in their words

SIGMA CHI
FRATERNITY
The Founders of Sigma Chi—Ritual of 1855

I place this White Cross over my heart, because it appeals both to my intellect and my affections. I will wear this badge with a deep sense of humility and a feeling of unworthiness, believing that this badge requires more of me than the world requires of other men; and realizing full well that I can never conquer by a sign, even though it be a cross, but only as the ideals for which this badge stands take possession of my heart and become exemplified in my life will I ever know the deepest meaning of the White Cross of Sigma Chi.

Preamble to the Constitution of 1856

Believing that many advantages are to be derived from a secret fraternity organization;

Appreciating that closer communion of kindred hearts which adds so many incentives to virtuous exertion; and Feeling that in union there is strength:

We do hereby form ourselves into an association for the development of the nobler powers of the mind, the finer feelings of the heart, and for the promotion of friendship and congeniality of feeling.
Benjamin Piatt Runkle

[To the Alumni of Gamma Chapter, June 24, 1879]

The Sigma Chi was not the offspring of chance, or the creature of mere boyish fancy; it was the child of rebellion, honorable rebellion, which success has dignified into a revolution ... The influence of these associations cannot be other than healthful and beneficial. The friendship formed in these fraternities, when men's hearts are pure and unselfish, endure through life, and the hours passed in these halls are the most fondly cherished memories of our college days. As long as the standard of the White Cross is upheld by loyal hearts, so long will it flourish and endure, respected and esteemed by all men who honor honest ambition, gentlemanly courtesy and true manhood. May it flourish and endure long after I, that speak to you.

[To the Sigma Chi Quarterly, 1908]

This carries me back to the olden and perhaps primitive times when we had an essay, and a supposed poem at every session of the chapter, and prepared our brothers for the literary society work and the college debates - when the question asked about a prospective brother was: 'How does he stand in the classes, and can he write and debate?' There is where Jordan was made an orator, Cooper a preacher, Bell a college president, and Caldwell and Scobey were trained for writers."

[To the San Francisco Grand Chapter and Grand Consul Newman Miller; June 28, 1916]

For each Founder there are now two thousand hearts that throb under the emblem of faith and hope - Faith in Sigma Chi ideals, and hope for our future in this world and in the world to come.

To these thousands I send fraternal love and heartfelt good wishes. As you have, through all of our struggles and contentions, so now, and in the future, go on with the good work until the White Cross is known and honored in every nook and corner of the educational world and you shall accomplish greater things than the Founders could ever have hoped or dreamed.

The Scrolls of these Founders are nearly filled; soon each will have turned the golden key to the final mysteries of life. We will watch over you as the Eagle watches over his young. So, clasping each and every hand I look to the "Stars."

Ever Cordially and Fraternally

Ben P. Runkle
[To Joseph C. Nate, past Grand Consul, responding to Brother Nate’s request for assistance in writing the History of Sigma Chi, November 29, 1910]

My Dear Brother Nate:

I received your circular letter, and enclosed folder, this morning, have read both and, to be frank, am at a loss as to what I ought to say in reply.

The proceedings (I should rather say, certain of the proceedings) at the last Grand Chapter so depressed my confidence in the future of Sigma Chi that I have scarcely thought of the matter since without a feeling of sadness which is all the heavier because my affections were wounded as well as my sense of fairness. The manner in which the revised Constitution was forced through, without the slightest opportunity for consideration and discussion, was painful because it indicated that a domineering, arrogant, instead of a brotherly spirit, was at the head of fraternity affairs. Again, the manner in which our candidate for Grand Consul was attacked and another Brother, not one whit better, or worse, was lauded on to victory made me sick at heart. I have tried to forget these things and have endeavored to believe that our adversaries were actuated only by the highest motives but the original impression still remains.

It seems to me that the active chapters have too little to say in regard to the government of the fraternity. The power is concentrated in the hands of too few of the Alumni. I care not how good the men are, the system is wrong in principle. The Alumni should guide not govern.

I often think of the words of dear, old Sam Ireland after our candidate was defeated (in the same old way) for Grand Consul at Nashville: ‘General, they have no sympathy with our feeling, there is too much politics in the deal. Let us get what happiness we can out of association with those we love, and let them have their way for good or evil.’ I did not feel that way. I do not surrender easily but I did come to a realization of conditions. So realizing, I wish you success in the work, and if I can aid you, will cheerfully do so. ... 

We cannot have things (save now and then) our own way in this world, but we have the consolation of knowing that the mass of humanity is just and fair minded, and will give us credit for our good intentions in the long run.

Let me hear what, if anything, you desire.

Affectionately yours

Ben P. Runkle
[To Eta Chapter, September 16, 1857]

As you are rather 'young and inexperienced' in the Society you will, I feel confident, excuse me if I make some suggestions. At the commencement of each session, at the first meeting, you will elect all the officers as well as a poet and orator. Then, too, you must look out for good fellows who have just come to College. Be careful to get those who, possessing the requisite mental and social qualities, are expecting to finish their course 'with joy and gladness.' The perpetuity of the society depends on having such members in it. I would not advise you to have more than four or five in each class.

