 1930, known as the National What To Read Club.

Walter had been working with various civic groups interested in education. As a publisher, he was aware that these societies allowed publishing companies to furnish their texts for study in connection with their club programs. He saw many fine women serving various organizations and receiving, in most cases, cultural work that was not of high quality. Very few women went to college, and there was nothing available to young women in general that enabled them to join together to be supportive of each other, to share their strength, to learn together and to have a circle of friends beyond the next-door neighbor. And so he saw the need for and conceived the idea of an organization which would provide excellent cultural opportunities for women. Even more important, the organization was to serve the members rather than the members serving the organization.

> "It was evident that many, many young women, who would ordinarily have gone away to school, remained at home and were the sole support of their families. They were fine young ladies unable to go to college because the Depression had hit. I could envision for them a pure organization with no connection with the publishing business that would offer as much as possible of the intellectual and social experience they would have had in college.
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> The more I thought about this, the more I was convinced I would like to make this great project my life's work, even if it was necessary to lose my position with the Grolier Society."
>
> -Walter W. Ross

Following this idea he fashioned together a program of study, based on a book anthology of over 20 volumes of English Literature, to be furnished to each chapter. He had the idea that each chapter would receive an outlined program based upon that text.

> "There was no name for the organization and we used one that was not in the least definitive and was certainly not attractive - "The National What-To-Read Club."
>
> -Walter W. Ross

It was April of 1931 and Walter W. Ross took his idea and program material to Vinita, Oklahoma, where he had been recently with the *Book of Knowledge*. He drove his little car down a partially paved road in Vinita, Oklahoma on a sultry, overcast day. Here was a sleepy, struggling community of 5,000. Here Beta Sigma Phi was established with the help of Mrs. Leona V. Schroers and a group of twelve young women who responded to the invitation to a new kind of life. Pictures were taken, fees paid and materials and instructions shared.

Walter W. Ross tells the story best:

> "I drove my little car into Vinita, Oklahoma, on a day of overcast sky. It was a typical country town of 5,000 people and only a part of the main street was paved. There was a rather nice new hotel called the Vinita Hotel which had just opened. I went in and sat down a bit and then walked all over the whole town. I asked the hotel clerk if he had lived there long and he said he had lived there a long time. Then I asked him who was the most prominent woman in Vin-

ita and he told me without question it was Mrs. Leona V. Schroers. I called her and she allowed me to come and see her. I explained to her my dream of Beta Sigma Phi (although then it was 'The National What To Read Club'). "

"I began to show her my papers and tell her the thoughts that I had about this young organization-to-be. After a while, she said to me: 'Young man, you have a wonderful idea, but you are a bit awkward in presenting it. Give me those papers and come back here at four o'clock this afternoon.' I did as I was told and when I went back she had twelve young women in her living room and right then and there we established a chapter of "The National What To Read Club.'"

"I have visited them many times since then and the first treasurer has told me that even though they gave small checks as first payments for their fees, she was in the bank and did not clear the checks until all of the supplies that I had promised them arrived. I thought that was a rather amazing sidelight."

"We had our installation dinner and we called in a local photographer to take a flash picture. He had an old-fashioned business that was just a tiny trough on a stick with powder in it and he touched the match to the powder and took the picture. Little did we know that night that that was the beginning of one of the greatest organizations our modern world has seen."

"The next day Mrs. Schroers told me to come by the house, which I did. 'Now,' she said, 'I want you to go down and see the greatest woman in Oklahoma, Mrs. Sally Rogers McSpadden, Will Roger's sister.'"

"Mrs. McSpadden had raised Will Rogers and was in many ways very much like him. Of course, I took Mrs. Schroers advice and Mrs. McSpadden, who at the time was very active in the National Federation of Women's Clubs, gave me much help on program planning and the organization of chapters and was a guiding light to me personally during the rest of her life. She became our first International Honorary Member."

It was Mrs. McSpadden who suggested that more women would be interested in joining if the club were made into a sorority of sorts.

"After leaving Mrs. McSpadden that first day, I went to the office and brought together the first steps in Beta Sigma Phi. We had adopted as a motto, 'Life, Learning and Friendship,' and we found that the three Greek words which mean life, learning and friendship begin with the letters Beta, Sigma, and Phi, and so there we had the name of our new organization."

A local jeweler helped Walter W. Ross design the pin, and another friend helped in creating the crest. After the pin was created, the jeweler gave him the very first one, and he presented it to his wife, Dorothy – who was indeed the first Beta Sigma Phi.

"It has been said that I was the first member of Beta Sigma Phi. Speaking very humbly, this was spiritually true. For I was privileged to share his thinking, his every effort, his every dream."

- Dorothy Ross

In July of 1931 Walter W. Ross went off to organize the first official chapter of Beta Sigma Phi. He planned to set up his first chapter in Salina, Kansas, but on the way came upon Abilene and the newly built, air-conditioned Sunflower Hotel. There he met Helen

Pepper and Helen Holmstrom and within a little over a week, the first Chapter of Beta Sigma Phi – Kansas Alpha, Abilene – was founded with seven members.

