



International Spirit of Zinck's Night ~ Thursday, October 15, 2009

About Zinck's and the Others

by Charles H. Blood '88

I have been requested as a native Ithaca alumnus to say something about Zinck's restaurant, so well remembered by many of the older Cornell alumni.

To our prohibition friends who may consider it bad form to recall those "bad pre-Volstead days" or to pay a mead of praise to a former "saloon keeper" I can say that this brief article is only designed to depict a phase, and a very small phase, of early student life and it is perhaps after all not improper to remember our foibles as well as our more-to-be-desired qualities. Even our beloved first president in an after dinner gathering was wont to recall, with zest, incidents and escapades connected with his undergraduate days.

The present day student when he hears some alumni reminiscing, and singing "We'll all have drinks at Theodore Zinck's when I get back next fall" wonders what it is all about and is inclined to believe "these old grads are 'has beens' but they think they are having a good time anyway."

It is difficult for the undergraduate of today to visualize the old time University setting when the student population was five hundred instead of five thousand, when there was no Cornell Heights or Cayuga Heights, no Bryant Tract, no dormitories except Cascadilla, almost no residences or rooming houses east of Eddy Street, when the fraternity quarters, the Glee Club and Masque rooms were all located down town, when the athletic activities were conducted in the valley at Percy Field, and when the student life outside of the academic work on the Hill centered in the valley below. True it is that these old grads reminiscing about Zinck's are "has beens" and the Cornell and Ithaca of today is a revelation to many an alumnus who has neglected his opportunities to return to his Alma Mater.

"Theodore's" is but a symbol of the old days when a student knew almost all of his classmates, and the community spirit that characterizes the best of the smaller colleges was a marked characteristic of Cornell. Those were the days when Cornell was supreme on the water, and the students living down town were in more intimate touch with the crews; when bonfires on State and Aurora streets greeted returning crews who had swept the water, and it was hard luck indeed for Ithaca's Volunteer Fire Department if they attempted to check the incipient street conflagration, because the hose lines were often cut by some over-enthusiastic student. Those too were the days when freshman and sophomore class rushes were held on the Fair-grounds and when the annual cider raid at Forest Home was a trip to the country.

With no Drill Hall or Bailey Hall, no Willard Straight, no Schoellkopf Athletic Building, and no fraternities owning their own homes, except perhaps Alpha Delta Phi, located about a third of the way up Buffalo Hill, some gathering place for students in their periods of relaxation was almost inevitable. Theodore Zinck, a corpulent, good-natured, quaint German, not devoid of good business instincts, supplied to an extent the need. He was a good citizen for a man in his line of work,—honest, industrious, with an amusing personality, and he catered almost exclusively to the student trade. His German and Bock beer always drawn from the wood at the right temperature and equal to the Heidelberg and Munich concoction, was his staple and practically the only



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beverage served. He was a friendly and kindly soul, proud of his recently acquired American citizenship, and with a memory for names almost equal to that of Davy Hoy. On one occasion an alumnus came into Zinck's Restaurant and said, "Theodore, I haven't been back in five years and I have made a bet you can't recall me by name." Theodore promptly said, "You lose; you're Sam—and you still owe me \$4.85." It is needless to say that the long standing account was settled then and there.

In so much as "beers" were the chief article of trade, account keeping was easy for Theodore. One beer, price five cents, was represented in Theodore's book by a single mark after the customer's name. After four had thus been marked, the fifth was represented by a single transverse mark and the sixth began a new figure. Students were also in the habit of keeping record of the number of schooners emptied during the course of the evening. Zinck's was usually crowded on any evening in the week, and frequently it was only the early arrivals that were fortunate enough to gain a place at the tables.

In that friendly atmosphere with the singing almost nightly of college songs until Theodore's good night greeting of "Zwelf o'clock, time to glöse up," it is little wonder that Zinck's was for some years a tradition of a sort.

In those early days when a Junior Ball was held downtown in Library Hall and there were no senior societies, no Mummy Club and similar organizations, there were class social clubs: Frieuja for freshmen, Undine for sophomores, Bench and Board for juniors and Mermaid for seniors, and these clubs held their monthly banquets in private dining rooms on the second floor above Zinck's Restaurant, often with a pig roasted whole at either end of the table.

Theodore was scrupulous about the reputation of his place and if at any time the singing was not to his liking it was promptly stopped. On one such occasion when some athletic victory was being celebrated he announced that the next person to start another song would be put out. A subsequent innocent arrival was requested by a mischief making fellow student to start "Far Above Cayuga's Waters" and it was a long time before the new arrival understood why he was conducted to the door. A song about the Kaiser particularly irritated Theodore's German sensibilities, and not infrequently he was purposely irritated because his broken English remonstrances were, to say the least, highly amusing.

Zinck's, however, was by far the best conducted student resort of a semi-convivial nature in the old days, and had others of his occupation been more like him there probably would not have been the necessity or demand for prohibitory laws. It was inevitable of course that on some rare occasions, in those pre-Volstead days with the student community living in the heart of town, the effervescence of undergraduate spirits would exceed the bound of propriety. One citizen not unjustly alleged the impropriety of students on a hot June night attempting to swim in his fountain, and various merchants claimed that their business signs were not designed to decorate students' rooms, but it is reasonably safe to say that the spirits that occasioned these escapades were not the German beer dispensed by Theodore.

Theodore's place but typified in a crude way the desire of students for a community spirit—what Willard Straight expressed in his wish to make Cornell "more human."



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With totally changed conditions inherent in student life at Cornell, with its better equipment and ten fold more students, with its athletic fields, its dormitories, its elaborate fraternity halls and its Willard Straight, one may wonder if this desire for a community spirit is not really fully satisfied and whether a certain individual independence is not more conducive to an academic atmosphere. And yet, when one remembers the real pleasure derived from the general student gatherings of the old days such as happened so frequently at Zinck's, and the traditions which grew up around them, one wonders whether beer is not after all really a necessary concomitant of some of those old traditions; one wonders whether in the new and better Cornell the student singing and social gatherings which created the spirit of loyalty to such a marked degree must be limited to the fraternity houses, to the annual Senior Singing in front of Goldwin Smith, and to occasional athletic rallies in Bailey Hall.

There may be a stimulus to the student of today to help create a community atmosphere and Cornell traditions so important to Cornell's future if he realizes how strong was the Cornell Community spirit in the seventies and eighties when the opportunity to acquire an education was not handed to him on a silver platter, and when "climbing up the high hill" to an eight o'clock or choosing the only other alternative, of riding in a bus drawn by three horses, were the necessary realities of student life. In no sense would I desire to be construed as bemoaning the passing of the old order of things, but with our growth and prosperity there is a danger of there being lost some of the vitalizing influences of the community student life of the early days.