His background would seem to be an unlikely start for a lifetime interest in the problems of the not-so-well off, but Hormel did not fit comfortably into his background. The grandson of the founder of the giant Geo. A. Hormel & Co. meat packing and meat products company, James grew up in Austin, Minnesota where the company is based. He did not like growing up in a small community where he could not avoid being different and the focus of attention, at a time when, like all small boys, he needed to be just one of the crowd.

"It was impossible for me to get that in a community where the company was essentially the principal employer," he said.

At the age of thirteen he was sent to a boys' boarding school in North Carolina, but this experience was no more satisfying. Here the student body was so homogeneous, almost all coming from wealthy families in the Midwest and South, that James felt he did not get a very good exposure to the realities of the world. He also felt uncomfortable with the prevailing attitude at the school, an air of condescension of the patrician students to the plebian world around them.

Hormel made a shaky start to his college career. He flunked out of Princeton after a wonderful year of doing nothing that vaguely resembled studying. A smile lit up his face at the memory. He finally settled down at Swarthmore and majored in history. On graduation, Hormel was not sure what to do next. He decided on law school with the expectation that a legal background would be useful in whatever he chose to do. One thing he was sure of and that was that he would not be returning to the family business. Although he later served on its board of directors for fifteen years, he has never played an active part in the firm. At the Law School he was especially interested in areas of the law involving notions of equity and constitutional issues, but found on graduation that law firms in the late 1950s were not actively engaged in these issues. He struggled with conventional law practice in Chicago for a few years, mostly in the fields of insurance defense, corporate practice, and the planning and execution of estates, but these did not hold particular interest for him. When the opportunity arose to return to the Law School as Dean of Students, he leapt at the chance, and never thereafter returned to the practice of law.

As Dean of Students at the Law School, Hormel succeeded Jo Desha Lucas, who wanted to devote his full attention to teaching. Whereas Lucas had held joint teaching and administrative posts, Hormel was full-time Dean of Students.

"The Law School was going through changes, particularly with respect to admissions. It was getting many more applications than before and they required a great deal more attention. It was quite a challenge at first. I was very young and had no administrative experience. It was all on-the-job training. Fortunately, Jo was here to help and Dean Edward Levi, during his last year as Dean, was a wonderful person to work with. His assistance was invaluable." Hormel settled in eagerly to his new post. "It was to me enormously exciting and rewarding to be a part of the University community. We moved back to Hyde Park (from Winnetka). I could walk to work. There were all kinds of stimulating people to be with and activities to be involved in."

The last few years of James Hormel’s appointment as Dean of Students saw the beginnings of student unrest and a time of tension.

"It was increasingly difficult to be a part of the administration at a time when students were focusing on problems that led to conflict between students and the administration," he said. He feels that those on the University side were not necessarily unsympathetic with some of the students' causes. However, twenty years ago there were notions of responsibility, based on the old ideas of in loco parentis and these clouded the issues.

Hormel found it increasingly hard to represent the administration's point of view. In some instances he felt more aligned to the students than to the official line. He was also distracted at this time by personal problems and eventually decided that upheavals in his private life and his work as well were too much to cope with. He resigned from his post in 1967.

In 1968 Hormel attended a meeting of about seven hundred people who were enormously dissatisfied with the chaos and violence of the Democratic Party’s convention in Chicago. They wanted to try to form an alternative vehicle for Senator Eugene McCarthy to get on the ballot. Hormel was one of a small group selected to be the nucleus. Later, when it became clear that McCarthy was not interested in their efforts, the group decided to form an