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“The Old Stone Bank”

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OLD TIME COMMENCEMENTS



Presented by

“The Old Stone Bank”

Providence, R. I.

June 15, 1931



Old Time Commencements

ONE HUNDRED and sixty years ago in Warren, James Manning, the first president of Brown University, presided at the first commencement of that institution. Seven men received degrees, a smaller number than an average fraternity delegation of today. The next year, of course, the college was moved to Providence, there to begin its long years of growth in size and fame to the institution of learning we know today. And the number of graduates per year has increased steadily until now the average is between 250 and 300. Definite statistics have a certain interest, particularly as they reveal trends and changes over selected periods; but undoubtedly of far greater interest are subtle or radical changes of customs and manners.

Thus, at this time of year, the time of Commencement exercises in schools and colleges the country over, it might be propitious and perhaps amusing to look back to the kind of Commencement Brown held one hundred or more years ago. A newspaper clipping for the *Journal* of 1839 devoted half a column to a report of the Commencement exercises at the college. Two sentences might be quoted to advantage: "The young gentlemen put on their best looks, and were safely delivered of their several pieces with the true Com-

mencement roar. The city was full, as usual, of strangers and of literary men, and the galleries were full of ladies who looked very lovely and talked very loud." Commencement in those days was a gala affair involving the whole town of Providence. Practically a whole week was used up in the general excitement despite the fact that Commencement itself lasted only a day. It was as much of a festival period for the community as a carnival or circus week, and in many respects was quite similar.

Joviality was king. Everyone was in a smiling mood all the week. Disputes and petty arguments were dropped. Foes became friends for the time being, though they might be at each others throats once the spell had passed. Women postponed their "washing day" a week in order to join more completely in the excitement. And hundreds of people began to arrive in town, including scores of relatives, distant and otherwise, of the townsfolk.

All this may seem like exaggeration but in reality the case was as it has been stated. In particular, the influx of outsiders to the town was amazing. They flowed in and flowed in until one wondered what was done with them all. Graduation itself took place on Wednesday of the week, but these people started to arrive on Sunday and Monday, with a steady stream of them pouring in all day Tuesday. Their coaches could be seen in the stable yards of the "Golden Ball Inn," the "Montgomery Tavern," and other hos-

teleries of the time. Hundreds of these vehicles there were, so many that the hostlers who took care of them numbered them with chalk in order to remember to whom each belonged. But all this, or most of it, can be explained. Commencement week was for Providence an annual period when visits from country cousins and aunts and uncles were expected and received. Throughout the year the townspeople might go on excursions to visit these outlying relatives, but it was always during Commencement festivities that the latter were invited to be guests in turn. In addition to the relatives from the country, the town had more than its quota of fakirs, itinerant peddlers, rowdies, and ladies of the evening, all drawn to the scene like flies to molasses.

Excitement grew through the first two days of the week but approached a climax on Tuesday evening. It was the night when the college was always completely illuminated. Toward dusk, people from the lower part of the town would begin walking up the hill to the college buildings, congregating there in constantly shifting groups about the college grounds. When it was past the hour of dusk, suddenly the college bell would start to toll, and on the instant candles would flare forth from every window in the dormitories and classrooms. In front would be something like an illuminated medallion of a spread eagle which would proceed to harangue the crowd in Latin. At the same time a brass band that had been quietly

assembling earlier in the evening on the steps in front of the old chapel would blare forth with popular marches and medleys, and the rapture of the crowds would be complete. Just how much any of these good people thought of the college itself, whether they really understood what higher education was all about, whether they cared for anything else besides the general opportunity for excitement, is a matter of question. Probably nothing more than the general air of festivity appealed to them. While the band played and the candles continued to glow, they were in the best of spirits, but at a second tolling of the bell everything stopped as abruptly as it had begun. The campus was plunged into sudden darkness and the people left to stumble their way home as well as they could. They never seemed to mind this termination of the evening, but took it as a temporary respite before the resumption of festivities the following morning.

The remainder of the night was just long hours of restless tossing for the seniors who were to become graduates on the morrow. Sleep was out of all question. And perhaps it was the same with many of the townspeople too. But at an early hour they were summoned from their beds by a salute from a battery of guns—the same which had been captured from General Burgoyne and Saratoga. Downtown, through the principal streets a veteran drummer and fifer wound their way, playing reveille. The total com-

bination was better than a thousand alarm clocks. Excited as a small boy, Providence got up and dressed.

On the great Weybosset Bridge hawkers of food and novelties hastened to set up their stands. In the armory members of the artillery company scheduled to accompany the Commencement procession adjusted their uniforms, burnished their buttons, and polished their boots. By nine o'clock people once more began streaming toward the college. The gates before the institution were wide open on this important morning.

On the campus itself various units of the procession were forming—the faculty, the graduates, the undergraduates, the members of the corporation, and the military escort. Finally, when all were assembled, they swung into line to the tune of a military march and set out through the gates down College Hill to North Main and thence to the First Baptist Meeting House. All the way was lined with scores and hundreds of townspeople and visitors, laughing, calling to one another and to those in line, exuberant in general.

At the meeting house other crowds awaited the arrival of the procession. And after the last of the procession had filed in, these people swarmed into every available seat and bit of standing room. There were special stages inside built for the occasion. One on the north of the pulpit was for the faculty, one on the south for the graduating class, and one in front for the speakers. The

band which had supplied music for the march down the hill, now established itself in the west gallery, where the organ is now located, and struck up some hymns and anthems more lively than the usual run. Then the president offered the invocation, and the exercises were officially begun.

Until noon the audience listened to addresses by various scholars, the leaders in the class, but at that time the procession formed again and wound its way back up the hill to University Hall for lunch. Here they ate in shifts off tables made of boards stretched across wooden horses in the old Commons Hall, the general eating place on the old time campus. It was a hurried affair, this meal, for it was soon time to form in line again and tramp down the hill to the meeting house to resume the exercises of the day. Throughout the afternoon more essays were delivered; then degrees were conferred by the president; and last of all the valedictory was given. With this final oration the ceremony of graduation came to a close, and once more the procession—graduates, faculty, artillery, and all—climbed the hill back to the college. A religious meeting at the Baptist Meeting House in the evening was the last episode of the day. Graduation was over.

The next day was one in which the crowds had no interest, and they began leaving the city in droves. By Friday all was quiet again. Of the hundreds who came annually to Providence at these graduation periods of

the early 1800's few could have cared honestly for the literary exercises of the occasion. For them it was a holiday from start to finish, and they came to let off in hilarity and boisterousness the repressions of ordinary drab living. The lower classes used the occasion to get drunk and in that condition provided excellent victims for pickpockets, petty thieves, and women of the streets. The *Literary Cadet* of 1827 deplored this state of affairs and exhorted for a saner graduation, something more quiet and less open to the public. Gradually this is what has come about. Of course the procession still winds down the hill and whoever wishes may watch, but there is no great celebration the night before and no general hilarity in the city. Perhaps some of the color has been lost in the process of change, but certainly there has been an increase in dignity and respect toward Brown University itself.