



# THE LEGEND OF THE ALPHA THETA BELL



## A tale of West Virginia days gone by.

by William R. Mitchell (West Virginia, Alpha Theta '60)

### Founders Day 2007 – Alpha Theta Chapter (West Virginia University)

**W**hat a great Founders Day we had this year, the 139th anniversary of the Founding of Pi Kappa Alpha at 47 West Range, University of Virginia, Sunday Evening, March 1st, 1868. "For the establishment of friendship on a firmer and more lasting basis...." About 35 Alpha Theta Pikes were in attendance "to promote brotherly love and kind feeling," just as purposed 139 years ago. At least 15 alumni and over 20 from the undergraduate chapter were in attendance. The afternoon TV broadcast of the WVU-Cincinnati game turned out to be rather unexciting, as the Mounties ran away with it from the very first. But this just added to the fellowship, giving more opportunity for conversation, and for the actives, pledges and alums to really get to know each other. The alumni were very impressed with the fine group of young men now guarding the flame of Pi Kappa Alpha and of Alpha Theta at WVU. Very enthusiastic. Very bright. And very motivated to make and keep PiKA #1 at WVU.

### The Bell

**T**he highlight of Founders Day was undoubtedly the recounting of the mysterious origins of the Alpha Theta PiKA Bell by Brother Clyde Robert Cattrell '39. For the larger audience of PiKA International, let me put things in context by telling you a bit about the large, pure brass locomotive bell which is legendary on the WVU campus. The "PiKA Bell", as it is known at WVU, attended nearly every home football game for over 50 years, clanging out its victory cheers for each Mountaineer advance, and then leading a spontaneous "Victory Parade" for major wins down four blocks of High Street, then a block east, and then four blocks north on Spruce, and back to the dorms where the throng would break up and return home. The bell announced and led the Friday night pre-game celebration, held with a huge bonfire on the ROTC armory drill field directly across the street from the main campus dorms, women's hall and men's hall, and within a couple of blocks most of the sorority and fraternity houses. The Bell, by taking a couple of turns past the dorms and Greek houses, could spark a spontaneous gathering of thousands within minutes.

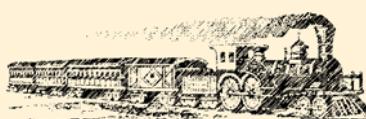
Indeed the PiKA Bell is powerful and is a legendary symbol of West Virginia University spirit, treasured not just by Pikes, but by a worldwide community of WVU alumni and by the citizens of Morgantown. This is attested to by John Samsell, a columnist in the *Morgantown Dominion Post*, who makes frequent nostalgic references to the Bell in his column, particularly during football season. Mr. Samsell is not a Pike. He is simply expressing the sincere appreciation of the thousands of WVU alumni and the citizenry of Morgantown who treasure the proud tradition of the PiKA Bell. Sadly, the bell has been missing from the campus for the past few years – stolen from the house during the chapter's absence. Both the actives and the alumni are seeking aggressively to return the Bell to its traditional role by this fall.

That said, you understand how excited we are to have Bob Cattrell's story, which had been lost from the memory of all for at least a couple of decades.

### A Brother's Tale

**E**ighty-six years young, Brother Bob told the tale as only a master story teller could, but all the while preserving the secret of the identity of the trio who actually obtained the Bell from a mysterious individual called "Trane".

The story begins at Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh. Brother Bob and Brother Art Weeks '38 paid a visit there while in town to buy shoes at a place known to be the best bargain for the fashionable wingtips of the day. The Carnegie Pike chapter had a large brass locomotive bell in the house. They used it for their dinner bell. Bob and Art were immediately seized by a fit of longing for just such a bell for Alpha Theta. Upon returning to Alpha Theta and telling their story of the Carnegie Pikes' bell, one of their brothers told them of a place where he believed such a bell might be obtained. An expeditionary force of six was soon formed, and they took off in a '36 Packard. For those who don't recall, this was the Cadillac of its day.



Bob says that he drove, and with him were Bill Phelps '35, Paul Dan Williams '38, Mike Montesinos '39, Dick Unbehaun '39, and a sixth whose name is being researched and will be writ "down in our book of memory". Well, sad for our crew, the expedition that night proved fruitless. But the idea did not perish. A few nights later, three of the original six sallied forth once again.

It was a cold, foggy, March night not long after Founders Day in 1940, when these three young men drove through pitch blackness and fog, this time in a capacious '39 Plymouth business coupe.

They took blankets to wrap the bell, rope, and two huge wrenches suited to their quest. They parked at their destination, made their way through the darkness, and succeeded, not without some difficulty, in acquiring their bell from one known simply as "Trane".

The temperature had dropped significantly since the trip down, and the return trip was through an ice storm. Two had to get out and push the trusty Plymouth over the highest hill (and in West 'By Gosh Virginia a "hill" is a small mountain), but they finally arrived at the chapter house, then located at 445 North Spruce Street, at about 2:30 a.m., where the entire chapter celebrated the bell, clanging it loudly, until cooler heads prevailed and they desisted before neighbors summoned Morgantown's finest.

Brother Bob has at least a couple of sequels to this tale, but they shall await another day. What shall remain forever sacred, never revealed to other than Alpha Theta initiates, never spoken above a whisper, are the names of the Noble Three who purchased the Bell. These and other mysteries shall remain buried, known only to the Loyal Order of The Keepers of The Bell of Alpha Theta.

### The Evening Concludes

**A**nd this, my brothers, has been the tale of the Bell, told by Brother C. Robert Cattrell at the Alpha Theta Founders Day Dinner, celebrated on March 3rd, 2007. Kudos and credit to Brother Jerry Hamill '57 who led the writer to Brother Bob and this wonderful contribution to the history of Alpha Theta, and many thanks to legacy initiate William R. Cattrell '67, Bob's son, for bringing his father to Founders Day so Bob could share his story. Many thanks also to Brother Mike Shook '77, who made all the arrangements.