

From the Archives

Homecoming traditions abound

By Kevin Thorie, University Archivist

Homecoming, one of the oldest and happiest traditions at Stout, can trace its ancestry back to the annual Night Shirt Parade. The parade was usually held on a Friday night prior to the year's most important football game. Students would dress in their nightshirt (*later they could also wear costumes*) and parade around the campus and downtown Menomonie before returning to Stout to sing songs and have pep talks around a bonfire. The tradition of a nightshirt parade was to remain a part of Stout's homecoming until 1929 when it merged with the snake dance.

The first official homecoming was held at Stout on March 30 and 31, 1917. The celebration was held in conjunction with the dedication of the home economics building (*later named Harvey Hall*). Alumni from across the Midwest attended the celebration that included speeches, tours, musical entertainment and a banquet. It was also at that time that the Stout Alumni Association was formed with Ben Leuchtenberger as the first president.

Less than a month after the first official homecoming, the United States entered World War I. This, combined with the death of Stout President Lorenzo Dow Harvey, may have prevented the school from having another homecoming until 1922.

Many of the traditions that would become features of future homecomings began in 1922. In addition to the snake dance and bonfire, an alumni breakfast, pep rally and dance occurred. According to the *Stoutonia*, fun and excitement was experienced by all. The only negative aspect was the poor officiating that led to a 3-0 loss to River Falls. It is interesting to note that the homecoming game was one of the last football games of the year—largely due to the number of injuries sustained on the field.

By 1923, homecoming was firmly entrenched at Stout. The new president, Burton Nelson, was a strong supporter of athletics and was very popular with both students and alumni. In that year, a parade and homecoming play were added to the festivities. In spite of a 39-0 loss at the hands of Superior, the *Stoutonia* proclaimed: "Homecoming Surpasses All Expectations."

During the following decade, even during the start of the Great Depression, homecoming grew in popularity. The celebration was somewhat curtailed in 1925 out of respect for the death of President Nelson's wife. However, that was also the year that Stout won its first homecoming game, 6-0 over Superior. New activities added to the celebration included women's archery and field hockey games. A tradition also began for each incoming freshmen class to build a bigger and better bonfire than its predecessors.

What made homecoming of 1935 extra-special was the dedication of the new Burton E. Nelson Athletic Field. The plans for the new field were approved in 1933 and work began almost immediately. They included a large field for interschool games and a smaller practice field.

Several names had been suggested for the new field, but the Stout Student Association voted unanimously to name it after the man who had worked so hard to see this dream realized.

It was in 1937 that a homecoming queen first made an appearance on this campus. Lorene Graslie was crowned as Harvest Queen at that year's bonfire following an election by the student body.

Two years later, in keeping with the homecoming theme, "The American Way," Betty Coed and Joe College replaced the queen. Actually, three people were elected as Joe College (*Tom Keough, Pat Murphy and Dick Trezona*), and three were elected Betty Coed (*Betty Coe, Betty Smith and Virginia Wild*) as well. It was their job to lead the torchlight parade and light the bonfire.

As might be expected, World War II had a major affect on homecoming activities. In both 1943 and 1944, the football game was cancelled. Homecoming activities were largely confined to a bonfire, picnic and softball game. The effects of the war carried into 1946 when the alumni banquet was cancelled due to a lack of meat products to serve guests.

In the years following the war, the Stout campus expanded rapidly. As the number of students and alumni expanded, so did homecoming. By 1956 the homecoming parade



Though there was no football game held in 1943, Peggy Trezona (*Above center, with "V" for crown*) reigned over the "Onward to Victory" homecoming celebration. (*Left*) The Stout band and Pom Pon squad march in the 1970 parade.

had grown to more than 30 floats, with bands participating from all over the area. The following year the number of alumni who returned exceeded 500.

Through the years, there have been a series of problems associated with homecoming. As early as 1916, Stout students complained about being pelted with eggs by local high school students during the snake dance. A more persistent problem was the efforts of after-hours bar patrons attempting to close I-94 in the 1970s and 1980s.

Perhaps the most serious incident occurred in 1960. That year a number of students from Eau Claire came to Stout to prematurely set fire to the bonfire. During the melee, with Stout students guarding the wood, several students were burned and four were hospitalized. The entire campus was thrown into turmoil as attempts were made to locate any missing and possibly hurt students, and to put out the fire at the fairgrounds.

"Highlights in Heritage" was the appropriate theme for the 1967 homecoming. That was the start of a yearlong celebration of the 75th anniversary of the founding of Stout. During the Diamond Jubilee, it was estimated that Stout topped the 10,000 mark for the number of students who had received degrees from Stout. At the close of the celebration, during homecoming of 1968, so many alumni returned to Stout that all of the hotels were filled. Special buses had to be commissioned to transport alumni from hotels in Eau Claire to the campus.

During the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, homecoming reflected many of the changes that were taking place in society. Traditional homecoming activities such as the parade remained important, but greater emphasis was placed on concerts. Among the well-known bands and performers who played during homecoming were the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and Billy Joel. It was also in 1970 that Stout had its first male homecoming candidate, Robert Cavey.

It was unfortunate that in the late 1970s and early 1980s the activities of a very small number of students threatened the continuation of homecoming. The excesses committed during parades, at the game and, most often, after the bars closed, were usually alcohol related. As a result of these activities, some schools pulled their bands from the parade, some people refused to attend football games, and some even called for a cancellation of all homecoming activities.

Surprisingly, in many ways, this crisis brought the City of Menomonie and the university closer together. Through their combined efforts, the problems were slowly alleviated. One of the most successful efforts was the the Bash on the

Grass—an alcohol free concert and party.

Many positive homecoming events also took place during those decades. For example, the new Home Economics Building and the Merle M. Price Commons were dedicated. Also, in 1978, the UW-Stout Athletic Hall of Fame was created with the following charter members: Alvern Damberg, Dave Stori, Harley Hesselman, Gale Woelffer, Bob Young, Glenn Harke, Mike McHugh, Mike Thompson, Mel Coleman, John Peterson, Dwight Chinnock and Ray C. Johnson.

In 1990, with much of the turbulence of the previous years left behind, Stout prepared to celebrate its centennial. The theme for that year was "100 Cheers for 100 Years." This proved to be one of the largest and most successful homecoming celebrations in Stout's history. Dozens of activities were planned for both students and alumni. Even the weather proved to be perfect. To top it off, Stout defeated Stevens Point 25-15 in football. That year a roving reporter for the *Stoutonia* asked, "Is Homecoming more for the student or the alumni?" Lance Keeley, an industrial technology major, responded simply, "Both—because that's what homecoming is all about." He was right. Homecoming began as, and continues to be, one of the happiest traditions for both Stout alumni and students.

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Early homecoming celebrations included a snake dance (*above, 1924*) and bonfire (*right, 1935*). Each incoming freshmen class would attempt to build a bigger and better bonfire than its predecessors.