

**A Study of Bemidji State University Traditions:
Past, Present, and Emerging**

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Within a few weeks, my journey here at Bemidji State University will end. Knowing this has caused me to do a lot of reflecting on my last four years here. By doing so, I have realized how much a part of me this university is and how saddened I am to leave. One thing that helps me with my parting is the memories and friendships I have gained. While I value my education here, it is the ties with the people and all the activities I took part in that have made my college experience so great. I know I am not alone in enjoying the many activities and chances to meet people. From the establishment of Bemidji State University others have shared in many of the same experiences and activities, in part because some of them are traditions.

I became interested in the traditions specifically pertaining to BSU when I gave a tour of campus to an alumna this past summer. As a Bemidji State University Ambassador, I gave tours frequently. However, this tour was different; I walked away from the tour with much more knowledge than I had imparted to the alumna. Her father had helped write the BSU fight song, and her memories and stories of her time at BSU sparked my interest for BSU's past. It was evident to me that many things had changed since BSU's founding, and yet, there were several programs and traditions that from their start have remained vital to this campus. This interest prompted me to look at the traditions within Bemidji State University: past, present, and emerging. To do this, it was necessary to look into what causes traditions to form, change, and disintegrate. Through my research, I wanted to know how our current and potential traditions size up to our past ones; have we sufficiently replaced ones lost along the way, and is there a need to work on current and emerging traditions to prevent possible losses?

Traditions exist as a major part of our society and culture. Where you find people you need only to dig surface deep to discover them. Traditions can be found everywhere, albeit in many different and varied forms. Many of them are taken for granted, and the abundance and variety of them at BSU is not initially apparent. When beginning my research on this topic it became important to clarify and define exactly what a tradition is. This proved to be more difficult than expected, in part because traditions vary so much in popularity and importance, and what some may view as a tradition others may diagnose as a passing fancy. Traditions can also be legendary, information on the traditions background and formation can easily be skewed. However, the variety and uniqueness of traditions remain appealing and allows for many of them to thrive, and it is not surprising that Bemidji State University has them. Some of them are similar to those found at other places and institutions, while others remain largely unique to us.

Before we begin, it is important to clarify what traditions are. They can be and often are easily confused with rituals, customs, and/or habits. I considered the definitions from the dictionary to help differentiate between the three:

A habit is a behavior pattern acquired by frequent repetition or physiologic exposure that shows itself in regularity or increased facility of performance, a particular practice, custom, or usage.

A custom is a habitual usage or practice common to many or to a particular place or class. They are often long established practices considered to be unwritten laws. It can also be considered as repeated practice. It is the whole body of usages, practices, or conventions that regulate social life.

Both habits and customs are an established way of doing things, and for the majority, they tend to be individually versus group based. This helps to differentiate them from traditions, but because they both tend to be patterns and remain over long periods of time, they are often confused with traditions.

A ritual is primarily religious, the established form for a ceremony, or the order of words prescribed for a religious ceremony. A ritual can also be any practice or pattern of behavior regularly performed in a set manner.

A tradition is an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (as a religious practice or social custom). Many times this means it is the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction. There is often cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions. A tradition is also known as being a time-honored practice or set of practices.¹

Within a university setting traditions are not written down; they may be labeled and sorted, but those involved with campus traditions do not carry them on by referring to a “traditions manual.” They spread without written instruction. They become well established but rarely become “laws.” They happen largely because past success with the activity indicates continuance. Therefore, according to these definitions, the term “tradition” most closely describes the material included in this study. For the purpose of this project, I have chosen to use the following definition: an activity, program, or custom that is handed down either by example or word of mouth and inherited by several generations of BSU students, faculty, and staff.

¹*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. “habit,” “custom,” “ritual,” and “tradition,” New York: MacMillan Inc., 1986; and *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “habit,” “custom,” “ritual,” and “tradition,” Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

What is the purpose of university traditions, and why do we have them? They can contribute a great deal to schools or organizations. However, they tend to be invisible when glancing at the whole university. They are so ingrained into the institutions that people might not even think about why, when, or how they started, or how much they add to the college experience. Yet, without them, many universities would be vastly different. Traditions are necessary to help bind the university together. In a school it is often easy to get swallowed by academic routine. Because traditions are largely people based (they form around and because of people) they help create community in an academic setting. They help make college more than just studying, and they provide something in common among the student body, especially as classes grow larger over time. We need connecting ties and deeply-rooted activities and traditions to keep in touch with each other. As I prepare to end my own journey here, I take comfort in the fact that other students in the years to come will share many of the same experiences I enjoyed.

Though future students will participate and enjoy many of today's traditions, what they experience will continue to evolve.

The cumulative effect of our life experiences creates in each of us a lens through which we observe what goes on around us. This lens focuses our attention on particular aspects of what we see. Society passes principles and values to future generations through customs, traditions and rituals that mold this lens through which we view our lives and shape our opinions. Throughout history, cultures have passed their family values to future generations by these means.²

² American Family Traditions, "Shaping Our Lens: Traditions." Retrieved 11 April 2003. <[HTTP://www.americanfamilytraditions.com](http://www.americanfamilytraditions.com)>

The university is ever changing; therefore its traditions are too. They are not something that remains the same; they are slightly altered to fit the new group taking part. It is likely that the central idea will remain the same, but the group experiencing the traditions every year is different. Their dynamics can change the outcome and direction of the tradition.

Histories of other universities reveal that they too share traditions. Some of these traditions may form spontaneously, yet I believe that there is a reason they begin and that each one has a specific role and purpose. One constant result of traditions is that they help create a feeling of community, especially within organizations as diverse as educational institutions. It is important for universities to create and maintain ties with alumni, they help to promote college loyalty and bring in much needed donations. In a recent alumni publication, this aspect of alumnus duty was clearly pointed out: “Aside from helping the university, it is a way to invest in BSU and say connected. Perhaps the best reason to give through this program is to show belief in BSU.”³ Because a large part of every university is made up of alumni, many traditions are focused on not only present students, but also past. In order to take an in-depth look at BSU’s traditions, we must begin by investigating BSU’s past, to see how things have changed, and how they began.

The decision to have a university in Bemidji was in itself a long debated issue. But, as it happened, Bemidji Normal School was established and began its first regular school year in 1919, with thirty-eight students. The Minnesota State Legislature chartered the school in response to a growing need for public school teachers, and teacher training was its primary curriculum. Then, in a pattern familiar to American higher education, in

³ “Answer the Call,” *Horizons Publication* (2002): 8.

