

JIM GOES GREEK

By Dave Holman



Jim Owens shows undisguised pleasure in his fraternity choice, despite early reservations about joining the Greeks. He gave the Fiji house serious consideration, but the end of rush found Jim celebrating with new brothers in Alpha Tau Omega.

JIM OWENS is one of 30 young men sitting in the dim ballroom of the Tiger Hotel. It's the last Friday in August, and they have come here for the fraternities' formal rush. None of them knows exactly what to expect or what is expected of him. They are courteous, eager to please. Most of them don't talk unless spoken to; then they sometimes talk too much. Some houses are already full, and rushees are not assured of acceptance. The anxiety erupts in a fountain of questions directed at whoever might have some answers.

Owens seems different. He is two years older than the average man here, for one thing. He seems sure of himself. But he is not yet sure he wants to join a house.

"I think I probably will join, if one of them wants me," he says. "It may sound conceited, but I think I have a lot to offer. I think I'm a fairly personable guy and I like people. I could probably do more in a fraternity than I can outside."

He has a few more specific reasons, too. He is a transfer student from Virginia Military Institute and he is ready for a change from VMI's rather monastic regimentation. The social benefits of a fraternity do appeal to him. And after two days in the dorms, he knows he wants out of there, too.

"They won't let me keep my bike in my room. My main sport right now is bicycle racing and I have a really good bike. I am not going to leave it outside to get rained on or ripped off. I've been hiding it in the bushes and taking it in piece at a time. I bring in a wheel. A little later I carry in the frame. Pretty soon they are going to catch on that this guy has a bike in his room. It's hanging in my closet now."

Owens spends all day Friday visiting fraternity houses. He is a good prospect, and he is courted heavily. Have a beer. Upstairs, downstairs. Here's the lounge. Our cook is the best on Campus. Grades are important here. There's always someone around who can help. Our Little Sisters are the best girls you'll ever meet. Have a beer. Here's the trophy room. No, hazing is absolutely out. We start serving breakfast at seven. Have a beer. You don't have to check your date in and out. Our house isn't the fanciest, but we have the strongest brotherhood of any, and that's what's important. Need another beer?

Friday night there is a keg party for the rushees. It's a chance for the house rush chairmen and the prospects to get together in an informal social atmo-

sphere. Owens is riding out to the party with one of the house presidents who wants Owens' pledge. Conversation is pretty general until Jim brings it down to specifics.

"I was in one house today, and the first thing they showed me was a file of tests for almost every course here," he says. "I'm really against that, personally. What's your house policy on things like that?"

SILENCE in the car. The guy must be a radical.

Well, uh, we do have a file. Every house has a file. Uh, not many guys use it, I guess. It isn't kept up to date too well. Not very practical. Uh, why are you so against it?

"I went to VMI, and they have a very strong honor system there. I have literally seen guys drummed out of school at three in the morning for cheating. I don't want to preach or tell people what they should do, but I think it's a form of cheating and I don't want anything to do with it."

By Saturday Jim has pretty well narrowed the field. Two, maybe three, alternatives stand out. He is back at the ATO house for the third time. There are other rushees in the parlor, talking with the house actives about their backgrounds, sports, house policies. Rush chairman Jeff Holaday takes Owens aside for a more personal chat. Formal bids are to be submitted to rushees at a meeting tonight, but Owens will be moved into the Alpha Tau Omega house before then.

Saturday night brings another beer bust, this one just for ATOs. For the first time Jim has a chance to meet all the pledge brothers and the actives. It is the official wetting down of the pledges. Beer is everywhere. The picnic shelter floor is slick with it, shirts drip with it and eyes are glazed with it. Owens is the pledge class chugging champion. Some pledges are sick but they stay on their feet, not to be outdone in the manly art of getting zonked.

The actives are not drinking much. Now they stand back to watch. The main objective is to get the pledges drunk together, to get them unified, and also to get them so sick of beer that they won't want any more for the next two weeks. Henceforth, they are to conduct themselves as gentlemen.

