If mythological beliefs persisted today, there would be many claims that Eta Kappa Nu sprang full-grown out of the mind of its Founder — as the ancient Greeks claimed that Eros (Cupid) sprang out of the shoulder of Aphrodite. However, it is well known and fully accepted that worthy ideas as well as marvelous machines do not spring; they evolve through painstaking development. Furthermore, to have credited the founder of Eta Kappa Nu with having obtained his idea as a dream while sleeping would be a gross insult. True, Maurice L. Carr was a “dreamer,” as are most men of vision, but his dreams were spirited daydreams and he had the mental and physical faculties and energy to carry them through, and the personality to interest nine others to use their brains and brawn in teamwork — as true researchers and inventors of today.

At the installation of Beta-Delta Chapter in 1937, “ML” said he did not recall definitely when the idea first occurred to him of forming a collegiate society of electrical engineering students, but he thought it occurred sometime during his sophomore year. He said, however, that he knew with certainty that while working for a utility at Springfield, Missouri, during the summer of 1904, he resolved to sound out his classmates on the subject in the fall.

He first approached a particular buddy called “Army” — Charles E. Armstrong. The idea immediately met with Armstrong’s approval and the two decided to broach the subject to other classmates. “Army,” who was born September 30, 1874, was almost three years “ML’s” senior. As Brother Edmund Wheeler has pointed out, “He and ML were considerably older than most of the rest of the group and both had had much practical experience prior to their senior year. Thus the young organization had the advantage of their counsel and advice in both class and fraternal affairs, which all of us were glad to accept.”

Following their first formal meeting on Friday evening, September 23, 1904, young Carr and Armstrong effected a meeting with Milton K. Akers, Edmund B. Wheeler, and Ralph E. Bower, who became sufficiently infected with enthusiasm to agree to a planning session. Sunday morning “ML” and “Army” spent several hours on the steps of the Astronomical Laboratory preparing written, tangible plans — they sought secrecy at this stage.

The five met as agreed in front of University Hall on Sunday afternoon, September 25, 1904, and wandered to a shady spot under a large cottonwood tree in the middle of an Agriculture Department field off the main campus. The tree has since become sentimentally emblematic of the early history of the organization, although it was but a chance choice and sheltered but a few subsequent meetings.

The following five weeks were extremely busy ones. A name and an emblem were chosen, policies of membership had to be defined, membership qualifications and an induction ritual were drafted. Early in this organization period Fred D. Smith, Frank R. Winders, and William T. Burnett joined the original five. Then, on October 28, 1904, at the home of Frank Winders, the first induction meeting was held. Carl K. Brydges and Hibbard S. Greene, both seniors, had by then consented to participate and it is fairly well established that Otto Wiemer became the first formal initiate. (A copy of the first ritual is in the national files.)

Finally, the organization received recognition from the university administration and later meetings were held in a room in the EE building.
All early reports were that Brother Carr's original idea was to make the chief purpose of the society one of employment — a professional union, we would call it today. But in those days such organizations were not thought of. The early publications quite plainly indicate this purpose. However, not many years passed and very few chapters were installed before it was decided that Eta Kappa Nu should be an EE honor society with scholarship as one of its chief qualifications.

Brother Wheeler recalls that scholarship was an important consideration from the first, but not a deciding factor, he, along with Carr and others of the original ten, decided that invitation to membership should depend primarily upon a collective favorable judgment of individual candidates and as to the likelihood of their eventual success in the engineering field.

Thus it was concluded that some classmates would not be considered eligible regardless of their scholastic rating and the matter of scholarship qualification for membership was temporarily deferred. In short, the founders were looking for future leaders of the profession!

With those basic ideals the organization was launched. The seal and plate for membership certificates were made up early in 1905 and the certificates were delivered in time for commencement. While HKN was strictly a "local" when organized, the foundations of a "national" were so strong that when the chapter assembled a first convention prior to the 1905 graduating exercises a full list of "national" officers was elected from the departing class.

The formation of a "ghost national" on the part of the founding members was more than a sign of wishful thinking because groups of EE's in Midwestern schools soon heard of the society and petitioned for a chapter. The first new chapter was installed at Purdue University in 1906. But that organization "went on the rocks" quite early. It appears that our early members, being young, did not fully understand the workings of college administrations and had not obtained prior approval of the Purdue officialdom. The President of Purdue required that the charter be withdrawn, which was done. But those already inducted were continued as members of Eta Chapter (a chapter-at-large). In 1913, the Purdue EE administration requested a charter for a chapter on its campus and Beta was reinstated.

Gamma Chapter was installed at Ohio State University in 1907, two more, Delta at Armour Institute of Technology (now Illinois Institute of Technology) and Epsilon at Pennsylvania State College in 1909. Chapters at Case School of Applied Science (now Case Institute of Technology) and at University of Wisconsin were added in 1910. By then the national characteristics of Eta Kappa Nu were established. Still, growth was not phenomenal and continued at an average of but one chapter a year to 1916.

Scholastic standards observed soon after the founding of Eta Kappa Nu were memorialized in a mild statement written into the Constitution during the Convention of 1913. This set definite numerical limits to the proportion of each EE class that could be elected and required that the by-laws of each chapter must specify definite scholarship standards subject to approval by the National Executive Council. In general, these standards were specified in grade points. Then, during the latter part of the 1930's, our national officers recommended that each college chapter set the upper fourth of the junior EE class as eligible for membership. This was not made mandatory until 1947, when the requirement of such rating was written into our Constitution at the recommendation of the Association of College Honor Societies, of which HKN had become a member.

During this period several alumni chapters were established and The Bridge began publication to act as a vehicle of communication between students and alumni. In fact, it was the idea of the founders, carried through to this day, that Eta Kappa Nu should be more than a campus organization — a man is a member of a campus chapter at most for two years; but he is an alumnus for the remainder of his life!