



ON TAP: Selection to senior honor societies unique to Rochester—the Keidaeans (at left, members of the 1935 class) and the Marsiens (members from 1958)—is based on scholastic achievement and participation in cocurricular programs.

Ask the Archivist: What's So Special about Special K(eidaeans)?

A question for Melissa Mead, the John M. and Barbara Keil University Archivist and Rochester Collections Librarian.

Our son was in a group called the Keidaeans. Is there still such an organization and, if not, what was it, who was in it and why, and what did it do? —Janet Heslink, parent of Nathan Heslink '99

“[The] purposes of the Keidaeans shall be: to promote mutual cordial relations among college groups, between students and faculty . . . to serve as a forum of debate, and a clearing house for suggestions for the improvement of activities of the University. . . .”

In 1999, the year your son was a Keidaeans, the group celebrated its 75th anniversary. This unique-to-Rochester senior honorary society was established by five students and two faculty members in 1924, and the group still convenes regularly to meet with University administration and staff and to learn more about the workings of the University.

According to their records in the University Archives, the name is based on the word “Kehte,” meaning “chief” or “greatest” in Algonquian. It was chosen to honor the Native American heritage of the Rochester area, and the Keidaeans frequently went camping in Letchworth Park.

One year after the Keidaeans was founded at the College for Men, the College for Women created its own senior honorary society, the Marsiens. Members could be identified by a small pin: a “K” placed athwart an arrow, or a gold sword representing the Roman god Mars.

The roster and meeting schedules of both groups were published in student newspapers and yearbooks, although the Keidaeans’ original constitution states that the “machinery of its government, its discussions . . . and rites remain within the confidence of its members.” Those rites have been a frequent subject for *Campus-Times* articles that describe envelopes slipped under dorm room doors with instructions to gather at midnight on the Eastman Quadrangle, and the warning, “Show this to no one.”

Selection for the group—known as tapping—is based on participation in cocurricular activities and scholastic achievement. In the early years, there was a point system that was so un-secret that the April 28, 1924, *Campus* newspaper outlined the number of points awarded to

those elected by their peers as editors and writers of student publications, as leaders in a fraternity or club, to student managers of sports teams, to athletes earning varsity letters, etc.

Each May, a ceremony is held at Witmer House, the official residence of the University president, and the new members add their names to the Keidaeans scroll: unrolled, it contains over 40 feet of signatures. Most recently, the group has included both River Campus and Eastman School of Music students; one additional student is selected by the student members as a “Keidaeans’ Keidaeans.” Two honorary Keidaeans from the University’s faculty and staff are selected by the students to act as advisors.

The records of the Keidaeans (sadly, the Archives lack files for the Marsiens) show that the group acted as a sounding board between the administration and undergraduates on a wide variety of topics, including alcohol use, parking, and the academic schedule. As the Students’ Association grew stronger as a governing body, the influence of the Keidaeans appears to have waned.

In the late 1960s, many “establishment-focused” student groups were dissolved. University traditions seemed irrelevant compared to events occurring beyond the Genesee. Membership in Keidaeans and Marsiens dropped significantly, but the scroll shows no complete gap for any year except 1946. With the Class of 1972, the two groups merged.

Membership is intended to honor leadership and dedication to the University and to nurture an ongoing connection to the institution. Since the inception of the two societies, many alumni who chaired the University’s Board of Trustees have been Keidaeans or Marsiens: Joe Wilson ’31, Mercer Brugler ’25, Don Gaudion ’36, Virginia Dwyer ’43, Bob Goergen ’50, Bob Witmer ’59, and Ed Hajim ’58.

Need History?

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