

The Delphic Oracles

Or: How to Be a Gashouse Man

Welcome to The Delphic, the Glorious Delta Phi, or the Gas House, as some call it.

To begin, we have a tradition of being the best club on campus, and for the last 100 years it has been said, as one undergraduate president said thirty years ago, that "It is common knowledge in Cambridge and a point of great pride to us that the Gas House is currently the closest and most active of clubs."

Founded, July 3rd, 1846 by Edward Tuckerman.

Disbanded by the faculty, 1848.

Re-Founded, April 17th 1885.

Clubhouse at 9 Linden Street completed in 1903.

The club itself is patterned after traditional English social clubs, except on a much grander scale. The outside of the building was redone a few years ago, and the interior will be updated soon. James Purdon '95 was the architect for the club. The wood paneling in the lunchroom is from the old clubhouse at 72 Mt. Auburn St., currently the address of the Spee, and it was made in 1893.

In 1908, for two years, the official name of the club was "The Gas"

Our steward today is named Richard DiFranco, and he makes the best Eggs Benedict you will ever taste. There are some stewards, however who spent their whole life at the club, the most prominent being John Alessi. Alessi was the most famous steward of the club – he began as a coal-shovel boy in the basement of the club and basically spent his life here. His ghost still haunts the building today, and sometimes you can hear him talking in the kitchen, or, when the basement is quiet, you can hear him shoveling coal. There is a story that, as a callow youth, he was serving the 1926 commencement breakfast when J.P. Morgan '89 arrived at the club to meet the young members and fortify himself for the observances shortly to occur in The Yard. After consuming generous portions of everything on hand, the founder of the club and the nation's richest banker reached for a check to sign for his meal. Young Alessi, ever wise to the ways of the graduates, firmly demurred stating: "Mr. Morgan, the club has been badly burned in recent years. We have put all graduates on a cash basis during commencement week." Mr. Morgan, having no money on him (remember the rich are very different from you and me), was forced to have a hapless and poor undergraduate buy his meal.

Many of the members of the club have been in the armed services, most recently Ian Callery, who never made it through Harvard or initiation, but was an elected Delphic member. The war brought out the best in many of the club members, and as usual, they were the best kids on campus, doing things so college it would blow your mind. For example:

Guido Pantaleoni '21 was from a prominent St. Louis family. While a freshman at Harvard, he served in the Secret Service in Boston, which caused him to have a bad academic year. After serving as a sergeant in the Balloon Corps in World War I, he had trouble getting back into

Harvard. When all the facts came to light, Dean Greenough welcomed him back to Harvard – as a senior! After several years as a successful New York lawyer, he was sent to the Italian front as a lieutenant colonel during World War II. He was killed when the jeep in which he was riding ran over a land mine. Soon thereafter, a German officer was captured and he asked about the American colonel who, while a prisoner, had convinced him to surrender his entire outfit to the Allied Forces. It had been Guido Pantaleoni. He's not the only one who was in the war, however. Everyone in the club was in training and in perfect shape. Several members could jump from the floor to the fireplace mantle and stay there. To do so required superb physical condition, enough alcohol to get up the courage, but not enough to destroy the equilibrium. We at the Gas House have always been good at drawing the line.

Another war hero was Second Lieutenant Sherrod Skinner '51, a Marine who died in the Korean War. Skinner and a few others were isolated and surrounded in their bunker. After calling in artillery to keep the enemy away his radio equipment was damaged beyond repair. Undaunted by the intense enemy barrage, he twice left the protection of the bunker for more ammunition and grenades. Though painfully wounded on both occasions, he refused medical attention to direct their final defense as the position was overrun. Realizing that they had no chance, he directed the men to feign death as the enemy came through. After surviving an enemy walkthrough, a grenade was thrown between him and two other survivors. Skinner instinctively threw himself on the grenade, absorbing the fatal blow and saving his two comrades. For these efforts, Second Lieutenant Skinner was awarded the Medal of Honor.

And even while we kicked ass as patriots and athletes, Gas House boys have always known how to party. During prohibition liquor arrived via bootleggers at night, and two members and the steward would go out to meet them and get the alcohol. You can find where they stored it under the cushions and in the hidden cabinets – even in the basement. There was a lot of room for booze. Then they would take it to the chemists to make sure they were getting actual alcohol, and wouldn't die if they drank it.

Some people just cannot get enough of the club; I am one of those, along with Paul M. Hollister '13, who kept the last few years of his life from being lonely ones by living at 9 Linden Street, where he developed many a close friendship with undergraduates who were young enough to be his grandchildren.

