

Discovering the past: How we used to party

■ Although some traditions for homecoming week have died out, the football frenzy continues to make history

By Jeff DeMoss
for the Emerald

The campus air is crackling with the energy of homecoming week the way bonfires used to crackle on campus at this time of year.

Once again, it's time for that fall tradition that gives us all an excuse to party in the name of school spirit, despite our busy schedules. And if we look back through the years, we find that students and alumni alike have avidly celebrated homecoming since the University's humble beginnings.

The history of homecoming at the University is rich and storied, and few people in town know that history better than Keith Richard, former archivist for the University Alumni Association, now retired.

"The first homecoming wasn't so big," Richard said. "The first graduating class, which consisted of five people, came back to watch the 1879 commencement, and that was about it."

The celebration has obviously grown since 1878. The major contributor to this growth appeared around 1912, when football began to take center stage at the festivities.

Homecoming celebrations started getting big in the 1920s. Specially arranged trains brought people from Portland and other nearby towns down to Eugene for an alumni luncheon and the football game.

"It was like a big parade from the railroad station to the luncheon to the game," Richard said.

In the 1930s, students began organizing concerts for the celebration each year, usually after the game. They would get some of the most popular musicians of the day, such as Ella Fitzgerald and the Supremes.

"Nowadays, big-time names like that are too expensive to hire," Richard said.

However, the late-night student tradition lives on through dances at the EMU Ballroom each year. Some homecoming traditions are no longer around because they've been outlawed, such as the bonfire, which was an annual favorite among students. The biggest one ever, according to Richard, was in 1915 out in front of what is now the Knight Library.

"It was four stories high," Richard said. "It burned for three nights and two days." City ordinance now prohibits such blazes, but the tradition was cleverly reincarnated in the 1970s in the form of a "wiener roast."

Another pastime that might get one arrested nowadays is the "noise parade." On the night before the big game, members of campus fraternities would march around the campus area competing for the title of noisiest group.

Enthusiasm for homecoming died off in the late 1960s as students began to challenge such traditions in the name of change, but the celebration was revived in the mid-1970s.

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