1921 Bemidji Normal became Bemidji State Teachers College (BSTC), offering a four-year degree.

This name was replaced by Bemidji State College (BSC) in 1957. In 1975 the school's role had changed from a teacher's college to a multi-purpose educational institution and thus became Bemidji State University (BSU). Currently it enrolls nearly 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students. More than fifty baccalaureate fields of study, Master of Arts and Master of Science degrees are offered. Some of these are unique to the state. While the name and curriculum of the school have changed throughout the years, the primary focus has been that Bemidji State University serves the people of its region. It was formed primarily as a school for students in northern Minnesota. Though today it continues to serve this function, it has attracted more and more students from other communities, states, and countries.⁴

When looking at today's traditions, it is hard to believe that some of them have existed since the early years of the Bemidji Normal School. One rarely thinks about the traditions that have faded from the scene, but often the ones we no longer have left gaps where today's current traditions are. As with other universities, throughout the span of Bemidji State University's existence traditions have grown and changed forms many times.

Past

The university is lucky to have many traditions still thriving after changes in administration, students, and time. Many traditions, however, have been lost along the

⁴ Art Lee, *The University in the Pines*, 2nd ed. (Bemidji, MN: Bemidji State University, 1994), 64-65. See Lee's book for an extensive history of BSU.

way. Traditions fade for a number of reasons, and certainly traditions will continue to get lost along in transition. For those who once took part in these traditions, it is hard to see them disappear, and knowing that the activities you took part in are now nonexistent or replaced by others may be hard to understand. "In the perspective of a century, collegiate change stands insistently revealed. We are slow to recognize it in a shorter period - not only slow, but as alumni reluctant. Surely the college that we attended was an ultimate institution, not to be improved by newcomers' tinkering."⁵ However, it is important to remember that there are many new traditions that are taking the place of those gone. Perhaps with time, some of them can even return in a revamped form. Throughout my research for this project I came across several traditions that have been lost to BSU.

When looking through my mother's college scrapbook (she attended Bemidji State College from 1971-1975) I found pictures of her first day, and she is wearing a green beanie on her head. When I asked my mom about the picture, I was surprised to find out that new freshman, "frosh" students, were required to wear green beanies for their first week, to help distinguish them from upperclassmen.⁶ I found this to be quite amusing and was surprised to learn that on our campus this tradition existed for quite some time, roughly from the 1920's until the 1970's.⁷ I was even more amazed to learn that this was a tradition commonly found in other institutions and colleges around the nation. Beginning throughout the nation far earlier than at BSU, beanies at other universities date back as far as the late 1800's: Hanover College began using beanies at

⁵ Ernest Wilkins, *The Changing College*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), 1.

⁶ See photos 1-3.

⁷ The earliest that I came across beanies mentioned at BSU was in the 1940s; Lee's *The University in the Pines*, infers that the beanies arrived on campus during the 1920's. Lee, *University in the Pines*, p. 356-326. "Freshman Take Heed," *Northern Student*, 29 September 1948, p. 2.

their school in 1881.⁸ An alumni article from the University of New Hampshire shares their usage of the beanie,

However, Freshman Rules remained, and so did the most enduring tradition of all, the freshman beanie. The first beanie, a 'substantial blue cap with a white button,' was introduced in 1909, although at that time it was a 'skimmer'...Freshman were usually required to wear the beanie and follow the Freshman Rules until Thanksgiving or the first football victory.⁹

Today this practice would be considered highly questionable and be labeled as hazing. It is therefore not surprising that this tradition was stopped (largely nationwide) by the generations attending college after World War II, through the 1960's. Similarly, Freshman Hell Week faded during this time. In part because there was a change of lifestyle and also because many of the returning veterans began their college careers at an older age than most freshman students. They were very unhappy to be forced to wear the beanie with other (younger) freshman students. The beanies were a reminder of freshman inadequacies and resistance by students was understandable.

Today there are few or no things done to physically distinguish the freshmen from upperclassman on campus. Within small organizations such as sports teams or sororities/fraternities this could be a different case. At BSU initiation practices still take place within the sororities and fraternities. When asked, a current sorority sister affirmed the inferior treatment of pledging girls. However, she was quick to point out that they do

⁸ "Hanover College History: Celebrating the First 175 Years, 1827-2002. Rev. 9 December 2002. 10 April 2003. <<http://www.hanover.edu/Library/hchistory.html>>

⁹ Mylinda Woodward, " 'Those Rah-Rah Customs' " *University of New Hampshire Magazine*. Rev. 8 April 2003, 12 April 2003. <<http://www.unhmagazine.unh.edu/>>

not haze members.¹⁰

There is another lost tradition that still visibly reminds of its former importance but remains unused on campus, the large stone fireplace. Its wayside location by the lake (though at the time it was built it was located in the heart of campus) makes it unknown to many students, unless they walk directly past it on the lakeshore, may have even contributed to its loss of value and tradition. Even after seeing the fireplace, its meaning and history to the school are oddities. But older alumni often have ties to the fireplace and therefore visit it when they make return trips to the school.

The initial idea for the fireplace became a reality after much talk and promotion. “The idea of a fireplace as a centering point for college outdoor festivities originated in September 1930 during a faculty dinner party near Cass Lake.”¹¹ There was a fireplace at the lodge and it was suggested to then President Manfred W. Deputy that such a similar structure would surely be an asset to BSU. During the summer term students and faculty brought loads of rock to the campus. The fireplace was dedicated on June 6, 1932, and bore the following description: “This hearth of the BSTC, contributed by alumni, students, and faculty under the sponsorship of the 3rd and 4th classes of 1931-32, is dedicated by Manfred W Deputy, the first president of the college to the spirit of recreation, friendship and good will.”¹²

The fireplace was used not only for recreation, but also for campus events. Al Nohner, BSU news and publications director, remembers it being used primarily for

¹⁰ This kind of information is confidential among sorority sisters and I agreed to not share specific information regarding the interview. Confidential interview, Bemidji, Minnesota, 27 April 2003.

¹¹ “Fireplace Near Completion,” *Northern Student*, 6 June 1932, pp. 1;4.

