

THE BROTHERHOOD

JOHN CHURCHER'S HISTORY OF THE MOHAWKS CHRONICLES DECADES OF CAMARADERIE

by Kathi Wieser

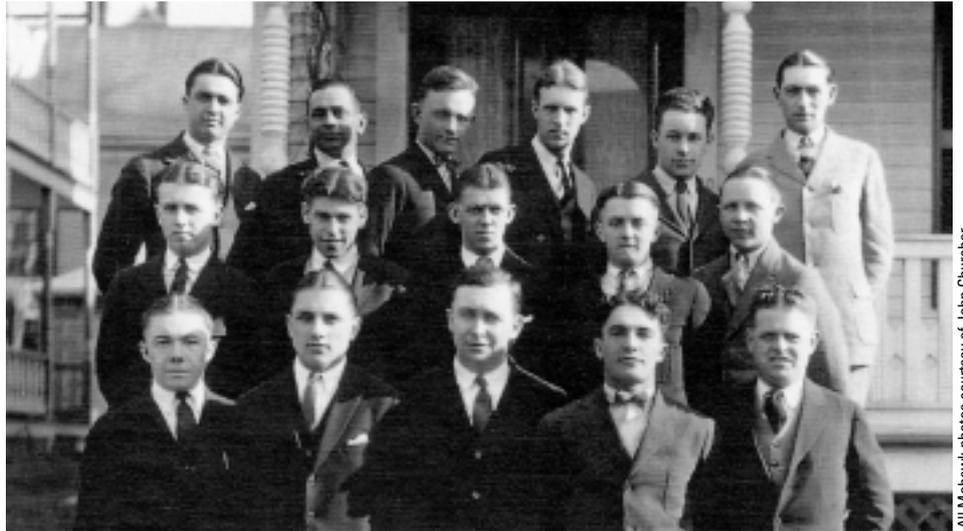
In a boarding house on Myrtle Avenue in Fitchburg, early in the decade that brought us the Charleston and the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald, a group of male students at the Fitchburg Normal School planted the seeds for a new campus organization. By the fall of 1924, this new club had formally evolved into the Mohawks, a fraternal society that continued to grow and prosper throughout the remainder of the 20th century.

Fast forward 66 years. The Fitchburg Normal School was now Fitchburg State College, and John Churcher, a 1987 graduate and U.S. Army veteran, was fighting boredom as he recuperated from knee surgery. Churcher, 41, was an active member of the Mohawks during his years at Fitchburg State College and decided to pass the time by updating a contact list of former Mohawk members.

"Before I knew it, I was organizing old club files, photo albums and various other club information," says Churcher. "And so began 'the book.'"

What started as a simple directory became "Soangetaha: The Mohawk Club at Fitchburg State College," a nearly 300-page history, filled with factual information about the club and Fitchburg State, and anecdotes from members dating back to the original club president. The stories show the parallel growth and interrelationships of the Mohawk club, the institution that became Fitchburg State and the United States as a whole during a turbulent century.

The Mohawks began in 1922, when a group of eight men living at Mrs. Manning's boarding house decided to form a rival club to the Gaveleers, the only men's club officially recognized by the Fitchburg Normal School's administration. Because these men all came from the Berkshire region of Massachusetts, they called themselves the Berkshire Club. After nearly two years of planning and reorganizing — including an important name change, instituted to expand the potential membership base — the Mohawk Club held its first official meeting on Nov. 17, 1924, in what is now Thompson Hall. "It was renamed



All Mohawk photos courtesy of John Churcher

Members of the original founders of the Mohawks Club gather in front of the steps of 120 Myrtle Ave. in Fitchburg. The home was the site of the Berkshire Club, which later became the Mohawks. The photo was taken in 1923 or 1924.

the Mohawk Club, as many members who traveled here from western Massachusetts traveled the Mohawk Trail (Route 2) to get to Fitchburg," says Churcher.

The club's original constitution, signed by its 15 charter members, stated the Mohawks' purpose as "promoting a spirit of cooperation in the school, social welfare in student life, professional betterment, and whatever benefits may be derived from keeping in touch with our graduates..." The members elected Stanley Kruszyna '25 as their first president. Paul J. White '78, who interviewed Kruszyna for Churcher's book in 1992, was struck by the founder's continuing loyalty and interest in the club's members and activities.

