

## **Brotherhood and Good Eats -- How Crows Dined Fifty Years Ago**

***Of all the ways Crows form and strengthen their bonds with one other in college – intramural teams, charity projects, theme parties (the Caveman Drag, e.g.), exchanges with sororities, house repair projects and, of course, the Ritual, one of the most important events – a ritual in itself – is mealtime at the AXP house. And so it was for us at Phi Kappa in the late 1950s through the mid-1960s, although we didn't give much thought to how we were bonding as we asked for another slice of beef or another dollop of potatoes. Brothers Rich Murray and Brian Bland (U. of Illinois, '63) blended the memories of about twenty Phi Kappa Brothers to create this bit of tasty nostalgia.***

The Crow house at the University of Illinois (known for its impressive Greek houses) boasted a dining room that took up the first floor in one leg of the L-shaped building. The decor was what you might find at schools such as Harvard or Oxford: light-colored walls accented with dark wood trim and ceiling beams. Similarly, we ate at three long, dark, heavy oak tables, with chairs to match.

The ruler of the adjacent kitchen was a short, stout, graying red-headed widow named Lucy Rebenstorf, who had a cook's legendary temper. Woe to him who made the mistake of whistling or singing in her kitchen. But Lucy loved us, and showed it through her personal pride in preparing most meals from scratch, and doing her own baking, including wonderful dinner rolls (but not bread). Her workday ran from about 6:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Word was, she once cooked for one of the Proctors of Proctor & Gamble fame.

We were provided twenty meals a week (we were on our own Sunday evening):

- Breakfast every day, 7-8:30 a.m., with cereal, toast, coffee and juice, and hot food – eggs or pancakes – available M-F. On Saturdays, Spudnuts – the local donuts made from potatoes -- were another choice.
- Lunch, M-F at about 12:15 p.m., was another hot meal. Sunday mid-day hot dinner was a more elaborate, formal offering. Sometimes it was brunch-style, featuring home-made pecan cinnamon rolls. Saturday's lunch was an informal buffet of cold cuts or perhaps sloppy joes.
- Supper, at 5:30 p.m., was a hot meal Mon.-Thurs. and Saturdays. Friday supper was much like Saturday lunch – a cold cuts buffet.
- Special meals: On the Sunday following in-house formal dances, our dates were guests at the midday meal. Homecoming, Mother's Day and Father's Day also meant special arrangements. At Thanksgiving, a whole roasted turkey with all the trimmings was served at each table with the table head doing the carving, a learning experience in itself.

Beyond sharing good food, we were brought together by the structure of the various meals, which ranged from the formality of Sunday dinners, to the T-shirts, shorts and bawdy songs on Friday evenings. Even before eating supper, our separate daytime endeavors were put aside for spirited bridge or pinochle games in the card room or a chance to look at the newspaper in the living room as one of the piano-playing Brothers would provide some pre-supper pop standards or even ``modern'' jazz. On a spring Sunday, we loved to relax on the sunny front porch before or after the big meal.

For lunch and supper, except for the informal Saturday lunch and Friday supper, we entered the dining room together, with the House President at the head of Table 1, at the far end of the room. The Vice President headed Table 2; the Ritual Officer, Table 3. At the evening hot meals, everyone stood while the Chaplin said grace and no one sat down until the President (or senior officer) did.

Hot meals were served by white jacketed waiter-students working for their meals. (A dishwasher-student kept busy in the kitchen). Lucy's high-quality cooking was well-known along the grapevine of would-be waiters, creating a waiting list to work at AXP.

The table head was served first, although the waiters put platters of food at both ends of the tables. The food was passed to your right, using a precise cross-over method: you accepted the food from the man on your left with your right hand and passed it to your right with your left hand. Like other table-manner lessons, this one had a practical side: the passing protocol meant few spills or tangling of hands and arms. After everyone had been served and requests for seconds began, there were no "short stops" when passing food unless permission was granted from the person who'd asked for that platter.

Weekday evening meals, in particular, were a time for instructing Pledges on such table manners, also including the use of napkins and utensils. Jackets and ties were required at the Monday and Wednesday suppers, as at the big Sunday meal. At Tuesday and Thursday supper, as at lunch, school clothes were the norm. In those days, that meant no sweat shirts or jeans. At the conclusion of the more formal meals, we stood and sang *Amici*.

Although we never left the table hungry, we were limited to one glass of milk per meal. After that, it was water in the same glass. And while many of us were smokers, it was never, ever, allowed during meals. Swearing was prohibited, with modest fines for violations (except on Friday evening, of course). Despite the general decorum of most meals, the head-of-table sometimes faced modest rebellions in the form of a Brother shouting, "Table Up!" prompting the men at that table to quickly shift it – food and all – toward the table head, pinning him in his chair against the wall. The sturdy chair arms (usually) prevented any injury. Of such small actions is unity formed.

After most meals, we left the dining room as we'd entered – together – and only when everyone had finished. However, it was relatively easy to get permission to leave lunch early due to afternoon classes. Occasionally we'd have a couple of slow eaters who delayed our *en masse* exit after supper, but their pace usually improved after a couple of nights of being targets of, shall we say, the majority's obvious disapproval.

On Dad's Day, after eating, we would sing, "Come out, come out/ Come out, Miss Lucy, come out, come out," until she reluctantly emerged from the kitchen to receive her accolades as well as a bonus from the assembled fathers.

Men who knew they would be absent for lunch or supper were supposed to sign out on a small blackboard in the kitchen. Once, when the pledges staged their annual walk-out, one dutifully signed out on the blackboard: "The Pledge Class." Lucy, despite her reputation for being stern, was known to fix early lunches (eaten in the kitchen) for the one or two men who had noon classes or for anyone with a bona fide reason for missing a meal – e.g., an exam.

The Phi Kappa chapter mascot was the lovable, somewhat eccentric German shepherd, Ace. He was trained never to go into the dining room and, during meals, usually laid on the floor of the foyer (which was open to the dining room), looking at us with sad, pleading eyes. He was fed before supper, to lessen his temptation to cross the invisible boundary when we ate. If he tried it, the pledge responsible for feeding him, seated at Table 3, would scold him. One story has it that a large, newly delivered, roast beef was somehow left on the butcher's block in the kitchen. Lucy found Ace feasting on the meat; her exact reaction has been lost in the mists of history, but faint echoes could be heard for years afterward.

After supper, "quiet hours" went into effect, so we would mount the stairs to our rooms to hit the books.

One other tradition semi-related to dining was this: any Pledge who racked up too many demerits had to clean out the large grease trap in the basement, directly below the kitchen.

Many words have been written about the special camaraderie created when friends share a meal. For Crows, that's always been true, an important part of how we learned to "Be Men."