¹² See Photos 4-6.

orientation programs during the 1960s and 1970s. Nohner distinctly remembers using the fireplace for this purpose during his senior year in 1969.¹³ Students were sent to different stations to receive information; the fireplace was the spot from which a representative from the Student Senate addressed new freshmen. After Nohner's graduation and before his return to BSU as a professional, the fireplace became unused, though no record of when or why is available. At one point it was "weeded" and fixed up prior to an all class reunion, so that alumni familiar with it would still be able to recognize it.

There have been no direct replacements for the loss of the fireplace; though the surrounding parks near campus provide areas for students to have campfires. Finding a place for new fires does not replace the fellowship that the fireplace also brought. This could be changing, as during the past few years, the fireplace has received usage during the equinox celebration.

Weekly convocations used to be a regular part of the school year and a time for students and faculty to meet together. The convocations began in 1919, and President Deputy made attendance required for all. The convocations were organized around many different activities, from speeches made by the president to character-building workshops. No matter what the topic, it was an official time and place when the entire school came together as one. As time went on, the convocations were no longer mandatory. Two years after President Harry Bangsberg took office they were eliminated. Instead he chose to bring national figures and groups to campus, such as the Norwegian National Symphony and Pulitzer Prize winner Hanson Baldrum.¹⁴

¹³ Al Nohner, interview by author, Bemidji, Minnesota, 13 September 2002.

Another previously important part of campus life was Paul Bunyan Days/ Winter Carnival Days. The festivities resembled Homecoming and started at BSU in 1948. Each year a Paul Bunyan and Carrie were chosen to reside over the carnival.¹⁵ Students on campus were encouraged to dress as lumber Jacks and Jills, and for a few years, men were even required to grow beards, facing a fine if they didn't.¹⁶ Events such as snow sculptures, concerts, and dances rounded out the week. Some events changed with the years. During the 1970s the best tobacco spitter and longest cigarette ash contests occurred. In the 1980s these changed to the best cherry pit spitter and bubble gum blowing contests.¹⁷ Such changes were seen around the nation, not just at Bemidji. As a whole, the 1960s and 1970s were turbulent times for many colleges and the aftermath resulted in many tradition and regulation changes.¹⁸

Traditions such as the beanies and fireplace once had a very relevant role in students' lives at Bemidji State University. The fact that some have disappeared is acceptable; it does not mean that they were not appreciated or well liked, simply that their time on campus is over. Other traditions have ended as well for different reasons. One reason is the lack or loss of an advocate. With a new advocate they could have possibly been maintained and continued. An example of this is the Community Breakfast Series.

This series had its start in the 1980s under the leadership of President Lowell Gillette. It was a very strong and well-attended program in the beginning. The purpose

¹⁴ Art Lee, *The University in the Pines*, 2nd ed. (Bemidji, MN: Bemidji State University, 1994), 275.

¹⁵ See Photo 7.

¹⁶ See Photo 8.

¹⁷ See Photo 9.

¹⁸ *Northern Student*, 11 January 1995, pp. 1&3.

of the breakfasts was to bring in either national or statewide speakers to campus. The speaker or topic was usually unique and significant. Gradually the series became routine. Due to the frequency, the speakers brought in were less unique and expensive. Different campus programs used the event as a way to plug their group and the breakfast series became “diluted.” The community breakfasts were not the only activities focused on bringing big names to Bemidji, the Lecture Series also promoted this.¹⁹

Perhaps the fact that the Community Breakfast Series (and other similar programs) have not lasted longer is because they were so powerfully associated with strong individual advocates. Leaders who form or become advocates for traditions help bring out the symbolic, culture-shaping side of the traditions. They work with staff and community to shape the tradition’s format. Once that person leaves the group, it may be hard to replace their dedication or ideas. Granted this is not always the case, but looking at the many clubs and activities that have come and gone, it is easy to see that the person in charge most often dictates the future status. Currently one campus club, Habitat for Humanity, is in a similar situation.

Present

At present, our university is home to a large variety of traditions. Some of these are shared with other campuses; one nearly universal phenomenon is Homecoming. It is one of the most easily recognized and shared traditions, perhaps because it was organized to bring alumni back to campus and create the feeling on campus that traditions often provide. “Some of the alumni had left school before we entered as freshman, yet we regard them as friends and acquaintances because we know them through their part in the

¹⁹ Lee, University in the Pines, pp. 382-383.

stories and traditions that make up the human background of the school.”²⁰ It is a tradition that is shared among most people associated within the university: faculty, staff, administration, alumnus, and students.

In the past, credit was given to the University of Illinois for the first homecoming celebration (1910), but this idea was recently disputed. According to Ellen Swain, University of Illinois archivist, Michigan State seems to have the oldest homecoming (1897).²¹ BSU celebrates homecoming every year, although comparing current and past itineraries, one sees a tradition that has dwindled in size and participation on campus.²² BSU celebrated its first official homecoming October 6, 1927, a mere eight years after the school formed.²³ Until 1931, Homecoming was a biennial affair; in that year alumni changed it to the annual celebration, complete with the customary events.²⁴ Different classes were assigned roles for homecoming. Freshmen became “custodians of the bonfire” and seniors were in charge of the party. A typical homecoming included the alumni luncheon, bonfire, pep fest, coronation, parade, football game, alumni/all school party, and dance.²⁵ Homecoming usually lasted a week, but the number of events changed, and today there seem to be fewer activities, apart from the football game, targeted at the whole campus community. In the past, an all-school party (including alumni) was held, but now each group has their own celebration. The alumni have an

²⁰ “Welcome Home,” *Northern Student*, 5 October 1934, p. 2.

²¹ Greg Hennigan “Investigation Challenges UI Homecoming History” *The Daily Illini* (online edition). Rev. Monday Oct. 21 2002 <www.dailyillni.com>

²² Bemidji State Library Archives, Vertical Files, Bemidji, MN.

²³ Lee, *University in the Pines*, p. 79.

²⁴ May Alter et al., eds., “A Historical Sketch of STC Bemidji, MN” *Northern Student Bulletin*, January 1938: 14-15.

²⁵ See Photo 12-16.

evening banquet/reception, and the Carl O. Thompson memorial concert is held on Sunday. The students spend that time at a concert given by Johnny Holmes, which was not originally intended as a homecoming event, but for students, it has become one of the week's highlights.

