Commencement Traditions

Wofford's first commencement was held on Sunday, June 24, 1855, even though Main Building had not been fully completed and none of the 24 students was ready to graduate. President William Wightman delivered the first commencement address, an eloquent sermon based on the first verse of Psalm 80, Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel. Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock, thou that dwellest between the cherubim, shine forth. The following year, Wofford conferred its first bachelor's degree, honoring a transfer student named Samuel Dibble, who later went on to become a member of the United States House of Representatives.

Those first two commencements set the precedent for Wofford's impressive 19th century exercises, which were the highlight of Spartanburg's social calendar. Often lasting for four or five days, they featured gymnastic exhibitions, oratorical contests, debates, speeches and sermons. Until 1875, most of the speeches were made in Latin. After the use of English came into vogue, the state's newspapers often printed the sermons, addresses and student orations verbatim.

Much has changed since those early commencements, but several century-old traditions have been preserved. An academic procession has been part of graduation at Wofford since the 1850s. In the early days, the faculty and students formed at the corner of Church and Main streets in Morgan Square and marched all the way to the college. Each graduating senior receives a King James translation of the Bible, signed by each member of Wofford's faculty and staff. Autographing the Bibles has been not only a meaningful activity for members of the college community, but also an enjoyable social occasion. The traditional Wofford commencement hymn, "From All That Dwell Below the Skies," is also a special legacy from the 1800s.

Missing from 19th century commencements at Wofford and at many other Southern colleges were the distinctive caps, gowns and hoods that have become the universal graduation outfit down to elementary school level. Regalia in the United States was not standardized until 1893, and the Wofford faculty and degree candidates did not wear it, even at commencement, until well into the 1900s.

—Doyle Boggs '70