"I was, of course, quite familiar with the State of Kansas, and selected Salina as a reasonable sized place for our first Chapter of Beta Sigma Phi. En route, I came to Abilene, and it was so attractive that I stopped at the Sunflower Hotel there. There was a charming young lady – Helen Pepper – and she was to become my second Beta Sigma Phi. On the mezzanine of the Sunflower Hotel, I met with Helen Holmstrom and she was to become my third Beta Sigma Phi. Within a little over a week, the first Chapter of Beta Sigma Phi – Alpha of America – was founded with seven members."

In an interview with Helen Pepper by Walter W. Ross' eldest son, Walter W. Ross III, when asked why the founder choose Abilene she answered with some hesitation. She said she believed that he was on his way to Salina where he had planned to organize the first chapter; but was attracted to Abilene by the sign on the highway advertising air conditioned rooms in the new Sunflower Hotel. "In those days, air conditioning was new, and I really believe he just planned to stay over night here and go on to Salina the next day."

"It was a hot and windy day in July. I was working at the Sunflower Hotel at the switchboard. Walter Ross came across the lobby to register. I was impressed by his appearance, for he bore every mark of a real gentleman. Both the manager of the hotel and the room clerk knew him, and I was introduced. In the course of the conversation that followed, Mr. Ross mentioned his interest in the formation of a non-academic, Greek letter sorority. Immediately I was interested."

"My excitement grew as together we worked out the details for the formation of the first chapter of Beta Sigma Phi."
-Helen Pepper

The chapter was exclusively a social and cultural group when it was first set up. But by the time Walter W. Ross returned to Abilene a few months later to check the chapter's progress, members had made a few changes.

"Beta Sigma Phi was started to help the members, but hardly before the ink was dry on the charter, they were helping others."
- Walter W. Ross

To fund their first service efforts, members of Kansas Alpha, Abilene planned a dance. It was held during the bank holiday in 1933. There was much discussion about the band that was to play that night. The chapter was divided about paying Lawrence Welk and his group the astronomical sum of $70 for an evening of his "champagne music." However, he proved well worth it. "We made the unbelievable amount of $300," Helen remembers. It was as though people thought it was the last dance they would ever attend."

"Within a little while (of setting up the first Beta Sigma Phi chapter in Abilene, Kansas), I went back to Vinita and they voted to change to Beta Sigma Phi, and we were on our way – on a journey that would include many foreign countries – nearly 200,000 Beta Sigma Phis, - and more than that, a lifetime of association with the finest people in the world."
-Walter W. Ross

When Walter W. Ross was asked if the growth of Beta Sigma Phi from seven members to more than 100,000 had surprised him, he replied that the physical growth had not surprised him at all. He had expected it

and planned for it, as he drove his little car from town to town in those early days, but the spiritual growth and the meaning it has come to have in so many lives still came as a surprise to him.

"I am quite sure," he said thoughtfully, "that all these things have come from the quality and character of the members themselves."

The first edition of *The Torch*, the official magazine of Beta Sigma Phi, was hardly a magazine at all; it was a tiny four-page paper packed with news of the young Sorority and its comparatively few Chapters. But it was published in January 1932, only six months after the founding of the first Chapter in Abilene, and the early copies were awaited quite as eagerly in those days as they are today.

The importance of that little paper to the growing Sorority can hardly be exaggerated; it provided a link between Chapters, and between members and their President. It was certainly a strong factor in the solidarity of Beta Sigma Phi's early days.

By February of 1932 The Educational Foundation was formed and incorporated to handle the financial affairs of the Sorority, and a few months later, in April of the same year, Beta Sigma Phi was incorporated under a Charter granted by the State of Missouri. Since "The Educational Foundation" name was often misconstrued as a charitable organization, the name was later changed to Walter W. Ross and Co. Inc., a straight business corporation.

> "I engaged a young lawyer, Carroll Berry, who was a good friend of mine, to draw up our Constitution and By-Laws, and secure our Charter from the State of Missouri. I explained to him that I wanted to make this new organization my life's work. I asked that the papers be very concise and simply drawn in such a way that each chapter could make its own rules, and its own decisions, and that the most important entity be the individual membership. My purpose would be to try my utmost to follow her direction in what she wished for herself as a member of Beta Sigma Phi. One more stipulation was that a separate managing corporation be formed to protect the chapter, and the individual members from any national debt for magazine publishing or running expenses of the national office. This separate corporation would give me a tenable position in which a man could be a servant to a women's organization."
>
> - Walter W. Ross

It is worth noting that Walter W. Ross developed Beta Sigma Phi for the purposes of social and cultural development because those were the things the members wanted. All that had been added, the service, the ways and means, the committees – have been added for the same reason. They were things the members wanted.

The whole of Beta Sigma Phi today is a continuance of Walter W. Ross's philosophy of serving the member by listening to her dreams, her goals, and what she expects of her organization. That philosophy brought Beta Sigma Phi into being. Growing out of the National-What-To-Read-Club, it has guided Beta Sigma Phi throughout the years and will continue to be the guide long into the future.