Most of homecoming seems to have switched from being a campus event to an alumni event. Alumni confirm there is a difference between current and past homecomings. Today there is very little bonding between the new faculty, staff and older alumni.

There is no one clear reason homecoming has changed so much and become less of an event on campus. In general, traditions do change over time, and sometimes there is little that can be done to stop this from occurring. Some events change for a reason, and as a result, the traditions are better. BSU's homecoming experience compares to that of other universities. Direct comparisons to the past, while potentially stereotypical and misleading seem to show that certain things are missing from our homecoming that were once present.

One major loss for homecoming was the elimination of the campus marching band and eventually the parade. The marching band used to lead the parade and was present at many other campus events.²⁶ During the mid 1970s many schools were dropping their marching band programs. At one point Bemidji State, along with only the University of Minnesota, maintained marching programs in Minnesota. Eventually BSU's program ended as well, due to lack of funding (which was necessary to maintain uniforms, instruments, etc.) and because of declining enrollments. The parade did

²⁶ See Photo 10 -11.

continue until 1998, using high school bands to replace the university marching band.²⁷ Al Nohner noted that, “When the homecoming parade stopped the whole homecoming aura seemed very shallow.”²⁸ Today we have a pep band, and though very much appreciated, they are small in number and do not entirely replace having a marching band.

Having a winning football team or the weather can also greatly affect the number of participants in homecoming, but restoring this tradition is crucial to its continuation. If recent graduates feel no strong connection to the university when they leave, they will certainly not come back for an event such as the current homecoming. Luckily, homecoming is a tradition that is easily reconfigured, and I believe that we have already begun taking the necessary steps to rejuvenate the week. Such activities as tailgating parties have begun, and organizations have offered free food before the game to add to the festivities.

Athletics is another major activity within universities that often involves and attracts a wide array of people. It provides the context for many traditions. Bemidji has had several traditions form this way, and though our athletic programs have changed greatly throughout our history, they remain vital programs.

Obviously, tying all traditions to athletics is not necessarily wise; there are many other groups responsible for major traditions at BSU. However, there are traditions directly associated with sports. These seem to be easily recognizable to students. One very popular and frequently mentioned sport tradition involves the football team jumping

²⁷ Bemidji State University Archives, Vertical Files, Bemidji, Minnesota.

²⁸ Al Nohner, interview by author, Bemidji, Minnesota, 13 September 2002.

into the lake after winning the homecoming game.²⁹ Though it is a recent tradition, starting in 1995, it is one that has quickly gained attention and importance. In a BSU Horizons newsletter, the lake jump is claimed as “one of the memorable moments in BSU Homecoming football.”³⁰

Several rumors surround the actual creation to this tradition, but it largely came about due to a bet/dare. The football team was winless during the year and was scheduled to face the defending conference champions, Winona State, for the Homecoming game. Beaver players vowed that if they could upset Winona and win, they would all jump in the lake. The final score of the game was Bemidji over Winona 25-14.³¹ Apparently Vance Balstad, the BSU maintenance and hockey icemaker, had to unlock the gate separating the field from the lake before the team could dive in. Since that year the gate is left unlocked in case the Beavers repeat their victory.³²

Often associated with athletics are the school mascot, colors, and fight song. While all three are separate from each other and did not grow directly out of sports, this is where they are most commonly used on campus. Besides being campus traditions, they have become recognizable symbols of our university.

Bemidji State University's colors are green and white. These colors were selected at an assembly hour during February 1920. Decisions about what colors should be selected were deadlocked when Cyrillus Freeman, a student, rose and said “As we sat here discussing this question, I happened to glance out the window. The sight that met

²⁹ See Photo 17.

³⁰ ³¹ “BSU Alumni Memories” *BSU Horizons* (1997): 8.

³² Nohner, interview.

my eyes was fresh, green pines silhouetted against pure white snow. What could be more appropriate than green and white?"³³ The colors were then chosen unanimously and they have remained that since. However, the shade of green has changed considerably. Jim McMahon, former public relations director for BSU, first suggested Kelly Green (a bright hue of green) with white and for many years it stayed that shade. Over the years, the color has progressively become darker, moving to the current dark forest green. The reason for the gradual change is to match the color scheme to our University motto "University in the Pines." Kelly green simply did not suggest pine trees.

Many of our new BSU ads, designs, and souvenirs use and integrate the color blue with the customary white and green. BSU's marketing/publications office explained that the introduction of other colors has occurred before and that currently blue is being integrated to represent the lake. Even though the colors shift and change, the official campus colors have remained green and white.³⁴

Football at Bemidji State University began in 1926. The team did not identify with their current mascot, a beaver named Bucky, until years later. *The Northern Student*, Bemidji State's newspaper, started referring to the football teams as Beavers starting in 1932.

Some time ago the athletic teams representing Bemidji were named Beavers by President Deputy. This name is excellent because the beaver is not only symbolic of this north country, but is clean, and a hardworking animal. From now on the

³³ May Alter et al., eds., "A Historical Sketch of STC Bemidji, MN" *Northern Student Bulletin*, January 1938: 14.

³⁴ BSU publications office.

Bemidji teams will be frequently referred to as Beavers in sports articles.³⁵

Prior to this the team had been referred to as the “Peds,” short for Pedagogue Teachers, because all students attending BSU were planning on becoming teachers. The 1932 football team was apparently inexperienced, but because he was impressed by their hard work President Deputy declared and christened them the Beavers during a fall 1932 practice. Since beavers are known for their diligence and hard work, it seemed fitting that the team use it. The beaver became the established symbol for the football teams and took the place of the term “Peds.” Bucky’s look as both the mascot and logo has changed as much as the shade of green that often accompanies him. Since 2002, he has taken on a much fiercer, yet realistic, look.³⁶

The school fight song is another symbol tied to sports on campus, though used for other purposes as well. The fight song has been a part of the university nearly since the school’s beginning. During the second year of operation, as part of a song-writing contest, the song “Hail to Thee, Bemidji College” was composed, with music by Raymond Nelson and words by Marie Krosgeng. The college song was sung frequently at a variety of events for twenty-five years and it remains as the alma mater to this day, though little known after 1950.³⁷ The campus fight song is “Go, Bemidji Beavers.” School fight songs are frequently played at sporting events, whereas alma maters are not. Perhaps the popularity and endurance of the fight song can be attributed to this and also the fact that the song was written by students. “Go, Bemidji Beavers” was written by

³⁵ May Alter et al., eds., “A Historical Sketch of STC Bemidji, MN” *Northern Student Bulletin*, January 1938: 14-15.

