

WHAT'S A COLLEGE WITHOUT TRADITIONS?

**A Senior takes inventory of Caltech's traditions
—and discovers an unmistakable trend**

SITTING IN THE LOUNGE in the late afternoon, a magazine lying unobtrusively in his lap, the Senior thought of traditions.

It was a natural thing to be thinking about after what had just been going on a moment ago. There had been a freshman, reading the same magazine, wearing cords. The frosh, who was a pretty good boy at that, had been the only freshman in the lounge at the time, and had read along, completely oblivious of the small knot of upperclassmen which began to form around him.

The upperclassmen, in a group effort to be subtle as well as funny, talked among themselves in loud voices. "Some guys around this school just don't have any respect for traditions." "Isn't that the truth?" "Freshmen especially. You'd think they didn't care at all." "What's a college without traditions?"

Gradually the little group of upperclassmen grew, all of them staring at the unfortunate freshman, who still read, in blissful ignorance of his impending fate. More and more upperclassmen chimed in with comments that became more and more explicit about the value of old traditions.

Suddenly their victim became conscious of the circle that had formed around him; in a belated flash of insight, he realized that they were talking about him.

Well, the conclusion of the episode was swift and simple. His cords resting intact but unoccupied in the upper branches of the courtyard tree, a freshman learned the value of old traditions.

But several little details of the incident had started the Senior to thinking.

In the first place, it turned out that the frosh had never even *heard* of a tradition about only seniors wearing cords.

In the second place, when, two years earlier, one of his classmates had tried to wear cords to lunch in the house, the Senior had been helpless to protect his buddy as a swarm of at least 20 then-seniors had fallen upon

him and torn the pants into little pieces. The contrast was evident.

To the Senior the whole thing was symptomatic of a trend which seemed to be sweeping the campus and the students, wiping clean the old rough, rowdy, goofy, devil-may-care Caltech life and replacing it with a kind of scientific sterility, based on certain logical premises: don't do that, somebody might get hurt; don't do that, somebody's trying to study; don't do that, somebody's going to have to pay for it.

When the Senior had been a freshman, he had been part of a screwy, reckless student body that had an individuality which could neither be predicted nor suppressed. He and his buddies had played tag with the police for a week, stealing boxes from grocery stores at night, then marching down Colorado Street in their pajamas; they had waterfought, room-stacked, and election-rallied with men who knew that some of their number were going to flunk out but who thought it was worth it, with men who believed that self-expression was sometimes worth the price of ostracism, and—he had to admit it—with a lot of men who never actually thought much about it but just went out to have a blast.

Now the Senior felt a gnawing away at this old way of things, felt a different spirit in the student body, a spirit which he had heard some philosophical friends of his call the symptom of the decay of America, the spirit of *don't-might*. Don't be noisy; somebody *might* be trying to sleep. Don't go raise hell over at Oxy; you *might* flunk out. Don't steal boxes; you *might* get caught. Don't do this; you *might* be sorry. Don't do that; somebody *might* not like it.

Of course, there *was* always somebody trying to sleep; there *was* always somebody flunking out, and so on. It was a question of values.

Mentally, the Senior took a little inventory of the old traditions.

There were still waterfights, although somebody had

tried to pass a rule that upperclassmen couldn't participate. There was still room-stacking and lock-picking, although most of the experts had graduated. There was still a Ditch Day, although there were a lot of rules now about preventing property damage, which the Senior had to admit was a pretty good thing—especially for him. There was still a brake drum and there was still a brass spittoon, both having survived periods of near-disaster. There were still barn dances, with crew and flammers. There was maybe going to be a Throop Club Stag this year.

But the Pajamarino was as dead as last year's bonfire, as completely forgotten as last year's basketball scores. The night raids on orange-crate stockpiles were extinct. The poker game had graduated. There was hardly a single veteran living in the houses. Everybody except seniors, it seemed, used the Senior Bench; sophomores didn't know what it was. And the frosh didn't know about cords.

The trend was unmistakable and its progress was irresistible. This year they were going to clean up the election rally. Next year might be the last year they raided the Oxy bonfire, or the year that they abandoned the mountainside T to be overgrown and disappear, or the year that the seniors decided that Ditch Day wasn't worth it. The year after that might be the year the brake

drum was permanently retired, or the year that water-fights were outlawed.

To the Senior, the old recklessness had always called up a conflict in values. It was the individual vs. society, so to speak. As society, he wanted it quiet in the alleys after 10:30; as an individual, he wanted to screw around when he felt like it. As society, he didn't believe in stealing boxes; as a minority group, he wanted to have a bonfire.

Usually, though, this little idea of the spirit of don't-might would be the basis of his decision. It was better to live in a society where people could screw around at midnight if they felt like it (at least occasionally!), even at the price of a little lost sleep. It was worth it to live in a society where kids could have bonfires, even at the price of quite a few boxes.

This was the *hard* way to look at it, because it meant that there were no set rules for conduct, no fixed list of things not to do. The spirit of don't-might was the *easy* way out, but the Senior was afraid to think of where it ultimately led.

The Senior put the magazine away and walked up to his room to dress for dinner, wondering what he'd do the next time some frosh was wearing cords.

—Marty Tangora '57

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