

Collecting Fraternities

It's all Greek to me! And if you don't happen to be fluent in Greek, you're going to be at a distinct disadvantage in this category....well, maybe it's not quite as bad as all that. You definitely will need to acquaint yourself with the Greek alphabet, though, if you're going to make heads or tails of Fraternity covers.

Why are American fraternities named with Greek letters, anyway? It's not clear why, but, since the Greeks have always been recognized as the "brains" of the Ancient World, it's likely that this association with academia was carried over to these collegiate associations. After all, the Ancient Greeks could boast of having invented Drama, Geography, History, and a number of hard core sciences. They were the first people to be really curious about the world around them, and they weren't satisfied with the standard answers given by shamans, priests, and other religious specialists. Their resulting contributions in Philosophy, Mathematics, Astronomy, Physics, Literature and the like are legend. So, perhaps it's not so unlikely that students in a different time, in a different part of the world, and in a different culture would want to share in that awesome aura. Thus, fraternities are usually named by two or three Greek letters and are also known as "Greek-Letter Societies." Women's Greek-Letter Societies are commonly called "sororities."

The oldest American fraternity is Phi Beta Kappa, founded in 1776 at William & Mary College, Williamsburg, VA. It soon became a scholarship honor society. After 1830, the literary societies which existed in many colleges were slowly supplanted by fraternities modeled on the three established at Union College (1825-1827).

After 1870, many professional and honorary fraternities were established to give recognition to scholarship in various fields. Some fraternities have only one local organization, or chapter; others are nationally organized with chapters on a variety of different campuses.

If you have hopes of getting fraternity covers from all colleges, or even from all major colleges, you can forget it. Fraternities are actually forbidden at some colleges because, on a philosophical level, they represent secret societies, and, on a practical level, because of the defects in the fraternity system in general. Over the years, for example, there have been a number of notable fraternity scandals involving cheating, hazing initiations, and even deaths.

How many covers are out there? I couldn't even begin to give you a close estimate. I have some 120 in my own collection, so that would seem to indicate that this is a small category rather than a major one, such as Holiday Inns or Cameos. The oldest Fraternity cover I've run across is from the 1930s, but there should be earlier ones, in light of the long history of these organizations.

Although there are a variety of sizes to be seen, almost all of these covers are 20-strikes, and, admittedly, rather plain-looking. Collectors hoping to organize these covers by campus quickly find that this is impossible since few actually carry specific campus identification. That basically leaves only one logical alternative: organizing alphabetically ("Alpha Chi Omega," for example, coming before "Phi Alpha Delta").

There are a number of conjunctives to be found: Christmas covers, a few dated, and so forth, but the big one is Crests. All, or most fraternities has official crests, although they may not be shown on every cover. Thus, many fraternity covers sport very officious-looking crests, to the delight of crest collectors!