³⁶ See Photo 18-24.

³⁷ Lee, University in the Pines, p. 463.

Emeritus Professor Ron Gearman and his advanced harmony class, in 1947. They collectively wrote the words and music to the fight song during one class period.³⁸

Usage and knowledge of the fight song has declined over the years. The song is used at many activities yet evidence is clear that the words are largely unknown. One incident proves this true: Last fall I attended a Hobson Union Programming Board (HUPB) event, and to start things off, they asked the 2001-2002 Homecoming king and queen to sing the BSU fight song. The university band played the song, but no one sang, except the University President and a few audience members. It was embarrassing to watch.³⁹ The king and queen were far from alone in their ignorance. I can honestly admit that, had it not been for working at the admissions office, I would likely be in the same situation. Apparently this is not something that has occurred recently, in Lee's university history, he comments that "Beavers in all decades since the song's introduction never did learn all the right words [sic]."⁴⁰

This is not to say that people do not recognize the melody of our fight song, but without the words, it loses much of its meaning and intention. What can be done to remedy this? There are options; the football team provides a great example when they sing/chant it in Lake Bemidji (if they end up going in after the homecoming game). This problem could easily be remedied, especially with the requirement of Freshmen Year Experience (FYE) classes. Since the loss of an actual freshman orientation week, no class

³⁸ Lee, University in the Pines, p. 466.

³⁹ By contrast, both the king and queen (along with other audience members) were each able to sing their high school fight songs.

⁴⁰ Lee, University in the Pines, p. 466.

or activity covers the history of our school or traditions such as the fight song.⁴¹

Implementing even the gentlest in of indoctrination of students could do wonders, and there are plenty of available times to do this. Simply making available copies of the song words in programs could assist those unfamiliar with the song. Perhaps some find it pointless to dedicate much effort reviving a song, but fight songs help to engender spirit. If the task at hand is to build up school loyalty, we need to start with the basics.

Since graduation is important to new alumni and students, much effort is put into the actions that shape it. More first impressions are made on campus visitors by commencement than any other day. In the past ceremonies were held outdoors in the football arena, but due to the quarter system schedule, graduation did not occur until June.⁴² As the school calendar changed, and it became customary to end the semester in May, a new place for commencement was sought. Use of the John Glas Fieldhouse was a relief to many, and it has since been the building used for graduation ceremonies.

The style of the ceremonies has changed over time; there was even a time when the president's secretary gave a whistling solo. For recent graduates, a new tradition has been added to the traditional processional: going under the alumni - BSU foundation arch.⁴³ The arch was created to mark an entrance to campus. Because the campus stretches along the lakeshore, the archway, requested by President Lowell Gillette, indicated one's arrival at BSU.

For the graduation processional, graduating seniors, faculty, chosen

⁴¹ We do have a day-long freshman orientation, SOAR, but the day is spent with registration and does not intentionally cover any history or traditions of Bemidji State.

⁴² See Photo 26.

⁴³ See Photo 25.

undergraduates and alumni march amid a sea of banners and color. Bemidji State has the common tradition of faculty members marching in order of seniority during the processional.⁴⁴ During the 1997 graduation procession, the walk was altered to avoid the arch, due to a remodeling project on campus. This change upset some students, and their editorial comments in The Northern Student show how strongly they felt about the disturbance of such a tradition. “In the past, “seniors complained,” it has been tradition to take a campus stroll beginning at the BSU arch in front of Deputy Hall and have one more final walk through the beautiful campus.”⁴⁵ “When I received the information that seniors would be processing around the (John Glas) Fieldhouse, “agreed Meg Stephen,” instead of from up-campus and through the archway, this is how I felt: What is the point of processing at all?...Processing through the archway (in front of Deputy) has been a time-honored tradition for graduating seniors.”⁴⁶ As a student here, I agree wholeheartedly with the tradition of walking under the arch at commencement, however, these quotes provide a great example of how mythical traditions can be in general. The foundation arch was built in 1991, with the founders walk and plaques added in 1993, therefore falsifying the idea of it being a “time-honored tradition.”⁴⁷ This demonstrates what a strong impact some “traditions” can make in a short time. After only five years, students were very upset when denied access to the arch. Such visual traditions deliver emotional appeals (comparable to the football team jumping in lake) which help students

⁴⁴ Lee, University in the Pines, p. 337.

⁴⁵ Seniors at Northern Student, “Graduation, What a Disappointment,” *Northern Student*, 7 May 1997, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Meg Stephan, “Why Bother?” *Northern Student*, 7 May 1997, p. 6.

⁴⁷ It can be disputed as to how much time is required for a “time honored tradition,” but it is the author’s opinion that five years does not qualify for such.

claim an identity with BSU.

A tradition that appears less frequently than graduation is presidential inaugurations. Due to their rarity, they tend to be unique events. In 2002, I had the pleasure of attending President Jon Quistgaard's inauguration. The ceremony involves many university people. This tradition first started with President Harry Bangsberg. There was a discussion about whether Bemidji State ought to hold such a ceremony. The size, cost, and style of the inaugurations have changed over time. There is no traditional time or place specified for the inaugurations. For example, President Bangsberg chose to defer his nearly a year because President Charles Sattgast, his predecessor, had not formally had an inauguration. Since inauguration was an unfamiliar event, lots of investment, time, and money were spent planning.⁴⁸ Typically, an inauguration includes visiting academics wearing their robes and hoods. The ceremonies are colorful and evoke pomp and circumstance. Each president adds his or her own touch to the ceremony, from President Les Duly's Australian theme (they played "Waltzing Matilda") to President Rebecca Stafford's four-day event, complete with balls and banquets. At one time the president decided the format, but now a committee makes the decisions, tailored specifically to the President. Quistgaard's inauguration was well-received and attended, and if it is any indication of future inaugurations, they will continue to be successful.

Aside from campus-wide events, specific organizations on campus sponsor many social traditions. For example, the madrigal dinners, which have been running for thirty-one years, are organized by the University Choir Programs and occur each year before

⁴⁸ Lee, University in the Pines, p. 275.

