

(Eliza) Jean Nelson Penfield, Iota Chapter, DePauw

Despite the fact she had no Council experience, Jean Nelson Penfield was elected Grand President in 1900 to subdue the storm caused by the expulsion of Beta Beta Chapter at St. Lawrence.

At the time of her election (1900-1902), Jean Penfield was married to New York Judge William Warner Penfield and had lost two infant children, a boy and a girl. Her response to these tragedies was a devotion to serving Kappa and society.

Kappa Kappa Gamma had turned to Jean as one who could help the Fraternity understand its history, development, aims and purpose. Jean Penfield had begun her own Fraternity history nine years before as a sophomore member of Iota Chapter and its delegate to the first Panhellenic Meeting in Boston. There she was called into service to help delegates Grand President Evelyn Wight and Grand Secretary Emily Bright, when the third official delegate didn't arrive.

This valuable experience was complemented in Jean by her extraordinary speaking abilities; at the age of 19, in 1892, she was the first woman to win a prestigious interstate oratorical contest in Minneapolis, an event that drew contestants from 63 colleges representing 10 states and 30,000 students.

During Jean's presidency, Kappa was more public in its civic and social interest than at any other time in its history. The Fraternity was also more fully recognizing the value of alumna membership. Two new chapters (Beta Mu – Colorado and Beta Xi – Texas) were installed, and when the former chapter at St. Lawrence was re-installed as Beta Beta Deuteron in 1915, it appeared that her administration had done much to resolve what had been a controversial time in Kappa history.

Jean enjoyed national prominence as an attorney, parliamentarian, suffragist, songwriter and poet. She helped found the League of Women Voters in several western states and called together the deans of women at numerous colleges to help improve women's dormitory conditions.

In 1946, Jean was one of the first 10 Kappas to receive a 50-year pin and she presented Kappa with Iota friend Minnie Royle Walker's diamond and sapphire fleur-de-lis pin, "to be worn by the President on all suitable occasions." In 1950, Jean received Kappa's Alumnae Achievement Award.

She was the only daughter, of an only daughter, of an only daughter – all Eliza Jeans.