[To Eta Chapter, October 15, 1857]

When you first put on the 'dear old cross' you will create quite a sensation. In whatever part of the U. S. you may go you will find no handsomer pins, and I trust and hope that those emblems of purity will be indices of the purity and nobleness of the hearts beneath them. We should endeavor so to raise ourselves that to say of a man, 'He is a Sigma Chi' shall be synonymous with, 'He is a liberally educated, high-minded, pure and noble man.' Such are some of the objects of our Society. The world is in great need of just such men, and let all who go out from our chapters be such men.

[To Lambda Chapter at the time of the close of Alpha Chapter, September 13, 1858]

The Alpha was established in Miami University, June 1855; at that time, we numbered in our ranks the talent of the University. This made us proud, and, when we grew few, unfortunately introduced uncongenial elements. This destroyed our unanimity, and now we are gone, at least for the present.

Of the purity and uprightness of our motives, I leave you to judge. In our meetings for the past three years, I have spent some of my happiest moments; so happy, so pleasant, that the remembrance of them will always be vivid.

When you recruit your ranks, be certain to choose congenial, high-minded talented fellows. Though you may be strong now, take all you can get who have the ring of true metal. 'In time of peace prepare for war; 'while the evil days come not, prepare for their approach.' With much pleasure, I sign myself your Bro. In Sigma Chi.
Isaac M. Jordan

[To the Cincinnati Grand Chapter, August, 1884]

It is now more than a quarter of a century since the organization of our Fraternity, and yet every circumstance connected with it is as fresh in my mind as if it had all occurred but yesterday. Memory, ever faithful, brings back the whole scene before me, and I seem to see it painted with the most real colors. Bell and Cooper, and Scobey, and Caldwell and Runkle, all seem to stand before me as when I saw them last. The room where we met, the table at which we sat, and everything connected with it, rises distinct before my eyes.

In my judgment our Fraternity has grown to be what it is, by adhering to the principle with which we started in the beginning, of admitting no man to membership in it who is not believed to be a man of good character, of fair ability, of ambitious purposes, and of congenial disposition.

In a word, by the admission of none but gentlemen; and in no other way can such a society be continued. It is much more important that we should have but few chapters and have them good ones, that we should have but few members and have them honorable ones, than to have many chapters or many members. The decadence of other societies can be traced to a violation of this principle, and to an ambition to have many chapters and a large membership.

And let me here give a word of advice and admonition to the members of every chapter. Whenever you find an unworthy member of your society, expel him at once and without hesitation. Evil communications corrupt good morals, and one dishonorable man will bring reproach and dishonor upon your chapter and upon the whole Fraternity. The amount of mischief which one abandoned and dissolute young man can do is incalculable; he destroys everything around him; avoid him as you would a pestilence. One drop of poison will defile the purest spring. Avoid by all means the poison, the virus, the hemlock of bad associations.

Brother Sigmas, we belong to a society worthy of our highest regard and warmest affection. We are united in the strong and enduring bonds of friendship and esteem. Let us each and all so do our duty and conduct ourselves that we bring no dishonor upon our society or each other. And we may have the high and proud satisfaction of knowing that our beautiful White Cross, at once the badge of our society and the emblem of purity, will never be worn over any breast which does not beat with pure, generous, and noble emotions, and by no man who is not a man of honor.
By our Ritual we must avoid the danger that may come by believing that one could conquer by just wearing an emblem to parade virtues that are not within the heart.

[Address to the Fraternity – Semi-Centennial Celebration, Oxford Ohio, June 28, 1905]

The scenes and circumstances of today, the fact of standing on this once familiar spot, amid the classic shades of dear old Miami, carry my mind back fifty years to the time when, with these classmates and many other class- and college-mates, we passed those pleasant years preparing for the great realities of life, its duties, its trials and its joys. The memory of many persons and scenes of those days thrills my heart and seems to renew my youth, making all seem as of yesterday.

Among the many delightful memories of those far-off days is that of seven young men, one in heart and purpose – seven, symbol of completeness, if not perfection – who met and founded the Sigma Chi Fraternity, feeble as it was young, and seemingly hopeless and helpless. Looking upon our Fraternity as it then was and as it now is, I am filled with wonder and amazement, and can only exclaim; Is it possible that this growth and advancement has been made in the short space of fifty years?

But while we rejoice in the spirit and power, which have accomplished all this, and can accomplish vastly more in the future, permit me a word of warning. It is easy for that which is strong to become weak; for that which is ascending, to lose its balance and fall to grovel in the dust; and just in proportion as it was strong and noble and exalted, if it falls, will it become weak and worthless and perish. The mighty forces found in nature, the material world – viz., light, heat, attraction, and electricity – so long as they remain in their normal condition and act as the Creator designed, bring health and joy, peace and beauty, prosperity and abundant fruitfulness; but, when out of their proper condition, work only devastation and death, as seen in the earthquake’s throes, burying cities and even continents, with all that pertains to them, deep in the bowels of the earth, and in the tornado’s deadly rush, and in the thunderbolt’s resistless might. And just so in the social, the moral, and the spiritual worlds. The very forces which, when working according to the law under which they were designed to work, produce abundantly the fruits of purity, peace and love, and advance the best interests of all – these forces, when working abnormally, out of their order, produce results most destructive and fatal.
Be it yours, then, my brothers, in laboring for the advancement of all that the Sigma Chi Fraternity stands for, to do all in the right spirit and from the right motives, so that you may hand down our Fraternity to those who come after you with its strength undiminished, its beauty untarnished; and may it continue to advance in all that is good and true, until time itself shall be no more!

