Exploring Wofford’s Commencement traditions

Whether in 1856 or 2008, Commencement is the highlight of each academic year at Wofford. In South Carolina's agricultural, small-town culture of the late 19th century, Commencement was a multi-day affair. In June 1855, even without any students graduating, the college held a series of Commencement events, beginning with a Sunday dedication service for the Main Building. After two days of student examinations and presentations, Wofford's first Commencement concluded with a sort of inaugural ceremony, featuring addresses of about 50 minutes in length by each of the three faculty members. It is not entirely clear whether the addresses were in English or Latin, though one observer makes reference to a particular quotation in Professor David Duncan's address that the professor rendered in Latin and then was translated into English, "for the ladies." Apparently many of the early addresses at Commencement were in Latin, and one memoir asserts that President James H. Carlisle's 1876 address was the first in English.

The college awarded its first degree in 1856 to Samuel Dibble, who later represented Orangeburg in the United States Congress. His address inaugurated a tradition whereby all the members of the senior class gave speeches at graduation, a tradition long since abandoned. His diploma, in Latin, is part of the archives collection. Other traditions that started in the 1850s include the singing of "From All That Dwell below the Skies," which appears in the 1858 program (the oldest extant Commencement program in the archives) and the presentation of a King James Version of the Bible signed by the faculty. Several Commencement Bibles have been given back to the college over the years, and their signature pages reveal the gradual growth of the faculty over time.

Commencement became something akin to a social season in the late 19th century. As the literary societies grew larger, they began sponsoring annual debates and addresses. A prominent individual was frequently selected to make an address before the literary societies, with appropriate pomp and ceremony. The alumni association also began to meet during Commencement week, with an address by an alumnus. The Board of Trustees had its annual meeting during this week as well. An alumni banquet generally followed the alumni address. In 1889, a "toast card" was published with the various toasts proposed by various seniors and alumni – toasts made with iced tea, no doubt. With 16 students making addresses in 1889, the largest number since 1876, students had to keep their remarks to three minutes each.

Commencement season remained a three- or four-day celebration in the 1920s. In 1923, the long weekend began with the junior debate on Friday and continued on Saturday with the Class Day exercises. The seniors, meeting for the last time as a class, heard their class history, poem and prophecy read, imitated a faculty meeting to the amusement of the spectators, and finally, the president of the class "solemnly...divested himself of his robe of office and placed it on the shoulders of the president of the class of '24." The members of the class then joined with alumni arriving for class reunions for a banquet in Carlisle Hall, at which South Carolina Gov. Thomas G. McLeod, himself a graduate of the class of 1892, spoke. On Sunday, baccalaureate and the annual presidential address by President Henry Nelson Snyder were both held in Central United Methodist Church, and on Monday, Commencement was held in the chapel. Six of the 60 seniors gave addresses on behalf of their classmates.

Another highlight of Commencement and other formal occasions on campus is the wearing of academic regalia. According to correspondence in Snyder's papers, it appears that Wofford faculty only started wearing academic regalia in the 1920s. Most of the gowns and hoods appear to have been less elaborate in those days than now.

For the past 30 or 40 years, most of the major events surrounding Commencement have taken place in two days, though anyone at the college can tell you that today, the crush of convocations, celebrations and recognitions are spread out over the month before graduation.

For other Commencement-related stories, check out the From the Archives blog on the Wofford Web site – http://blogswofford.edu/from_the_archives.

by Phillip Stone '94