

# The Library of Congress Fraternity Ritual Myth

by Eric L. Rousey, Kappa Alpha Order  
University of Kentucky

## The Great Library of Congress Fraternity Legend

That's right, almost every Greek out there has heard a variation of this one. All of the secret fraternity/sorority rituals are in the Library of Congress, open for perusing, right? Well, almost all of them... all of them except *yours*. Your fraternity's ritual was removed by a kind alumnus in a high place, wasn't it? Well, hopefully this information will save you a trip to Washington.

## Introduction to the Myth -- The Awful Truth

Almost every Greek out there has heard a variation of this one. I myself heard it from my fraternity big brother. All of the secret fraternity rituals are available in the Library of Congress, he told me, "...except for KA's. J. Edgar Hoover took ours out." Maybe you heard a slightly different version. Maybe you heard that the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) "collected" fraternity rituals in the 50's as part of it's anti-communist, anti-secrecy investigations. Or maybe you heard that Joseph McCarthy himself made fraternities turn their rituals over. Or maybe you heard that this took place in investigations during World War One. Or maybe you heard that this was done for copyright protection purposes.

Anyway, you probably heard that your ritual is the only one not in the collection. Well, here's the sad news: **The Library of Congress does not have secret college fraternity rituals in it's collection!**

[insert shocking music here]

The Library of Congress has denied this repeatedly to no avail. It keeps popping up with the tenacity of the "sick little boy wants postcards" legend.

Nor, sadly, is any variation of this urban legend true. The HUAC investigations did not "collect" fraternity rituals. HUAC harassment was restricted almost exclusively to leftist organizations, and fraternities are generally considered very conservative organizations (not to mention that most of the HUAC members were fraternity men themselves and politicians who weren't about to take the political backlash from such an unwarranted seizure of conservative organizations' esoteric documents). Nor did J. Edgar Hoover remove KA's ritual from the collection. Nor did Harry Truman remove  $\Lambda$ XA's. Nor did Ronald Regan remove TKE's, and so on... Virtually every fraternity has heard a variation of this myth (with THEIR ritual being the one rescued by so-and-so). Many sororities apparently have heard variations as well, though the myth seems to be more prevalent among male fraternities.

There HAVE been at least two incidents where fraternities turned over rituals or esoteric information to a central body or person. In 1924, the National Interfraternity Conference's Committee on Fraternity Ideals sent out a confidential questionnaire to member fraternities asking specific questions about their rituals. And, for his 1979 Ph.D. dissertation, Bobby McMinn sent out requests to 67 fraternities for copies of their rituals, agreeing to provide anonymity for participating fraternities. McMinn got 22 rituals in response and used them as source material for an interesting content analysis.

## Origins of the Myth

The origin of the LOC-Rituals urban legend is, like most legends, cloudy. The origins of the legend might stem from the Copyright Act of 1870, and the subsequent practice of depositing materials in the Library of Congress for copyright protection. This law, combined with the resulting lore that built up around the "biggest library in the United States," might have led many to conclude that the Library of Congress has every book known to exist in its collection. For Greeks, the conclusion follows that, since their rituals are indeed books, and the Library of Congress has in its collection all books known to exist, then... Of course, the LOC doesn't contain all the books known to exist, only a very large collection.

The legend may actually go back to another similar legend about the Ku Klux Klan. This legend has it that the KKK deposited their secret ritual [the Kloran?] in the Library of Congress to obtain copyright protection, not realizing that the ritual would then be available to the general public. This legend was most recently repeated in Richard Shenkman and Kurt Reiger's *One Night Stands with American History* (New York: Quill, 1982). Citing an earlier rendition of the legend in Lawrence Greene's *The Era of Wonderful Nonsense* (Indianapolis: Bobbs/Merrill, 1939) the authors claim that in 1917:

*...Simmons [the KKK Imperial Wizard] decided that a book as important as the Kloran should be officially recognized, so he applied to Washington for a copyright. Like any author, he forwarded one dollar and two copies of the book to the Register of Copyrights. And from that time forth The Book of the Invisible Empire was available to anyone who asked for it in the Library of Congress. (p.206)*

In *The Era of Wonderful Nonsense*, the story is attributed to one of a series of articles on the KKK appearing in September, 1921 in the *New York World*. The author quotes this somewhat more detailed version of the story from the *World*:

