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The good ol' days

Spirit revival: get your rah-rahs out

The bonfire was touched off on the dot at 6:30 p.m. and in five minutes was a sheet of flame. Half an hour later pandemonium broke loose as shouting, puffing monsters rumbled, clanged and shrieked their way into the streets, followed by trucks of squealing females. ... Later on the women were permitted to have fireworks and on the whole remembered to shoot them at the heavens and not at the crowd. — Emerald homecoming edition, 1923

By the 1920's, homecoming was an established campus event: a kind of academic holiday when students, alumni and even stuffy Emerald reporters were permitted to go a little crazy.

The first official homecoming occurred in the fall of 1914 with "Alumni Day," a time when grads were invited back on campus in a "spontaneous effort" to keep them "interested in their alma mater." With only a formal party and reception for alumni and students, the first homecoming was actually quite dull and devoid of any rowdiness that marked later celebrations.

Years later and until their demise in the mid-sixties, homecomings evolved into boisterous occasions with spirited pep rallies, marching bands, fireworks, noise parades with 37mm cannons, homecoming hostesses, forty-foot-high bonfires and sign contests displayed all over town. The day before the big homecoming game classes were dismissed.

Most Eugene stores closed their doors for the occasion.

When the Webfoots played against Oregon Agricultural College, now Oregon State, the event resembled a war. Freshmen or "frosh" were enlisted to guard the big "O" on top of Skinner Butte all night before the game from OAC vandals. In 1952, however, a few marauders from Corvallis managed to destroy the sacred "O" with a few well-placed dynamite sticks.

This annual upwelling of "school spirit" manifested itself most dramatically in the volume of noise produced at the Homecoming games. At the 1927 contest, the cacophony of sounds reached such a loud volume that a reporter attributed it to Oregon's victory over the "aggies" from OAC.

"(T)he game was won last night if noise, noise, more noise and a revived Oregon spirit can possibly have anything to do with it. The racket machines ... came forth in a riotous display of deafening noise, racked from machine guns, saws, steam whistles, all the deafening noise ever devised by man," the reporter wrote.

Ray Hawk, vice president for administration and finance and a University regular for more than 30 years, says homecomings in the 50s were extremely noisy events with "the beating of drums and wailing of sirens only a few blocks from the hospital."

He also notes that the bonfires assembled in the '50s rose 50 to 75 feet skyward. Enthusiastic students built them with cranes.

"Those old fogies had a wonderful time back then," Hawk says with a smile.

So where did all the school spirit go? Enthusiasm for homecoming began to wane in the mid-60s as increasingly radical students stuck their clinched fists into the winds of the times and found: exploitation of migrant workers, oppression of blacks and a war of attrition in Southeast Asia.

By 1967, cynical Emerald editorials criticized homecoming as trivial and politically meaningless.

One editor opined: "We suggest that those people who have time to work on homecoming should get involved in more meaningful programs. The logical argument against this is that no one would be working on homecoming and thus it would die on campus. Wouldn't that be just too bad?"

A few years later, the great celebrations that transformed the whole city for days were nothing more than dusty memories recorded on yellowed newspaper in the University's archives.

Today, however, some see a renewed interest among students for traditional campus events. Hawk believes school spirit is "cyclical" and predicts a lot of student support for this fall's homecoming.

Hawk says 10 years ago students were "nonjoiners" who "had turned sour on the world." Today, by contrast, students seem "happier" and more inclined to participate in group activities, he adds.