Christmas.⁴⁹ The program focuses on medieval English culture and includes dinner, jokes, and songs. Much time and dedication is put into this special colorful event, and its conception can be credited to Professor Emeritus Dr. Paul Brandvik, currently carried out by Dr. Bradley Logan.

During my sophomore year here, I had the pleasure of taking part in our Eurospring program. It wasn't until I was on the trip that I learned how long the program had been running. The first group participated in the program in 1969, making it the oldest and largest of BSU's overseas study programs.⁵⁰ Eurospring is a program that allows Bemidji State students to study at Oxford University for five weeks and participate in a three-week tour of Europe. While in Oxford, students stay at Wycliffe Hall, a theological college and seminary for Anglican priests. The program's origin is disputed, but the current version was established in 1969 by several faculty members and Professor Kenneth Henriques, who received his M.A. degree from Oxford University and was responsible for the first Eurospring trip.⁵¹ Because he had maintained personal connections with professors there, he facilitated arrangements for the planning and programming. Currently, Dr. Allan Chapman of Wadham College, Oxford University, directs the academic program and is the chief lecturer.

Bemidji State University also offers other interesting study abroad programs, including Sino-Summer, begun in 1986. New trips have been implemented more recently, including: Hawaii, Iceland, Africa, and Malaysia. As travel continues to be popular, so do

⁴⁹ See Photo 27.

⁵⁰ See Photo 28.

⁵¹ Lee, University in the Pines, p. 309.

the programs that BSU provides.

Fantastic Dance Follies is yet another program at Bemidji State University that has changed dramatically since its inception and is still going strong.⁵² The initial show was put on by the women's beginning and advanced classes in modern dance. The classes started at Bemidji State Teachers College in 1945, and a program for the public was mandated by the administration. Dr. Myrtie Hunt was the class instructor, and the first program was in 1946 at the high school auditorium. Eight students made up the cast, one of whom (Marion Christianson) would eventually take over the program. As time went on the show progressed, moving to Memorial Hall, and each year practices and makeshift stages took place.⁵³

The program expanded with time and the participation of other clubs and dance classes, including those and men. As the numbers and variety of acts increased, so did the crowds attending. In 1978, Marion Christianson took over the program and brought it into the contemporary age, renaming the whole show the "Funtastic Dance Follies." The show expanded from one night to four and even traveled to other cities. When Christianson announced that she would be leaving, there was concern for the welfare of the show, and even the budget was cut by administration. "They were worried that the show would die after she retired."⁵⁴ Though the show has ceased to travel to other cities, a great number of students are still involved and today Christianson's daughter, Suzy Langhout, has taken over the show. It continues to be a popular event on campus.

⁵² See Photo 29-31.

⁵³ Lee, *University in the Pines*, p. 436-436.

⁵⁴ Nate Dybvig, "Will the Curtain Rise Again?," *Northern Student*, 26 April 1995, p. 1.

Yet another continuing tradition is Bemidji State's annual Feast of Nations, which recently celebrated its thirty-fourth annual performance. The program started in 1969, with only six international students attending the school. Today, the much larger International Student Organization sponsors the event to help promote cultural awareness. Traditionally, the program centers on international food and entertainment and the main goal is to help promote cultural awareness. This year a second day was added, consisting entirely of musical performances.⁵⁵

While analyzing Bemidji State University's traditions, I used other colleges as a guide. This naturally aroused my curiosity regarding how Bemidji State stands in comparison to other universities. Comparisons among colleges are difficult, and numbers of traditions only tell part of the story. Also important, is the size of BSU compared to others. "But if size gives opportunities, it also involves difficulties [sic]."⁵⁶ Large campuses have wider constituency and the ability to fund many of the needed activities or programs which may be considered traditions. Yet, smaller campuses offer students more frequent interaction and opportunities for in-depth relationships with each other. Though size is not an indication of school loyalty, it does cause one to wonder where Bemidji fits, as a mid-sized institution, neither large nor small. Size might provide an answer to why schools such as BSU have fewer traditions relative to other schools. BSU is too large to be extremely personal and too small to have the funding and opportunities of a large school. When asked his opinion about why Lumberjack Days ended at BSU, historian

⁵⁵ Tristan Scott, "2003 Feast of Nations features second day of performances," *Northern Student*, 16 April 2003, p. 4.

⁵⁶ A. Lawrence Lowell, *At War with Academic Tradition in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), 27.

Art Lee made the comment that “Today’s student body of about 5,000 may be too big for the kind of uniformity that existed between the 2,000-3,000 students back then.”⁵⁷ Yet many students consider the size of a school and choose to attend Bemidji for its larger, yet still personable numbers.

For many years, the physical campus, made up of student residences, a cafeteria, social areas, classrooms, and athletic facilities, were confined to one small area. People were literally forced to interact or see each other repeatedly, and many relationships formed as a result of this. As the campus grew, it was physically harder to get to know many faculty and students. Today the campus is much more departmentalized; some students spend most of their time in one building without venturing into other areas.

Many different traditions have dramatically changed or disappeared from BSU. While some events have replaced those gone, change causes past students and faculty to wonder why certain traditions fall by the wayside. As a nation we have become more sensitive to diversity, and some older traditions would now be considered inappropriate or labeled as hazing. However, it is important to consider that there are other reasons traditions end or evolve. In some cases, lifestyles have completely changed. Time and money are major factors; school is much more expensive to the student than it used to be. It is not uncommon to see many students today holding two or three jobs (myself included) to help pay for their education. This has cut down on the amount of free time that students have. Furthermore, since many student jobs are at off-campus sites, they spend less time on campus, and a job is another place for students to socialize and meet

⁵⁷ Art Lee, interview by author, Bemidji, Minnesota, 13 September 2003.

people.⁵⁸ Socializing off campus may prevent students from becoming actively involved.

Today many students have access to or own vehicles, and Bemidji State was labeled a “suitcase college” a long time ago, though when and if that has changed remains unknown. Many traditions are the brainchild of one person or administrator. When the one in charge leaves, their spot may not be filled. New alumni who didn’t take part in events when they were students have fewer reasons to return. When a college is smaller, many people get involved and are able to get to know each other and create strong ties, making campus returns more fun. Today, the ties held seem to be more among individuals and not linked to the university, according to Art Lee.⁵⁹

Emerging

Not always, but often, there are traditions that take the place of those that disappear, some filling spaces quickly and others taking a long time to transition in. Looking at our campus, it is evident that some activities and ideas have the potential to become traditions. Some of these have been around for several years already, while others are yet in their infancy. The following list suggests possible emerging traditions:

- * OPC- (Outdoor program center)
- * Women’s History Month
- * All-campus volunteering day
- * Student Academic and Scholarship Celebration

⁵⁸ There might be a correlation between the amount of time spent off campus and students participation and loyalty to on campus events. No such information was available at the time of my research, but perhaps a survey could be conducted in the future.