Actually, formal rush for the fraternities is almost an afterthought. All summer, house rush chairmen have been criss-crossing the state to parties in the major cities, visiting prospective members and talking with the families of high school seniors who have

indicated to Mizzou's Inter-Fraternity Council that they might be interested in pledging a house. By the end of August, several houses are already filled.

The long summer rush may be more taxing for rush chairmen, but it is more relaxed for the rushees, and the selection is more deliberate. The fraternity actives can learn a lot more about a prospective pledge and thus avoid "spooks" and misfits. Formal rush is for the benefit of men like Jim Owens, who comes here from Virginia Beach, Virginia, and those Missourians who were not rushed or could not make a firm decision during the summer.

The sororities still pledge the majority of their new members through formal rush. It is a week of concentrated madness. The streets of Greek Town are filled with hundreds of smiling young girls, trying not to perspire in the August heat. They are escorted from one house to another in groups of about 20.

EVERY half hour the doors of the sorority houses burst open and active members pour out onto porches and sidewalks, dancing, clapping and singing the praises of their particular house.

"If you want to be a red hot mama, go Kappa Kappa Kappa Kappa Gamma!"

Fraternity men bring drinks and folding chairs and camp before their favorite sorority to watch the show. Burlesque is not dead.

After five minutes of frenzy, the house members engulf a new group of 20 girls and the throngs flow back into the houses for a half-hour mini-party.

Somehow, after five days of this round-robin elimination tournament, the sororities and the rushees come to an understanding and bids are submitted to those rushees who have prevailed. On Monday after rush week, the chosen ones gather on a predetermined balcony and, one at a time, proclaim their choice of houses to all the Greek world and anyone else within a hundred-yard radius.

This year, about 600 girls started through rush week and 369 of those pledged a sorority.

Talk to a Greek and you will learn that fraternities are the greatest boon to the young college man since the invention of the zipper. Talk to an independent and you discover that all Greeks are direct descendants of Attila the Hun. Joining a house or remaining independent, like a choice of religion, seems to require a leap of faith. The student decides he needs it or he doesn't, and that commitment is seldom

shaken by any argument from any source.

After a decline in membership about 1970, more Mizzou students are deciding that they do want the fraternity or sorority fellowship. Gary Moden, fraternity advisor at the Center for Student Life, says 610 men pledged fraternities this year. There are about 2,100 men on campus actively involved with fraternities, the highest membership since 1970.

Sorority membership is at an all-time high this year, says Margy Harris of the Center for Student Life. There are 1,209 women in sorority houses. While actual numbers are at record levels, if you consider the percentage of women involved, sororities are a far cry from what they were in the "Golden Era" of the 1950s. Ms. Harris says that in 1953 about 43 percent of Mizzou co-eds were in sororities. Today the figure has dropped to around 15 percent.

Whatever the trend, two months after pledging Alpha Tau Omega, Jim Owens is sure he made the right decision. He feels living in the house is less expensive in the long run than dorm life.

"You have a planned social life that you are free to take part in as much or as little as you want," Owens says. "If I were in the dorm, all that would be out of pocket expense, but it's mostly included in the house bill here.

"Naturally it's a great way to meet girls, but it's not all party either," he adds. "Study around this house is the number one priority. There is a test file in the house, but I haven't met too many people who know where it is."

OWENS was elected president of the ATO pledge class. With encouragement from the house, he has gotten seats on the MSA elections committee and the speakers committee and is a candidate for the MSA Senate.

"It's a good way to get involved with the school," says Owens. "You have more opportunities than in the dorms or off Campus. It's a good way to learn to deal with people. You'd have to make so much more effort in the dorms to do the same things you take for granted in the house. And the people you live with become really good friends, not just somebody you pass in the hall. Just working in this type of organization is good training."

Despite all the benefits, Jim still can't keep his bike in his room. But there is a space for it in the hall just outside his door. □



The fraternity house welcomed bike racer Owens and his bicycle, too. In the University dorm rooms, the bike had to go.