*And thereupon, having so decreed [that the Kloran was to be kept secret and inviolate], "Emperor" Simmons, on January 12, 1917, made application in Washington for copyright on his book, which was granted after he had sent one dollar and two complete copies of the Kloran to the Register of Copyrights, as required by law. And ever since, also in strict compliance with the law, The Book of the Invisible Empire has been available to all comers in the reading room of the Library of Congress, through the card-index system, just as any other book copyrighted in the United States. (p.87)*

Obviously, the significance of this story for us is that it is so clearly related to the Library of Congress rituals legend. Consider, for example, some of the common elements of Library of Congress legend variations that are also present in the KKK story:

- The secret fraternal ritual
- Open availability to the public
- The Library of Congress
- Mention of the book being listed in the card catalog

The veracity of this long-standing KKK legend is unclear. But it might well prove to be a false urban legend itself, spread around to disparage the intelligence of KKK leaders. A search of the Library of Congress catalogs doesn't show any texts like the one described. There is no *The Book of the Invisible Empire* in the catalog. All texts in the catalog about the KKK called *The Invisible Empire* are apparently just histories. There is a book in the collection called the *Kloran*, but it's from 1968 not 1916. And the only apparent KKK ritual book is called *The Terrible Mysteries of the Ku Klux Klan* and is a 1970 reprint of a book originally published in 1868.

## Myth Variations

Here's a variation incorporating the "Red Scare" motif:

*Regarding the rituals being located in the Library of Congress. Ok here's the bottom line. In the early 1950's during the Red Scare several of the movers and shakers of the era felt that some college organizations could possibly harbor pro-commie sentiments. An act of Congress required all NIC and PHC Greek letter organizations submit final copies of their secret rituals and other proceedings to the Library of Congress for examination. It's hard to be partial. But Lambda Chi Alpha NEVER had its ritual examined nor deposited in the Library of Congress at any time (I am a Chopper in case you're wondering). Current President and newly honorarily-initiated brother Harry S. Truman from Missouri assured Congress that **LCA** was not pro-Ruskie, thus they didn't need to see our ritual. At this time it is true that several politicians over the years have "borrowed" their rituals from the Library of Congress on an extended basis. ; ) LCA's was never submitted ever.*

Here's another AXA variation:

*...when that certain bill was introduced, it just so happened that Harry Truman was President. Now the significance of his Presidency was that he was a brother of Lambda Chi Alpha. And he didn't allow our Ritual to be entered into the Library of Congress. He assured everyone that our Ritual was nothing to be feared, and nothing bad ever happened in it. This all transpired around the Anti-Communist era. So, in conclusion, not ALL Rituals are in the Library of Congress, at least not Lambda Chi's. Just a tid-bit of information for you.*

Here's a TKE variation:

*You know, as wrong as all this posting of Sigma Chi secrets is, these are really available to anyone. With the exception of my fraternity, **TKE**, all fraternity ritual books and the like are on file at the Library of Congress. The reason why **TKE**'s book is not on file is President Reagan, a Teke, borrowed the book from the Library of Congress and simply didn't return it. At least Reagan did SOMETHING right while he was in the White House...*

Here are a couple of Kappa Alpha Order variations:

*All national greek organizations present in the fifties, with the exception of KA, have their ritual under lock and key in the library of congress. It's in the card catalog.*

*...our ritual is not in the LOC for one very important reason. According to my information, J.Edgar Hoover kept ours from being logged and Harry S. Truman kept Lambda Chi Alpha's from being logged as well. That was the last time there was a large push against secrecy in fraternities at the same time that there were fraternity members in these important positions.*

Here's a FIJI variation claiming that the "ritual roundup" goes all the way back to WW I. Note that in this variation, the rituals are not in the LOC but in the Pentagon!

