

We asked Caltech alums to tell us their favorite traditions. Here's what they had to say:

Ditch Day¹

ENDNOTES

Millikan pumpkin drop² INTERHOUSE³ Honor code⁴ Negative-time Tommy's run⁵ Midnight doughnuts⁶ BLACKER CHIMNEY STACK⁷ "The Ride of the Valkyries"⁸ FIRING OF THE FLEMING CANNON⁹ FINALIS WEEK SNAKE KITS¹⁰

1. The day when seniors ditch campus, leaving behind elaborate puzzles, or "stacks," for the rest of the undergrads to solve. The exact date of Ditch Day is a closely guarded secret; it's always "tomorrow." Until it's today.

2. The Dabney Hovse^a interpretation of the Millikan Library's name-sake's classic oil-drop experiment, performed at midnight on Hallowe'en. Pumpkins frozen in liquid nitrogen plummet 10 stories from the parapet to the pavement, a ritual begun in 1972 by a group of problem-set-avoiding sophomores to 1) test whether students could access the new library's reportedly inaccessible roof (success!) and 2) demonstrate triboluminescence, the emission of blue-green photons by compressed sugar molecules (not so much).
a. The inscriptions on the lintels in the four original student residences read "Hovse" in the Latin style of carving; the residents have adopted the spelling.

3. Fall term's simultaneous and elaborately themed house (and hovse) parties. The tradition began in 1934 as the Interhouse Hallowe'en Dance.

4. "No member of the Caltech community shall take unfair advantage of any other member of the Caltech community."

5. A Caltech rite of passage possible only one night of the year: when daylight savings time returns to standard time. The object? Get to the

original Tommy's burger joint (corner of Beverly and Rampart Boulevards, just off the Hollywood Freeway), order, eat, and get back to Tech before you left.

6. Offered by ASCIT (Associated Students of Caltech) on the Olive Walk during finals week.

7. Now-discontinued practice of stuffing wadded-up newspaper into the chimney flue in the Blacker Hovse lounge and lighting it on fire. Place the paper just so, and the roiling heat waves would hit a resonant frequency. The vibrations could be heard and felt.

8. The beginning of Act III of the second opera in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, blasted as loudly as possible at 7:00 a.m., every day of finals week—and *only* during finals week; play it at any other time and risk being tossed into the nearest shower. (An exemption is made if you play the entire four-opera ring cycle.) Why 7:00 a.m.? To wake up students in time to start their four-hour take-home finals and turn them in by noon.

9. Final-exam-week junk-food care packages, so named because of the snake printed on the back of the blue books in which many finals are submitted.

10. An 1857 artillery piece fired for important events, such as Ditch Day, the end of the term, graduation, and the president of Fleming Hovse's birthday.