"Frequently, Stan would laugh, chuckle, and smile when he spoke about his days at Fitchburg and his memories of the Mohawks," says White in the book. "Most of his classmates have passed on, but he still speaks their names with fondness." Kruszyna himself passed away in 2002 at the age of 97, after meeting with and advising hundreds of Mohawk members who came after him.

It was precisely this kind of camaraderie, passed down through generations of Fitchburg State students, that attracted new Mohawks decade after decade. Building on

the club's original purpose, 'Hawks embraced physical fitness, character development and mentoring as key components of their mission. Through rituals and traditions similar to those of Greek fraternities, the club members developed bonds they carried with them long after graduation. "People I work with are amazed that I still know the whereabouts of some college friends, let alone that I continue to see 20 or so 'Hawks on a very regular basis," says Mark Leonard '73 in the book. "They have pulled me through a failed marriage. They were right beside me at the burial of my father. They helped me celebrate getting married again and the birth of my children. We were together in 1969 and we remain Mohawks and friends." Churcher's book chronicles similar experiences from dozens of former Mohawks.

Churcher made these stories the heart of his book, spending thousands of hours — and thousands of dollars of his personal funds — to research the college's history and speak with more than 200 former Mohawk members. In all, the project took eight years from conception to completion. More than a dozen former 'Hawks are acknowledged in the book for their contributions in research, writing, editing, artwork and layout. The

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Mohawks stand in front of and on top of a Mohawk statue on the Mohawk Trail in Massachusetts.



The Mohawk Club in the late 1960s.

book behind him, he now looks forward to continuing his affiliation with the Mohawks and with Fitchburg State. Although the club became an off-campus organization during the 1990s and has been inactive since 2000, Churcher and many other alumni have talked about reviving the Mohawks as an official Fitchburg State club. Some even express the hope that their children may someday have the opportunity to join them as Mohawks.

In addition to the book, former Mohawks can keep the club's memories alive through the club's Web site, www.mohawkclub.org.

In the meantime, Churcher and his wife, Carolyn Kelley Churcher '87, director of strategic staffing for Genzyme Corporation, are busy raising Jake, 10; Kelley, 6; and Kaitlyn, 3 at their home in Leominster.

Edmund Sullivan '53, former professor and director of the University of Hartford's Museum of American Political Life, wrote in

his foreword to *Soangetaha* that "Mohawks are college professors, school teachers, principals and superintendents, museum curators, clergymen, firefighters, police officers, senior command-level military officers, authors, artists, musicians, historians, mathematicians, media and management specialists, businessmen, even a magician. And, yes, coaches and physical education directors, too. Leaders all." Without a doubt, the hundreds of men who call themselves Mohawks would add "brothers" to that list.

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Editor's note: The Mohawks fraternity no longer operates on the Fitchburg State College campus. ■



Lou Lorenzen

authority for the campus if none of the administrators were on campus. There was only one campus policeman at this time. In our second year, there were three.

Many things were different in the student life section at this time. The Holmes dining room was not there. The dining room for Miller, Palmer, and Herlihy was where the Holmes dining area now is. All meals were served family-style and some students worked at serving and helping with the preparations of the meals. The only choice one had was to eat what was served, go get something somewhere else, or go hungry.

Both of my sons graduated from Fitchburg State College and I managed a wonderful career here in a place quite different from now that still is a beacon to those who want to strive and be successful.

Nothing has really changed. Teachers teach and students learn. Many of those I started with are gone. When I retired in 1998, only four faculty on campus were here longer than me. Irene Miranda, Colin Bourn and Frances Marshall, Patricia Barbaresi, Alice O'Malley (who has since passed away), Robert Zottoli and Donald Freeburg all have retired now. They too started that marvelous day in 1965.

The Saxifrage, "the rock breaker," is the spirit of our school. The identity one has in my area of development: social, professional, athletic or religious is always the sum of the many parts they insist with their intentions. I've enjoyed my trip through time's moment and I am proud to have been allowed to become part of this family of rock breakers.

For those of you who wondered: the beautiful pewter mug given to me on May 25, 1967, from the men of Herlihy Hall with the words, "your sponsor, advisor, friend," I keep in a cherished place. ■