



## REUNIONS HISTORY OF THE P-RADE

Office of the Alumni Association

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### HISTORY OF THE P-RADE

The P-rade, the Alumni Parade held annually on the Saturday before Commencement as the climax of Reunions, originated in the 1890s, but, as now conducted, is related to an earlier alumni event. Beginning soon after the Civil War, alumni classes had been taking part in a Commencement Day procession to the place of their dinner meeting where, as one observer wrote, "an excellent and abundant meal" was followed by five or six alumni speeches, "both grave and witty, serious and mirthful."

The more lighthearted Saturday parade of the present day grew out of the baseball rivalry between Yale and Princeton. The teams first met in 1868, and twenty years later began scheduling one of their games at Princeton on the Saturday before commencement. Alumni attendance grew, and periodically, a returning class would march to the game behind a band. But it was in 1897, stimulated by a torchlight procession of alumni at the Sesquicentennial celebration the previous fall, that all returning classes first joined in a parade to the game. Thus began the most colorful event of the annual Commencement program. It came to be known as the P-rade.

At first, the sole piece of decoration worn by returning alumni was a small badge with class numerals on it. Gradually, classes began to distinguish themselves by creatively decorating themselves with class hats, balloons, parasols, and large palm leaf fans, but before long, younger classes were wearing colorful costumes, carrying humorous signs, and sometimes performing comic stunts.

In 1907, the Class of 1897, dressed as Dutch boys, made an arresting sight – and sound – as they clattered along in their wooden shoes. A year later, the Class of 1898 marched as a Roman Legion, with tunics, buskins, shields, and swords, wheeling at their head a reproduction of the Arch of Trajan, on which was emblazoned: "AIN'T THIS A TRIUMPH." In 1909, not long after Princeton had been given its lake by the Scots-American Andrew Carnegie, the Class of 1904 appeared in orange and black tartan highland dress, led by a bagpipe band of highlanders in bonnet, kilt, and sporran, all creating the appearance of a Scottish regiment on parade. In 1916, when interest in the preparedness movement was mounting, the Class of 1906 wore the top hat, chin whiskers, white-starred blue tailcoat and the red and white striped trousers of Uncle Sam.

At the "Victory Commencement" of 1919, a throng of alumni, happy to be back from World War I, formed the longest and most colorful P-rade yet. Alumni Day that year coincided with Flag Day, and at the conclusion of the parade, a band struck up "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," leading five thousand alumni to march across University Field and wave their flags from right to left with each step. The Alumni Weekly reported that the event was "a moving sight which brought the 10,000 spectators to their feet." An even longer "Victory Reunion" P-rade took place in 1946 when 7,300 alumni returned to Princeton following World War II. The procession reached a climax on University Field with the massing of service flags showing the number in each class who had served in the war, and the number who had given their lives.

In P-rades over the years, classes young and old are renowned for their creative costumes. In addition to the colorful blazers worn by nearly all undergraduate and graduate alumni, Princetonians have appeared in the P-rade as convicts, Spanish toreadors, pirates, French artists, Apache dancers, Roman emperors,

cowboys, sailors, Confederate soldiers, members of the Foreign Legion, game hunters, chefs, firemen, baseball players, spacemen, and – most commonly – tigers.

Even live animals have been included at times. The P-rade of 1906 featured a troupe of trained lions, while 1923 included two tigers, and 1949 saw three elephants lead the clowns of '44 around the field and then kneel in front of the president's box.

The use of live animals has been infrequent, but bands have always been an indispensable element of the P-rade. Classes celebrating a major reunion – in other words, reunions occurring at five-year intervals – often reunite their own bands or hire outside groups to provide music. Sometimes, there have been as many as thirty bands punctuating the long procession with full brass, bagpipers, fife and drum corps, and countless other musical instruments. At the head of the column, as tradition dictates, plays the University Band.

Rain has put an occasional damper on the P-rade, but only once -- in 1953 -- did it force a cancellation. Some classes insisted on marching anyway, staging an impromptu parade in the R.O.T.C. Armory. After the storm abated, the twenty-fifth-year Class of 1928 marched to Prospect House, called out President Dodds, and, with him at their head, marched to University Field and back to the Cannon, accompanied by the University Band.

For many years, the P-rade formed in front of Nassau Hall, moved across the campus to 1879 Arch, proceeded down Prospect Avenue, through the Thompson Gateway, and around University Field, passing before the president's box near first base. However, upon the construction in the 1960s of the Engineering Quadrangle at the location of University Field, the alumni P-rade proceeded to Clarke Field, the new baseball field south of Ivy Lane. In the early 1990s, the route was altered so that the P-rade proceeded through the Fitz-Randolph Gate, around Nassau Hall, and down Elm Drive, finishing at Poe Field.

Until 1966, the P-rade ended with the Yale-Princeton Commencement baseball game. At that point, however, Yale decided that it could no longer keep its team together for the post-season game, and since 1968, the P-rade has terminated in an Alumni Association meeting, the alumni once more marching to their Commencement gathering as their predecessors did in 1865 -- now without the abundant meal and extensive oratory to follow, but with the color, music, and fun that have, for over one hundred years, been essential ingredients of this unique event.

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*This is adapted from:*

Alexander Leitch, **A Princeton Companion**, copyright Princeton University Press (1978).

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