

Kenyon Then & Now

by Christopher Barth

One hundred years ago, Kenyon was finally emerging from decades of slumber in the backwaters of higher education, having suffered through persistent fiscal woes as well as theological controversies that were a hallmark of nineteenth-century Gambier. President William Foster Peirce, after nine years at the helm, had carefully begun to craft a modern, relevant institution, and 1905 saw enrollment rise to 148, the highest level ever.

Then tragedy struck. The mysterious death of a freshman fraternity pledge in October 1905, combined with the loss of the Kenyon Military Academy to fire in 1906, set in motion another decade of decline, as the name of Kenyon College became synonymous with calamity.

The death of Stuart Lathrop Pierson, which attracted the attention of the international press, is one of the most wrenching episodes in the College's history. On Saturday, October 28, 1905, Pierson was awake for most of the early morning, awaiting the arrival of his father, Newbold L. Pierson, from Cincinnati by rail. His father, a Kenyon alumnus of 1880 and a Delta Kappa Epsilon member, arrived in Gambier to celebrate his son's initiation into the fraternity.

Later that evening, according to tradition, the new initiates waited in isolation away from the College Park for members of the fraternity to escort them to the ceremony. Stuart Pierson had been asked to wait near the trestle of the C.A. & C. railroad that passed to the south of the College Hill. He left the hill at 9:00 p.m. to await his party. The exact events that took place during the next hours remain a mystery.

According to a subsequent College investigation, at 9:55 p.m. three members of Delta Kappa Epsilon arrived near the trestle to retrieve Stuart for the initiation ceremonies, only to find him missing. Searching the area, they discovered his dead body on the trestle; he had apparently been struck by a passing locomotive. As they examined the body, another train approached, and the three boys moved the body to the embankment, sending one of their party to notify President Peirce of the accident. After consulting with Stuart's father, Peirce arranged for the immediate transportation of the body back to Cincinnati.

The following day, rumors circulated that, as part of its initiation ritual, the fraternity had tied Pierson to the tracks and that an unexpected train accidentally crushed the helpless student. A proper investigation never took place. Mount Vernon, five miles from Gambier, had the nearest police force and coroner. The College failed to notify these officials until the following morning, after the body had been transported to Cincinnati and after the town marshal and railroad employees had cleaned up the accident scene.

Upset that his office had not been notified immediately and sensing foul play, the Knox County coroner, W.W. Scarbrough, traveled the following day to Cincinnati to examine the

body. Scarbrough already suspected that Pierson had been tied to the track and that the College had attempted to cover up the misconduct. His examination supported this belief: in a statement to the press, he called attention to injuries on Pierson's wrists and ankles.

A public uproar ensued. Newspaper editors across the country and around the world condemned Kenyon for allowing such a terrible incident to occur. The press cited rumors of other incidents of hazing at the College and featured sensationalist accounts of the event.

The truth remained elusive, however. The coroner's office subsequently conducted an extensive investigation into Pierson's death, collecting testimony from everyone involved in the initiation rite, the removal and preparation of the body, and the cleaning of the trestle area. The testimony absolved Kenyon and the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity of wrongdoing in the death of Pierson. No witnesses testified that he had been tied up, and it was impossible to conclude that he had been tied to the tracks. The coroner admitted that in his initial examination he had looked only at Pierson's wrists and feet, not taking into account the general condition of the body. President Peirce swore that he had been present at the preparation of the body and that the injuries to the wrists and ankles were consistent with the injuries sustained to the remainder of the body.

But the public had already reached its own conclusions. The College suffered an enormous blow to its reputation. Enrollment dwindled, as parents refused to send their children to a school that condoned hazing. The Ohio State Legislature passed a bill on hazing aimed directly at Kenyon, imposing fines and jail terms for students convicted of hazing and for administrators found guilty of allowing hazing to occur.

The College, however, did not outlaw hazing. An editorial in the February 14, 1908 *Kenyon Collegian* proclaimed hazing an important and justifiable part of College tradition. While the author acknowledged that hazing could be used inappropriately and called for a return to proper boundaries in initiation rites, he maintained that hazing was necessary to instill a proper sense of respect in the incoming classes.

