

GRAD TELLS OF GROUP

EDITORS NOTE: The following is a statement from Dennis Holt, 1957 graduate of the University of Alabama. While at the University, Holt was active in campus politics, being elected to the legislature twice, serving on the SGA president's cabinet, acting as Director of Political Affairs, president of Arts and Sciences, and was a member of Phi Beta Kappa. His statement is as follows:

I became a member of the political machine at the University when I was a junior. I was taken in as an independent. This is the machine . . . as I remember it. Although most of the situations are expressed herein in past tense, I would imagine they still exist.

It is a strong force, a secret force. Anyone who tries to make the comparison between the UA machine and a political party is naive. The machine is secretive and works to control, not to compete. Its purpose is to control campus politics by any means that it has to use.

I believe that it was at one time called Theta Nu Epsilon, which was founded around 1878 as a secret fraternity, male members only, whose sole purpose of existence was the control of campus politics. The organization had ritual books, initiation ceremonies and even rings and keys with the symbol, a skull and cross bones.

The University had a chapter for many years; however, something happened to make them change their name to The Group. The ritual book

of TNE, deep maroon in color, was still used in certain ceremonies when I was in the organization. In the readings from the book, the name TNE was changed to "The Group."

Certain members of the organization had special names . . . for example, a first-year person before initiation was called a "malochick."

The Group is the same as TNE in all phases except the name. The basic structure, the officers, the purpose are the same of those of the TNE.

In 1957, seventeen fraternities were affiliated with The Group. No Jewish fraternities were represented, as the charter of the organization said that only people who believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ may be admitted. However, outstanding Jewish men were taken in at the University as independents. There were usually about one or two independents in The Group, but the number varies. When I was a member, there were three independents.

Each fraternity had, at that time, two members—two men who could supposedly control the members of their fraternity. Very few fraternity members knew anything about the machine.

Each house and each member was responsible for keeping its own membership up. While the entire membership of The Group voted a person into the organization, each member picked his own successor, more or less. One blackball could block a person from joining.

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CRIMSON-WHITE

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THE GROUP WANTS CONTROL AT ANY COST, SAYS '57 GRAD

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Blackballs are seldom used. I saw only one, cast by a fraternity member to keep out a Jewish student. This was in the Spring of 1956. The next September, after the fraternity member had graduated, the same Jewish member was taken in as an independent.

The Group had officers — a president, vice-president, secretary-treasurer. The membership fee was \$15 when I was in school. This was used to pay for refreshments during the meetings.

The Group met, usually around the midnight hour, somewhere off campus. One of the favorite meeting spots was a gravel pit south of Tuscaloosa.

Meetings are called for a purpose, and there are no regular meeting dates. From 6 to 7 to 10 meetings are held each year. The Group met in September to vote in new members, and would usually meet again shortly afterwards for initiation. The next meeting was in February, usually, when the members decided their slate of candidates for the top 10 posts — SGA president, vice-president, and secretary-treasurer, editors of the Corolla, Crimson-White and Mahout, business managers of the same, and the Cotillion presidency.

The meeting to decide the slate (sometimes it took two meetings) was always held indoors. I remember, one year we held this meeting at a cabin off campus. Another year it was held in the basement of the Chi Phi house.

When I was in school, the machine did not bother itself with the races for the legislature or school officials. But, I do not recall any occasion when The Group did not select someone to the top 10 posts. In every case they would choose a candidate to run for these positions. That person may or may not have been in the machine. If he was not in the organization then, he usually taken in after his selection. However, I knew one business manager of the Mahout who never joined The Group, although he ran on their slate.

The group's objectives were organization, unity and obtaining the maximum vote by any means possible. To insure unity and organization each fraternity member was pressured to vote for the machine candidate by the two representatives in his house. Fraternities that did not go along with the machine slate were pressured and told

that some "harm" might come their way if they did not go along with the machine. The harm: no patronage. For example, the Sigma Chi's bucked the machine years ago, and for a long time they were virtually kicked out of SGA.

There were ways they could pressure sororities. For example, after the slate is decided, the presidents of the leading sororities and a few outstanding girls were invited to an informal meeting with the machine members. In 1957 this meeting was held in the back room of Pugs. Refreshments were served, and the slate members made brief speeches. The girls were urged to support the machine candidates. It is not illogical to believe, that certain pressures would be placed on sororities if they refused to back the machine candidate, but this did not occur while I was in school.

If a race was hotly contested and finances are sparse, fraternities were asked to "devy up money" (usually \$25 each) to support the machine candidates. Fraternity treasurers were told to write it off on their books in any way they wanted. In the 1957 race, fraternities were asked to dig up money to help defray campaign expenses.

Internally, the machine was generally split into two factions. Some fraternities would stick together, others did not. A few floaters fluctuated from one side to the other, often swinging with them the balance of power. I remember one candidate for SGA presidency who lost the backing of the machine by one vote.

Mark this well: although there was a membership of from 30 to 35, four or five people run the show. The others were followers. Sometimes one man controlled The Group. These few "leaders" decided the slate and convinced the followers.

The Group is a powerful organization. It has ties that go beyond the campus. The Group, although its primary concern was controlling campus politics, always reserved the right to act as a force on a situation not connected with the campus political scene. I remember one meeting held at the gravel pit to concern The Group about an action of the Dean of Men. This, however, is the only meeting I ever attended that was not concerned either with voting in new members, initiation or deciding on political matters.

The Group has a unique system of keeping together. It is not a political party. It becomes something of a political party during the elections in that it supervises the organization of shuttle services and campus campaigning. But it is a secret organization designed to control the campus by any means it has to use.

I should know. I was a member.

Dennis Holt