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The Story Behind the '82 Beer Jacket

At a party sophomore or junior year, I heard a couple of friends, who were daughters of Princeton alumni, talking about beer jackets. They explained to me a little about what a beer jacket was and that their fathers still had their jackets. I remember thinking that those jackets must have meant something for alumni to keep them for so many years after graduation.

After that chance encounter, I didn't give beer jackets another thought until senior year. Susy Wenz and her Reunions Committee put out the call for ideas for our Reunions class costume. Beer jackets came to mind, and my suggestion was chosen. But there was a big misunderstanding: Susy thought that I was also volunteering to procure the costumes. I tried to convince her that I was unqualified for the task, but she would have none of that.

Thus, the quest to resurrect the beer jacket began. To get some advice and beer jacket history, I visited Hugh Wynne '39 at his home in Princeton. Hugh was an active and supportive alum I knew from ROTC. He explained how, prior to WWI, a group of students started to wear denim chore jackets and overalls that house painters and other tradespeople used to protect their clothing – in this case protecting seniors from beer.

Hugh further explained that while the overalls were abandoned at some point, the jacket tradition endured. Each class would design a simple, unique logo that could be stenciled on the back of the jacket (usually off-center to avoid the seam that ran down the center of the jacket).

We intended to make our jackets as authentic as we could: metal buttons, natural duck cloth, an off-center logo – something older alumni might recognize. The university store manager could not help us procure our jackets, but he “knew a guy.”

That industry contact in Philadelphia was a godsend. He agreed to procure the jackets, get them screen-printed, and deliver them to us on time and on budget. He only needed the artwork for the class logo and the number of jackets, by size, to order.

While we were on the phone, he asked me how many people were in our class and what percent were male versus female. After a brief pause, during which he penciled out an estimate, he recommended a percentage breakdown of jacket sizes to order. I jotted down his estimate and thanked him, but I stressed that I planned to make sure that each person in our class got exactly the right size. He responded with something akin to, “Well, knock yourself out.”

Nick Donatiello, class President, and Susy Wenz set up our costume task force to advance on two fronts. Eric Marton (via the Alumni Relations Committee) ran a logo design contest, while I focused on the order quantities.

As it turned out, the task of getting a beer jacket logo ended up reviving another Princeton tradition that few people may be aware of – class insignias. Historically, class insignias were meant to be widely-used, such as on letterheads and banners, and not just Reunion costumes. Insignias customarily incorporated references to events that occurred during a class's time at Princeton.

Eric recalls visiting the home of an enthusiastic alum, who regaled Eric with stories about Princeton and beer jacket logos. Based on Eric's description, the alum he met was almost certainly Hugh Wynne.

The logo contest generated a handful of submissions. The judging criteria looked for a balance of cuteness and gravitas – such as including some references to events and not just a cartoon tiger.

Rick Mellon's design won the contest. Among the examples of class logos/ insignias that were provided as reference for contest participants, Rick was particularly inspired by the class of '41 beer jacket design. The '41 logo stencil is a tiger atop a globe that looks like a bomb which is composed of caricatures of Hitler and Roosevelt.

Anyone who scrolls through the images of beer jackets on the Princetoniana website can see that our logo is more “involved” than beer jacket logos for other classes. There are roughly a dozen references to events in world news and on-campus that took place during our time at Princeton.

In parallel with the logo contest, we distributed a survey to all seniors asking for their jacket size (if known), and additional information, like height and weight, if we needed to estimate a person's size. The survey response rate was above 90%. Close enough, right? We should have stopped there, but Susy and I did not give up. We phoned every classmate who had not returned their survey.

I transcribed by hand the survey data onto a long green-bar computer printout listing our classmates – just over a thousand rows. I laboriously totaled the sizes. I was disheartened to find that our hard-won jacket size breakdown was within rounding error of what the guy in Philadelphia told me when I started. Even worse, it never occurred to me that if we wanted people to keep and wear their jackets years after graduation, we should have added some windage to the sizes to account for middle age.

So, despite my excessive need for accuracy, we nailed down our quantities in time to place the order.

A few weeks prior to Reunions, seniors queued up in Dillon gym for some administrative tasks, including the distribution of our class costume. They received a jacket, a painter's cap, and a handout that explained some of the history of the beer jacket, with a decoding of our logo design. We stood behind a couple of tables, guarding the jackets contained in the dozens of cardboard boxes stacked behind us. I dutifully checked off people's names on my green-bar printout to ensure everyone got the size jacket they were assigned.

There were a few early indicators that our class costume had hit the mark. Seniors didn't wait until the P-rade or Class Day to wear their jackets around campus. Some classmates decorated (dare I say desecrated?) and otherwise personalized their jackets. As I recall, a campus newspaper even went to the trouble of creating a parody version of our class logo.

Seeing our classmates in beer jackets during the P-rade was satisfying for everyone involved in the class costume effort. It was especially gratifying to see the positive response of older alumni. We had accomplished our objective: a unique keepsake costume that resonated with older classes.

We did not expect the beer jacket to be a recurring thing. Credit for continuing the tradition goes to those classes that came after us. Today's Princeton grads may take senior jackets for granted. That's OK – it is nice to know that the class of '82 helped to make it so.