⁵⁹ Lee, interview.

*Spring Solstice Celebration

*FYRE/FYE Courses

These were chosen for the paper due to a variety of reasons and each are different in purpose. Some of these are new programs, such as the All-Campus Volunteering Day, while others have been around for a long time but are still emerging, for example, Women's History Month. The OPC is an institutionalized program, while the Spring Solstice Celebration is initiated by students. Whether they are aimed at students or at the community, each listed program has elements that could help make it a successful tradition. However, it is not entirely realistic to say these will become future traditions; in the beginning, a lot of work and faithful leadership are needed to ensure their continuance. Even the best intentions and a strong start do not guarantee success and longevity. For example, "all-school week" during the 1930s went over well, and The Northern Student predicted, "all-school week will undoubtedly become an annual affair at the college and add materially to Bemidji's fame."⁶⁰ But, the week lasted only two years.

An informal survey of current students regarding traditions on campus revealed that their notions differ significantly from those that the faculty, staff, and books endorsed. However, when I started this I too had only the current "student-centered" traditions in mind. It is not that we are not aware of larger traditions across the university; it is just that each group views a different set of traditions as significant or insignificant. "The American College has two cultures, 'theirs' and 'ours.' Student's culture resides on fraternity row. While professors take charge of the classroom, the

⁶⁰ "Program for All-School Week Completed," *Northern Student*, 11 May 1931, p. 1.

students –soon to be alumni- remain in charge of the college [sic].”⁶¹ Students acknowledge broader traditions, but unless they are targeted specifically towards them, those traditions leave little impact compared to others. The group responsible for forming the “tradition” is also going to have a major impact on who will follow, keep up, and support/acknowledge the tradition.

The instructive fact for anyone connected with an American college or university is the completely uninvited, uncontrolled, undirected nature of these revolutionary innovations. Colleges did not decide to have fraternities. Nor did the rise of athletics represent a conscious ordering of collegiate life by the governing authorities They essentially happened to the colleges and they happened because students, left to their own devices, decided that they would.⁶²

This is a project that I found very fascinating. As a senior at BSU, I feel that there is a lack of information about many of our activities and traditions. And because there is a lack of available information about them, there also tends to be little interest in our school’s past. Many students have not thought about this topic at all: it is easy to take traditions for granted, and if you are not taught about them in the beginning, there is little chance you will research them on your own. For this reason, I feel that my research on BSU’s traditions will be useful information for past and future students.

Looking back to my original question, I feel that I have gained a huge appreciation for what we do have versus what we do not. Yes, we have lost important

⁶¹ Eds. Lawrence E. Dennis and Joseph E Kauffman, American Council on Education, *The College and the Student, an assessment of relationships and responsibilities in undergraduate education by administrators, faculty members, and public officials*, (Washington, 1966), 55.

⁶² Dennis & Kauffman, *College and the Student*, p. 52.

traditions, and with some went a feeling of loyalty for our school and a loss of camaraderie, but we have gained wonderful new traditions too. Appropriate steps are being taken by administration and the BSU Foundation to revive some traditions that have faded, and the next couple of years will be key as to whether they continue or not. Of course, specific predictions about future traditions must be left unanswered, and what I have related is only a start. As time continues, so will new traditions, since students perhaps not yet even enrolled will shape them.

There are also many specific things that can help “save” the traditions that are currently neglected. With appropriate awareness I believe we can, and definitely should, disseminate information about traditions and our past to current students. Traditions help to promote loyalty, and by encouraging the building and maintenance of today’s traditions, together we can build stronger ties to Bemidji State University.

Pictures⁶³



Photo 1, 1972 Beanie King and Queen



Photo 2, Beanie King and Queen



Photo 3, Freshman wearing beanies

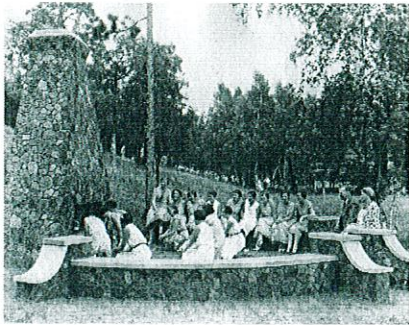


Photo 4, June 6th, 1932, fireplace dedication

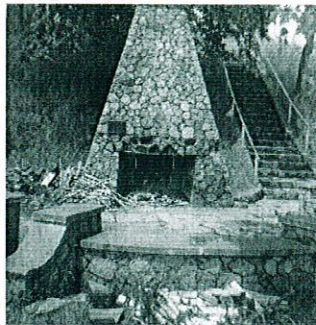


Photo 5, Fireplace in 1952



Photo 6, Fireplace in later years

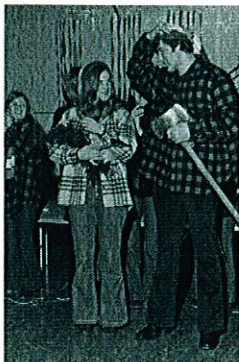


Photo 7, Elected Paul and Carrie, 1972 Paul Bunyan Days

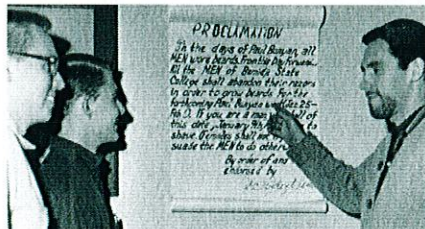


Photo 8, Sign declaring men grow beards for Paul Bunyan Days



Photo 9, Bubble gum blowing contest

⁶³ Bemidji State University Archives, Photo Collection, Bemidji, MN.

All photos obtained from BSU archives with the great help of Mr. Bill Shaman.

