

# The Origin of Alma Mater

## Paul Reinecke's Own Story

"Last summer you asked me to write a short account of how 'Alma Mater' was written. Briefly, it was written for a furlough song while I was walking punishment tours on the area during the fall of 1908. In those days it was the custom for Yearlings to congregate at Battle Monument on pleasant spring evenings between supper and call to quarters to bay at the moon and to sing furlough songs written by members of the class.

"The 'musical' output vied with Tin Pan Alley in quantity—and perhaps quality—for we used the same words 'moon, spoon, days till June—girl, pearl, hearts awirl'—ad nauseam. But like Mark Twain's Capt'n Stormfield, who was sent to a distant cloud bank in Heaven to do his psalm singing, we furloughmen sang our songs at the far-from-quarters Battle Monument.

"One other momentous musical event in the life of a Yearling class in the early 1900's was during the absence of the First Class on its Coast Artillery Trip, when the duty of putting over the Sunday Night Color Line Concert devolved on the Yearlings. Our class naturally decided to make this a great event, and we practiced long and hard. My stunt was to sing 'Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes', but as luck would have it, I was detailed as Corporal of the Guard that night. However, such duty did not present an insurmountable difficulty to a cadet. So while my relief was off post, I went into camp, got into proper uniform (for the Concert) and did my stuff—as I thought quite creditably. In fact we (that is, 1911) agreed the whole Concert was a great success. But the Officer in Charge (then Lieutenant Guy Kent of the Cavalry) also went to the Concert and overheard a sweet young thing in his party make some remark about Cadet Reinecke, who was singing. Said the O. C., 'Oh no, Reinecke can't be singing—he is on guard'. But investigation proved that the O. C. was also correct, theoretically at least, about a member of the guard singing. So I was busted and slugged for 10 tours for deserting the guard—a most heinous military offense, I then learned. And soon began those long Wednesday and Saturday walks without reason, but in this case, not without rhyme.

"While walking, I tried to compose some furlough songs—and soon began to tramp out the cadence of 'Alma Mater', to the tune of 'Treueliebe'—which was an old favorite, and capable of good barber shop harmony for a male quartette. Finally the song was tramped into shape, accepted by the Furlough Song Committee, and printed in our little pamphlet with the 30 or 40 others. The class sang these songs to ourselves during the spring of 1909. But the 'Alma Mater' had its first public appearance at the 1909 Graduation Hop, due to the efforts of the late beloved Kid Everts (leader of the Cadet Glee Club at that time), and the never-late, but equally well liked Johnnie Lee, both of 1909, and who both sang in the double quartette that presented it.

"Thereafter the 'Alma Mater' went the way of all furlough songs: forgotten (we didn't even sing it at our own graduation) until some years after 1911 left the Academy, when Mr. Mayer made his excellent arrangement and used the song as a companion piece to the inspiring and matchless musical and poetic masterpiece 'The Corps'.

"The 'Alma Mater' today is in almost the exact shape as it was when composed. Some English expert improved the line 'May it be said well done' from my original Pennsylvania Dutch 'May we hear said well done'—I had tried to retain the idea of immortality in the lines, and I thought the words sang better my way. But then I never was an outstanding English scholar, and anyhow, poetic English doesn't seem to run in the male side of our family.

"I confess, of course, I'm proud of the fact that the song has lived 30 years, and that there is still something left at the Academy of the class of 1911, even if we didn't rate very high in the estimation of the Tactical Department of that time—for a number of reasons.

"I secretly admit that a perhaps—unmilitary—emotionalism creeps up and down my spine when I hear the Choir and the Cadet Body sing that stirring 'The Corps' and my old 'Alma Mater'. Although I know no cadet could publicly confess such a feeling, the lives of its graduates, living and dead, prove to me that the spirit of those two songs is the real sentiment of The Corps."