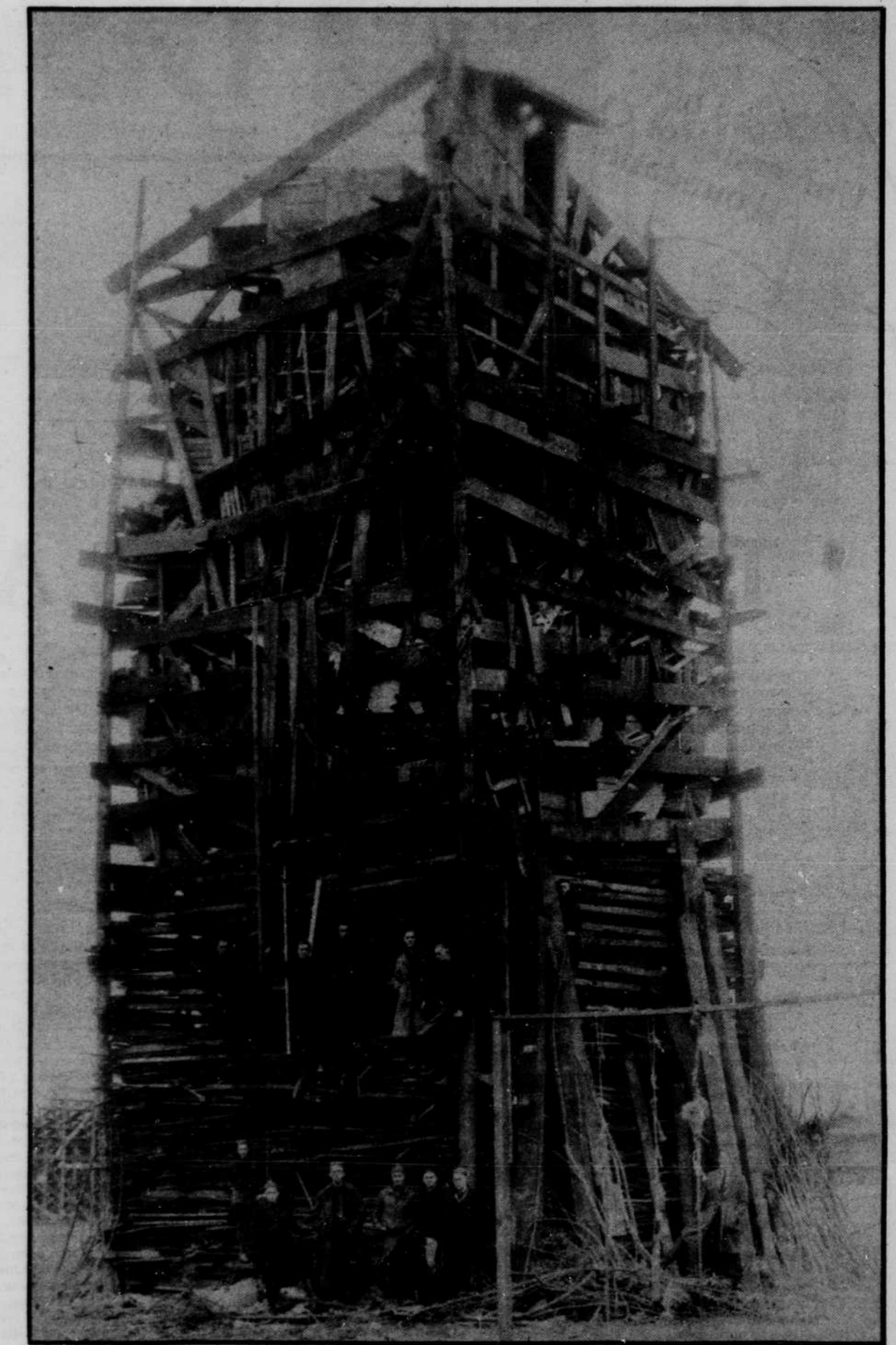
Mary Hutzikiewicz, director of the Student University Relations Council and one of this term's homecoming organizers, says she has noticed an increase in student interest in traditional school activities. She says last spring's Canoe Fete — a fraternity-sorority competition in float decoration with canoes that began over 75 years ago — was more successful than anyone had expected. She also points out that calls have been streaming in all week from students asking questions about this fall's homecoming.

"Ten years ago, any traditional event like this would have been boycotted," Hutzikiewicz says.

Story by Stephen Knight
 Photos courtesy University Archives



The 1959 Webfoot homecoming committee dutifully sparks spirit from the student body.



Back in 1921, the freshmen class gathered wood throughout homecoming week for a bonfire. The stack shown here rises about 35 feet. According to University archivist Keith Richards, this stack burned for three nights and two days.

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Friday, October 16, 1981

A thread runs through Jesus' teachings: "Rooted and grounded in love," they were meant to bring healing when understood, loved, and lived.

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