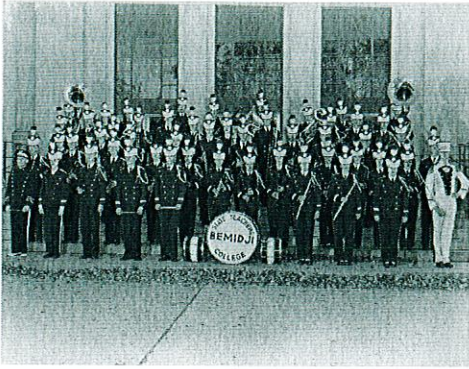


Photo 10, 1950's BSU Marching Band

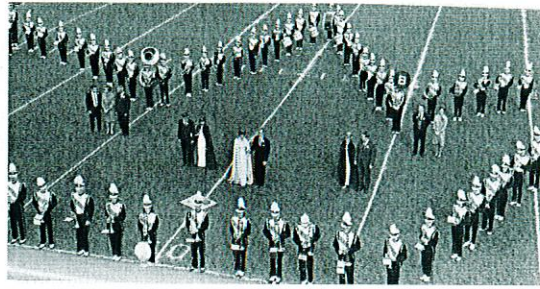


Photo 11, Homecoming 1966, Marching Band Performance

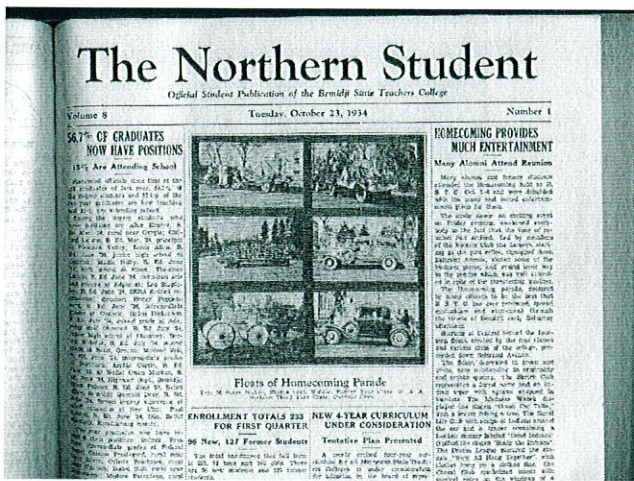


Photo 12, Homecoming 1934, Parade Floats



Photo 13, 1938 Homecoming Parade



Photo 14, 1980's Homecoming Parade

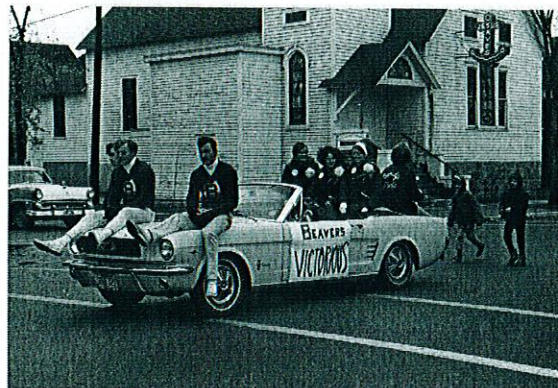


Photo 15, Homecoming Parade Float



Photo 16, Homecoming Parade Float Photo 17, First BSU Football Team jump in Lake Bemidji (after winning Homecoming game)



Photo 18, President Sattgast presenting beaver to C.W. Richards, for largest homecoming attendance, 1938 Photo 19, Bucky in 1966
Photo 20, Bucky and cheerleaders at football game

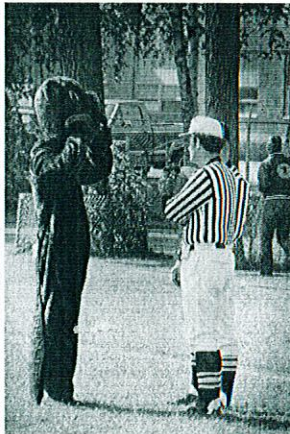


Photo 21, Bucky with friend? Photo 22, Bucky with friend? Photo 23, Bucky at football game Photo 24: Current beaver logo

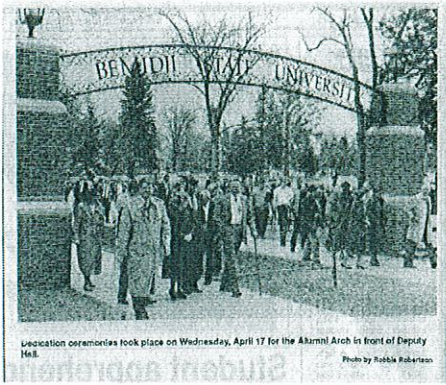


Photo 25, Alumni Arch Dedication, April 24, 1991

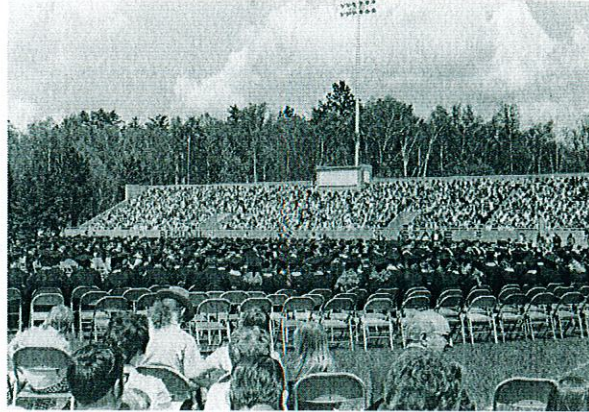


Photo 26, Outdoor Graduation



Photo 27, 1974 Madrigal Dinner



Photo 28, 1969 Eurospring with Professor Ken Henriques (row one, far right)



Photo 29, Funtastic Dance Follies Practice

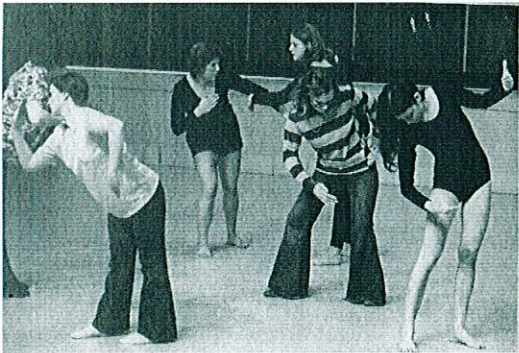


Photo 30, Funtastic Dance Follies Practice 1972



Photo 31, Funtastic Dance Follies Practice

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