

Williamsport Women: The merry month of May

Williamsport Women

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Many customs associated with the month of May have passed into nostalgic memory. Even colleges with strong religious affiliations used to celebrate the end of their school year with rituals of pagan origin.

Students danced around a Maypole, created garlands of flowers and elected a May queen. Originally, these festivities were an homage to the Roman goddess Maia, wor-

shipped as the source of human and natural fertility.

In 1928, no group in Williamsport celebrated the rites of May more enthusiastically than the students at the former Williamsport Dickinson Seminary, now Lycoming College.

The school newspaper, The Dickinson Union, stated, "This is the first record of May Day Exercises in the history of the School and we hope that there will be many more and that they will be as successful."

For almost four decades, the May Fete was an integral part



PHOTO PROVIDED

This photo from the Lycoming College archives shows the May Pole Dance in 1935. May Queen, Blanche Belles, and Heralds, Alice Hoffman and Lucylle Dieffenbacher, process as spectators observe.

of campus life, equaling homecoming in importance, though May festivities were considered to be on the feminine side.

In the early years, the girls, who were the only ones who could vote for May queen, planned and organized the

event and were all required to

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Lifestyle

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PHOTO PROVIDED

Shown in this photo from the Lycoming College archives is 1933 May Queen, Ann Eley, her court, entertainers and other ladies.

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be on campus for that special weekend.

The first May Day at Williamsport Dickinson Seminary

The May queen was selected by a vote of the senior women; the crown bearer and honor attendant were those who received the most votes from junior women.

The 1928 school paper described the event in some detail: "The Queen, Violet Duvall, was very prettily dressed in white. The procession started from the Girls' entrance, led by the two heralds, Jane Fraser and Jean Jackson. After Elizabeth Nicely had read the proclamation, the Queen's attendants, with Peg Allen as jester, came into sight and last of all, the May Queen appeared. As soon as the queen reached the foot of the throne, she knelt and was crowned by Ellana Foster. For the amusement of the Queen several dances were given including 'A Dance of Greeting' by the Junior Girls, 'Minuet' by the Queen's Attendants, and 'Virginia Reel' by twelve girls. The front campus was filled with visitors from nearly every part of Pennsylvania and all seemed to enjoy the program greatly."

The tradition continues

A few years later, the event was even more theatrical. Two "lost" children, having wandered for "hours," found their way into a forest scene on campus where fairies spotted them. When it was discovered that the throne was deserted because the queen had left to marry a human being, the fairies, determined not to be outwitted, chose a new queen from among the court attendants.

Certain rituals became standard aspects of the ceremony. The boys' orchestra played as the May queen and her court, carrying fresh flowers, circled around the rear campus in a

procession and then took their places at the throne. The queen always was entertained by dancers, usually representing various countries and dressed in picturesque costumes. The dancers performed numbers such as the "Doll Parade," "Swiss Mountaineers" or "Seven Jumps." Classmates sang trios or duets such as "Hark! Hark! The Lark" or "This is the Month of Maying." After "a troupe of Dickinson's delectable damsels trip around the maypole in colorful array," the festivities would end with a recessional, in which all participants, led by the newly crowned May queen, toured the campus. The court jester added a humorous note throughout the program.

May king

On May 12, 1934, at 11:45 p.m., the seminary boys crowned their own May royalty. Sounding brass horns, trumpets and bugles and banging frying pans against waste baskets, the boys awakened the girls, who rushed from their beds and appeared at the windows. The boys, dressed in bright-colored pajamas, gathered in front of the gymnasium, where a young man was crowned king of the May as his comrades dumped a bucket of water on his head.

Dr. Long, president of the college, strode across campus and bellowed, "I don't know who started this, but I'll give you all one minute to get to your rooms!" Note that the young women had curfews — the young men did not.

A weekend to welcome spring

Although the crowning of the May queen always was the culminating event, other activities became part of the May Fete. Since Mother's Day often coincided with the date of the fete in mid-May, a tea was held to honor mothers, while fathers watched a varsity tennis match. The weekend turned into an open house for prospective new students and visitors, with



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown above left, in this photo from the Lycoming College archives, is Phyllis M. Hesser, 1944 May queen of Dickinson Junior College, posing with her court. Above right is the 1929 May Fete cover. At left, in this photo from the Lycoming College archives, is 1936 May queen, Helen Flumerfelt, with her court outside of Hilltop Gym.

departmental exhibits, a play, an art show and a dance. Female students enjoyed a special extension of their curfew until 2 a.m., after the dance. A treat for the boys was the opportunity to visit the girls' dormitory rooms, which had to be cleaned and inspected before these male guests could enter.

Once a May queen ... always a May queen

In the beginning years, a May queen represented beauty and popularity — the "most attractive and most sparkling personalities on campus." Later, women (and men, who were entitled to vote as of 1951) were asked to consider beauty and poise and high scholastic standings.

Once a member of the May court, a woman never lost that distinction, even as an alumna. She might go on to attend graduate school, do missionary work in Malaya or be elected to receive the highest honor the college could bestow on a senior — the Chieftain award — but her role on the May court

always was prominent in her biography.

The May queen and the 1960s

After Dickinson transitioned into Lycoming College, the May celebration began to change. Planning was shared by both sexes for "Spring Weekend," as it began to be called, and the Greek fraternities and sororities started to figure prominently in the activities. Male escorts, not female heralds, led the women to their places of honor. Helen Felix, director of women's athletics, became the college staff member who coordinated the celebratory dances, which were held in a gym decorated with streamers, ferns and boughs of holly.

Detailed descriptions of white satin and tulle dresses no longer appeared in the school newspaper, nor were there numerous articles throughout the year describing plans for the much-anticipated weekend that officially welcomed the arrival of spring. Finally, in the late 1960s, there was no more

mention of a May queen at all. Historic records do not tell us whether the changing attitudes of that era toward women's roles played a part in ending the custom or whether the ceremony simply was considered too quaint and old fashioned to continue on a modern college campus.

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