[To the Grand Chapter, June 29 - July 2, 1909]

Brothers, you wear the cross, that emblem to me above all things the most worthy of reverence and love. See to it that you never do ought to dishonor it. Let your character be as pure and white as the enamel of which it is composed. Let your every word and deed be as rich and golden as the gold that surrounds and ornaments it....

[To Byron D. Stokes, Executive Secretary of the Fraternity in reply to his telegram informing Brother Cooper of the death of Thomas Cowan Bell, then leaving Cooper as the only surviving Founder of Sigma Chi]

Marion, Ohio Feb. 5, 1919
Byron D. Stokes

Dear Bro.

Telegram announcing the death of Brother Thomas Cowan Bell duly received. I sent a telegram of sympathy at once to his family.

It is with deep sorrow that I think of his death. He was a good student; an accomplished scholar; a brave and fearless soldier and patriot as his advancing titles of Captain, Major, and Colonel attest; a successful educator; a gentleman of the highest type, and an unfailing friend, and in his death the Country has lost a noble Son and our Fraternity a noble Brother.

The founders of this Fraternity will soon all live only in memory, but I am truly thankful that the Fraternity itself, founded on high and unchanging principles, will still live on in increasing strength and prosperity under the watchful care of its loving and faithful members.

I appreciate your thoughtfulness in sending the telegram.

With best wishes to yourself

    I am yours, in Sigma Chi

D. W. Cooper
Thomas Cowan Bell

[To the Grand Chapter, dated January, 1913]

I need not tell you how proud I am of Sigma Chi. It has grown mightily. You have built a memorial house at old Miami in honor of the founders and you have embalmed our names and our merits in your ritual.

Franklin Howard Scobey

[To the members of Alpha Chapter, 1855]

We shall form a fraternity on the principal that the adequacy of the fraternity lies in the opportunity for the building of a well-rounded and symmetrical development of individual character.

There must be in a fraternity, the expression and bond of friendship; at the same time, each must be free in the pursuit of his chosen ideals.

[To Gamma Chapter, December 11, 1856]

Nothing so much tends to promote friendship, as the free mutual interchanging of our thoughts, hopes, and fears with one in whom we can confide.
James Parks Caldwell

[To the 1905 Semi-Centennial Grand Chapter at Miami University, June 26-28, 1905]

Here we have met, my brethren, to celebrate the jubilee of a great Fraternity, whose principles and purposes we hold in reverent honor, and in whose progress and prosperity we feel a common pride; rejoicing at the lofty place attained and held by Sigma Chi among the moral and intellectual forces which “make for righteousness” and, all unseen of men, exert far-reaching influences for the betterment of the social and political world. For each of us knows that, in the mind of the eager-hearted youth who for the first time assumes its blazon on his breast, the White Cross of our order becomes at once a shrine for the culture of that love to which both Paul and Plato have lent the music of their words – an emblem of self-respecting manhood, and perpetual monitor inculcating, as the sole basis of honor, the lessons of truth, of courtesy, and of courage.

I almost persuade myself, however, that the splendid loyalty to the fraternal idea, which I have noted as characteristic of Sigma Chi, has given to its founders a more exalted place than they deserve. Not to them only, nor even chiefly, have been due the amazing growth and wonderful progress of our fair Brotherhood, and its magnificent position in the fraternity world – results too marvelous for me to recognize as the natural outcome of any work in which I have consciously borne part. True it is that without the sowers there had been no hope of harvest; but this abundant fruitage betokens later efforts, when ours had gone to waste amid the turmoil of troublous times. Those who came after had a harder task, out of which their native energy has wrought a notable success. Men of constructive intellect, it was theirs to conserve the spirit by a radical change of form, to repair and remodel the crumbling foundations, and to rear thereon the stately structure which we now behold. ...As the least active of the founders, I tender my homage to the real makers of Sigma Chi, content for my own part, having witnessed the planting of the acorn, to rest rejoicing in the far-thrown shadow of the mighty oak.

Fifty years hence it is more than probable that another and greater assembly will gather here to commemorate the centennial of Sigma Chi, and it occurs to me as not impossible that among the younger brothers attending this convention some may happily survive to be present on that occasion. There are more than one whose expectancy of life is great enough to justify a further look into the future, and the number of whose years falls easily within the age-limit of the founders when the Fraternity began. Through them I would transmit a greeting, with a hand-clasp, to a generation yet unborn, with an expression of fervent hope that they may look back upon a career less checkered than that which we have seen.
From the **Alpha Chapter of Sigma Chi**

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From original writings of the Founders, and

*The History of Sigma Chi*, by Douglas R. Carlson, '73