A favorite anecdote and one that will doubtless stir controversy concerns our steward of the early years, a man named Hoedtke. Mr. Hoedtke would, in today's parlance, be known as a certified mixologist. In a more civilized age he was simply famed as a creative bartender. It happened that Manhattans, a vile drink now consumed only by parvenue female alcoholics, were then quite the rage. Hoedtke had to improve on the art. First, he had the glasses well chilled or frozen. Dipping the rims in ice water and then powdered sugar, he created a frosting around the top. The Manhattan ingredients were tossed into a shaker, mixed, and then poured into the glass, taking care not to disturb the rims. A maraschino cherry was floated on the booze and inside the cherry was inserted (instead of a toothpick) a feather from a rooster's hindquarters. The "cocktail" was thus born.

The club has gone through its rough times as well, but has always survived thanks to the loyalty of members to the club. For example, in the late forties the club almost burned down. Fortunately, there was one student either conscientious enough to be working at 1:30 a.m., or else so far behind in his work that he had to stay up all night to avoid expulsion. The hero, Edward Ayres, '50, smelled smoke and found trash barrels blazing in the kitchen. Ayres raced throughout the club looking for a fire extinguisher; finding none he came back to the kitchen to fight the blaze as best he could. There, next to the raging barrels, were not one but two fire extinguishers. The club was saved and John Alessi had his worst mess ever.

John Alessi probably had more stories to tell about the club than any other person. Just never let this happen to you:

“One morning in 1930, one of my assistants had gone to clean the washroom, off the main hall. He came rushing to me, wondering if anyone had scalped a small animal, as there was blood and hair all over the washroom. Upon entering the living room we were stunned to see three bald-headed members. Mr. Ticknor, Mr. Stillman, and Mr. Kane had decided to shave each other's hair off in an odd moment, the night before. The results were that they wore skull caps to classes for the next three months.”

We have always been good at mischief as well, but if you pull something like this you will never be able to come back again:

Over the gaming table in the living room there hung an immense Tiffany lamp. Bill Ticknor, '30, a famed Walter Camp All-American, sent a perfect spiral (though badly aimed) the length of the living room. Lacking a football, Ticknor was using a large log from the fireplace. Unfortunately, it meant goodbye to a Tiffany lamp that today would sell at Sotheby's for more than it cost to build the whole clubhouse in 1903.

However, if you pull something like this, you will be a true Delphic hero:

The beautiful and ancient Roman sarcophagus in the garden stood once in the Brookline gardens of the legendary Mrs. Jack Gardner. The Brookline house passed to her nephew, a Gas House man, and it was later sold when two great-nephews were members of the club. Before the passing, the sarcophagus was “liberated” and brought to the Gas House garden. It so happened a few of the members were in deep trouble with the Roman History course that they had taken in the mistaken belief that it was a gut. The curmudgeonly professor of the course was invited to a Lucullan banquet in honor of the sarcophagus, a dinner timed to be just before the final examination. No member of the club received a grade below a B.

George Santayana '86 -- philosopher, poet, novelist, essayist -- wrote more about "The Gas", and has had more written about him in connection with the club, than any other member. Surprisingly, he was an honorary member, the first recorded, having been elected a few years after he graduated while he was a philosophy instructor at Harvard. Santayana contributed much to Delphic Club lore through his early poetry:

A selection:

*"I am named Pallas by the gods on high,
Goddess of wisdom and the bright blue eye,
My Chosen dwelling mortal men among
Is called the Gashouse is the vulgar tongue.*

*Through a few swells, redeemed from fast New York
The festive bottle may at times uncork,
Yet in my halls, throughout the studious year
Little but milk is drunk and ginger beer,*

*The sound of ribald jest is seldom heard
And high theology's the theme preferred.
The members of the faculty come here,
To learn true virtue from the youths I rear.*

*Beside my chaste young band the glory fades
Of Ursula's eleven thousand maids,
For since the gas first in the Gashouse burnt,
Here all were virgins, except those who weren't."*

We even have some "legends in their own time" in the club. Jack Lemmon was a member, and lost his virginity in the squash court. Matt Damon wrote "Good Will Hunting" in the small library (and it's important this be a key point on any good club tour) before he withdrew from the university. When *Good Will Hunting* won the Oscar for Best Screenplay, Damon was onstage to accept it. The presenter of the statue was Jack Lemmon.

Michel De Carvalho married the heir to the Heineken fortune and was in "Lawrence of Arabia" as a child. The head of a sect of Islam, the Ismailis, was a member of the club. His current title is His Royal Highness the Aga Khan.

The Delphic Club, the Gas House, "The Gas", Club Delphique – whatever you want to call it, has been, and always will be, the verriest, merriest chapter of the glorious Delta Phi.