Fortunately for Kenyon, President Peirce did not relent in his efforts to promote the College, nor did he tire of extolling its virtues, even in the face of criticism. Kenyon was able to overcome the "annus horribilis" of 1905–06. But rumors about the death of Stuart Pierson circulate to this day.

<http://www.kenyon.edu/x25074.xml>

Newsgroups: alt.folklore.ghost-stories

Subject: frat boy ghost in ohio

From: parsonss@kenyon.edu (WHAT COULD BE MORE FESTIVE THAN A BEHEADING?)

Date: 29 Oct 94 18:24:54 EST

OHIO: KENYON COLLEGE

I go to a college (Kenyon) that has tons of ghost stories, a good many of them related to specific verifiable events in our campus history. one wouldn't think that a place so small as this one (we only have 1500 students, and in the past, it was a lot smaller) should have so many ghost stories, but one way or another, the place is so spooky (or the students so imaginative) that one of our professors, Dr. Tim Shutt, is going to be featured on NPR ("Fresh Air, if I'm not mistaken) for their Halloween special on Monday night. anyway, on oct. 28, 1905 (89 years ago yesterday), Stuart Pierson, a pledge for the DKE fraternity was led down to a nearby railroad trestle and left alone as part of the initiation ceremony.

Now it is unclear (and it subsequently became the object of a nationwide debate), whether he fell to sleep or was tied to the tracks, but either way, it shouldn't have mattered: no night trains were scheduled to come along that particular line at that time of year. of course, you've probably caught on by this point that one, in fact, *did* come along, at 9:41pm (or thereabouts--the watch he was wearing had stopped at that exact time), a random, but grisly coincidence.

When his pledge master came along to retrieve him, the sign that had been left pinned to the unfortunate pledge's shirt took on hideous irony: it said, "when next we pass, it will be worse." now as it turns out, the young man's father, a former Kenyon DKE himself, had come in from Cincinnati for the initiation ceremony. he immediately left campus with the body of his son and took it to Cincinnati to be buried without any autopsy and only minimal investigation into the circumstances of his son's death. later, when asked for comment, the father said "boys will be boys" or something to that effect and declared the case closed. as America's first fraternity hazing-related death, the event shocked the entire country and nearly ruined the school.

Chances are, if you check the big city newspapers from around that time, you'll find stories and editorials, even some artists' depictions of the event. but all that's just the story of an unfortunate death. here's the ghostly part. some have claimed that Stuart Pierson's face can be seen looking out the window of his former room toward the trestle where he died, while others who live in that dorm (which has its share of hauntings) claim that he knocks or opens the doors of DKE fraternity members, or can be heard wandering about the halls near where he lived. others have said that they saw his ghost on the old railroad trestle at night (now a bridge for a bike path), and one story goes that the DKE's have his body in their possession and now use it to frighten pledges in their current initiation ceremonies.

Since I've been here, there hasn't been that much specific Stuart Pierson haunting reported, but two years ago, our security officers responded to a frantic medical call in the DKE housing wing (we have no fraternity houses, so parts of dorms are reserved for Greeks). a guy who lived in the room previously occupied by Pierson woke up to go to the bathroom, and on his way out his door was pushed back and "branded" (with a small triangle, or "delta") by what he described as an unseen force.

Now it could have been a hoax perpetrated to keep the legend alive, but if so, it was awfully convincing, since the college doctor was of the opinion that whatever happened, the guy wasn't making up a story, and the office of security and safety actually looked into the possibility of getting an exorcist. anyway, I found the story to be interesting enough that I went down to the railroad trestle last night to commemorate the event. now nothing particularly supernatural happened while I was there, but it was entertaining to watch members of the DKE's chanting and waving torches around in an unsuccessful attempt to conjure up old Stuart Pierson's spirit. they were even dressed in faux-druidic garb and more than likely doing all this to entertain the curious--like me.

I'm not sure if there's a more detailed account in a book called "Haunted Ohio," but there's a decent (though hardly exhaustive) section on Kenyon's ghosts that you might find entertaining if your interest has been piqued. I haven't run into any ghosts here myself, but I do know a disproportionate (compared to my past experience) number of people who claim to have had contact with ghosts here. after three and a half years here, it doesn't surprise me that there are actually Satanists who believe our campus has a gate to hell...

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