*Interestingly enough, all fraternity rituals \*are\* on file with the federal government, as a result of all "secret societies" being required to divulge all their secrets during World War I, the justification being to combat foreign espionage. At least, this is how I learned my fraternity history. So, unless your fraternity was founded after 1918 (or unless your fraternity had a brother serving as Secretary of War at the time, as did the FIJIs \*grin\*), your rituals are on file somewhere deep within the*

*bowels of the Pentagon. Or, probably more precisely, deep within the bowels of Fort Meade, Maryland, with the National Security Agency.*

Here's another variation that abandons the Library of Congress, in favor of the University of Illinois:

*Your ritual may not be in the "bowels of Ft. Meade", but there is a 1938 copy in the U of Illinois library archives. Along with about a dozen others.*

Here's another Kappa Alpha Order variation claiming that the rituals are not only in the LOC, but are even cataloged:

*On one of my numerous trips to Washington to do research, I am a history major, I asked one of the librarians at the LOC about fraternity rituals. I had heard the rumors before, and as he and I had been working together on my research project for a couple of weeks (we had become good friends) he looked up in their computer the name of some Greek organizations. SAE, Zeta Psi, and so forth and so on. I didn't even think about lambda Chi, but that logic seems sound. He told me that the ritual information was looked up in the basement somewhere and it would almost take an act of congress to gain access. Apparently HUAC, offered secrecy in the event of the clearing of fraternities. JEH was a KA and our ritual was not on the list, so I am assuming that he intercepted the book if it was turned over, or never asked for it in the first place. I guess that is the benefit of having a brother in a power position.*

## **The Official Position of the Library of Congress**

At the behest of a number of Greeks, I recently contacted the Library of Congress about the "secret ritual" issue. When I got through to general information they routed me to the reading room, where a kind lady cut me off before I could even finish my question, "...I already know what you're going to ask. It's not true. It's just a myth. We get this a lot."

She kindly agreed to send me a form letter that they send to everyone who writes in (or comes in) wanting to know where they can find all the fraternity rituals (except theirs of course). What they sent me was a very politely worded response indicating that they don't have secret college rituals in their collection.

So here it is [and before a bunch of you read the National Archives part and start harassing THEM about sealed rituals, note that, as I said earlier, HUAC and McCarthy NEVER investigated college fraternities. You can verify this in any good historical text on McCarthy or the HUAC and its activities (I'll probably provide a good bibliography of some of them here in the near future)]:

### **GREEK LETTER SOCIETIES: PUBLICATIONS OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS**

*The Library of Congress receives frequent inquiries concerning college fraternity and sorority publications, particularly those detailing secret initiation rites. The Library's general collections do not include any publications which detail secret initiation rites for specific fraternities. The rumor that a collection of documents detailing specific initiation rites exists at the Library of Congress stems from the belief that such publications were requested by either the House Committee on Un-American Activities or by Senator Joseph McCarthy's Subcommittee of the Senate Government Operations Committee in the 1950's. We have been unable to identify any information to support this in the indexes to Congressional hearings or the Congressional Record. Unpublished materials from*

*these committees are in the custody of the National Archives and Records Administration and are still sealed. No checklist or indexes exist for these documents.*

*The Library of Congress does have some fraternity and sorority publications which we receive through gifts, copyright deposit, and purchase. Greek letter society publications most commonly found in the Library of Congress collections include alumni directories, constitutions and by-laws, histories, song books, and periodical publications. These publications are recorded in the Library of Congress card catalog (pre-1980) or computer catalog (post-1968) under the name of the organization (e.g. Phi Kappa Theta, Delta Delta Delta) or under the broader subject heading "GREEK LETTER SOCIETIES." General information on initiations may be found by searching under the subject heading "INITIATIONS (INTO TRADES, SOCIETIES, ETC.)."*

*The Library of Congress owns published editions of Baird's Manual of American College Fraternities (call no. LJ31.B2). This reference work contains information on men's and women's college fraternities and sororities, professional fraternities, honor societies, recognition societies, and inactive Greek letter societies. Part I contains a general discussion of the origins and evolution of the college fraternity altars, rituals, and accouterments. Part II lists fraternities by college campus. Parts III-VI describe individual fraternal organizations, including brief discussions of history, government, traditions and insignia, publications, funds and philanthropies, headquarters and chapters.*

*The New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, New York, New York 10018, also maintains an extensive collection of Greek Letter Society publications, including the William R. Baird collection which was deposited in 1921. The most notable resources of this collection are the nearly complete sets of periodicals published by individual fraternities and sororities. Further information on college fraternities may be obtained from the National Interfraternity Conference, 3901 W. 86th Street, Suite 390, Indianapolis, Indiana, 46268.*

*August 1989*