

— hidden — HISTORY

IN THE DAYS OF YORE: BYGONE WILSON TRADITIONS

By Leigh Rupinski

In the College's early years, students caught the train (from campus, naturally) for a day-long picnic, danced the night away in Laird Hall serenaded by a live orchestra, and watched George and Martha Washington take a spin around the dining hall.

All three of these traditions have now faded from campus, but at one time, each one played as important a role in the student experience at Wilson as Senior Night and Dean's Day does for today's students.

Begun in 1888, the All-College Picnic was a traditional fall getaway for students, faculty and staff. It was also called Mont

Alto Day or Caledonia Day because the picnic typically occurred at one of the nearby parks. Originally, students took the Cumberland Valley Railroad's specially designated branch train line straight from campus to Mont Alto. In 1913, the Mont Alto State park closed to the public, so the event was switched to Caledonia. After 1951, the picnic rotated between Caledonia and the reopened Mont Alto State Park, as well as Pine Grove Furnace and Cowan's Gap state parks.

No matter the location, the activities remained the same: a picnic, followed by a student-faculty softball game, hiking, singing, skits and, in later years, organized group sports such as volleyball or dodgeball. Of course, no picnic would be complete without speeches from Wilson's president and the presidents of each class.

In the winter, Wilson held a Junior-Senior Promenade, or "prom" for short, which provided an opportunity for Wilson's all-female student population to socialize with the men at nearby colleges, such as Gettysburg, Franklin & Marshall, and the Naval Academy. The first prom was held in 1905. Juniors and seniors attended, while the freshmen and sophomore classes were responsible for decorating Wilson's gymnasium. Prom lasted from early evening until the live orchestra played its final song at 1 a.m. In 1928, the



Wilson students pose during a 1925 celebration of George Washington's birthday.

prom became a two-day affair with dances on both Friday and Saturday nights.

The 1956 "Greenwich to Broadway"-themed dance was an elaborate affair of "subway stops" around campus. The "subway" began Friday night at "Greenwich" (Laird Hall) for dancing and picked up again Saturday afternoon at the "Metropole" (Laird again) for jazz. It continued through a New York City-themed tour around campus at the "Brass Rail" (Alumnae House), "Schrafft's" (South Hall) and "Sardi's" (Riddle), before finishing up with another formal dance on

Broadway (again, Laird).

Washington's Birthday, also called the Martha Washington Ball or the Minuet of 1776, was held around the same time of the year as the prom. Wilson students dressed up as either George or Martha Washington and performed period dances in the dining hall, which was suitably decorated with an enormous American flag, Washington's picture and soft candlelight. Six seniors chose the junior dancers they wanted for partners prior to the evening's festivities.

The 1899 *Phaetra* literary magazine describes "such an array of antique finery and powdered hair and rosy cheeks as is never seen elsewhere outside of fairyland." Ladies wore elaborate brocade gowns, while the "gentlemen" wore knee breeches. According to the 1942 *Conococheague* yearbook, the dancing itself was composed of "deep curtsies, intricate turns, the flash of swords, [and] low bows," all to the tune of a minuet.

Wilson's traditions are unique and integral parts of the Wilson experience. For more information on any of Wilson's traditions, whether extinct or ongoing, please contact the C. Elizabeth Boyd '33 Archives at hankeycenter@wilson.edu or 717-262-2049. **W**