

## The Class Rush—A Description

John F. Marszalek  
Professor of History  
Mississippi State University

It is a truism that modern sport on the college campus is a big business, and it has long been so. Soon after the birth of major intercollegiate athletics in the nineteenth century, the faculty, administrators, and highly paid professional coaches took control of student games and turned them into vehicles for institutional publicity and fund raising. Students became spectators. Alma Mater was still revered in song and cheer, but most students did it from the grandstand, watching rather than participating in the storied battles.

Sport had no place in the early history of American higher education. Colonial colleges were religious institutions, and sport and other extracurricular activities were frowned on. Over the years, students fought this paternalism; anti-faculty riots became common in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Literary societies and fraternities came next, and soon after the American Revolution there developed class competitions. Hazing or fagging of freshmen evolved into the "Class Rush," or "Bloody Monday," so named because it often occurred on the first Monday of the Fall term.

Rules apparently varied from school to school, but the general aim of the Rush seemed to be an expression of one's manhood, class camaraderie, and a loosely institutionalized protest against the stultifying nature of campus life. More mature academics viewed it as rowdiness, but students, even the slighter and more intellectual, maintained it into the 20th century even after faculties and administrators hoped organized football teams would take its place. Students would cheer on the formal teams from the stands, but they would also participate *en masse* in the rugged Class Rush. It continued in schools all over the country long after the establishment of commercialized intercollegiate athletics. Students refused to give up all control over their physical activity. They continued rebelling against the dominance of those with authority over them.

In his excellent recent book *Sports and Freedom, The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics*, Ronald A. Smith concludes that the Class'Rushes "contributed to a sense of community, [but] the development of intercollegiate athletics began to replace them. As class size rose in the latter nineteenth century, the need for community became even more important, and athletics played an increasingly vital role in creating it."<sup>1</sup>

Smith may be correct, but the data he provides for such a generalization is not

---

1. Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom, The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8-25. Quote is found on page 23. See also John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport* (Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1978), 193-96.

conclusive. Was the Rush pro-community or anti-establishment? Was it a rite of initiation or an act of protest? Precisely when and where did the last Class Rush take place? Did formal athletics kill it or did other community-building extra-curricular activities take its place? Or, did it simply become old-fashioned?

Answers to questions such as these would provide a clearer insight not only into an important physical phenomenon but also into the broader question of 19th and 20th century student life and attitudes. There is a need to collect and analyze contemporary discussions of the Rush in institutional histories, student newspapers, alumni magazines, diaries, and letters.

What follows is an example of the kind of source material that is necessary for such an analysis. This previously unpublished letter is not only an excellent description of a Class Rush, but it also shows how exhilarating the experience was and gives clues as to why students participated in it.

P. Tecumseh Sherman (1867-1941) was the youngest of the eight children of Civil War General William T. Sherman and his wife, the former Ellen Boyle Ewing. Cumpy, as family members routinely called him (to distinguish him from his father, Cump), was hardly a superior physical specimen. He rode and he participated in some summer water sports, but that was about it. In 1886 he was a six footer who suffered from asthma, a slight speech defect, and a hearing impairment. He later became a lawyer and by the 1930s gained fame as “one of the country’s foremost authorities on Workmen’s Compensation Laws and Automobile liability insurance.”<sup>2</sup> Much of his spare time (he never married) was spent as custodian of his father’s personal papers and as historical source for Civil War information. Both at work and in his spare time, he was hardly an athlete.

Yet his participation in the Class Rush of 1886 so excited him that he poured out his exhilaration in a letter to his mother. This letter is preserved in the Sherman Family Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, with whose permission it is published here in its entirety. The young Sherman used no paraphrasing to organize his torrent of words, so the editor has silently done so.

New Haven  
Sunday, Sept. 26th  
[1886]

Dear Mama,

The rush yesterday was a great success. Garneau.<sup>3</sup> Field<sup>4</sup> and I all went out. Garneau & I put on our canvas jackets & old trousers, sewed the sleeves & legs tight so that no one could grab us, & then sewed our canvas jackets onto our trousers & of course wore no hats.

2. Wallace A. Capp, “P. Tecumseh Sherman,” *The Eastern Underwriter*, December 14, 1934, p. 86.

3. George Francis Garneau (1868-1890) was, like P. T. Sherman, a BA graduate of St. Louis University. He too hoped for a legal career after completing his course work at Yale in 1888. In 1889 while at the St. Louis Law School, he became ill with consumption and died the following year. *The Quarter Century Record of the Class of 1888*. Sheffield Scientific School, Yale University (New Hampshire: Tuttle, Morehouse, and Taylor, 1915). 44-45.

4. John Ellis Field (1867-1918) became an engineer specializing in water and sewage works in his native Denver, Colorado. *Forty-Year Book of the Class of 1888*, Sheffield Scientific School, Yale University (New Hampshire: Tuttle, Morehouse, and Taylor, 1929). 39-40.

There are three classes at Sheff.<sup>5</sup> '87 or the seniors, '88 or the juniors, our class[,] and '89 the freshmen. The Juniors, '88[,] does the rushing, & '89 gets rushed. '87 men go out, with long dusters, with funny things painted on them,— which they give to the men who at the end of the rush have not sufficient amount of clothing on.

The freshmen, assembled at [North] Sheff[ield] Hall about seventy five or eighty strong, where they were formed in order, marshalled out of town on one road by the seniors. When we got to North Sheff the '88 rallying place we were warmly greeted, as our class didn't seem to be turning out very well, & they were glad to see us. Then we set up our yell, "rah, rah, rah; rah, rah, rah; rah, rah, rah '88[" at frequent intervals & gradually our numbers swelled until we had about sixty. Then we proceeded out to the assembly place, but by a different road from the freshmen.

At the appointed cross road we halted & formed into two compact columns, formed four broad, & made very solid & compact by our locking our arms together. I was in the left hand column which was about seven deep, while the right hand column was eight. In a few minutes the freshmen turned in from the side road & faced us in one solid column. Then our left column pushed into them, but they were over eighty strong & they shoved us aside & we went down like so many tin pins. But this broke their column. & right through the break, & on through the whole freshmen formation went our right hand column yelling '88 like thunder all the time. our column still doing enough to keep the freshmen in our neighborhood from hurrying to the rescue. Then a lot of the men began to fall, those behind stopped shoving & the first "push rush" was over.

Then we formed a large ring[ ] & an '88 & '89 heavy weight wrestled. Our man won, so we proceeded and "put him up." This means to raise him above the crowd & keep him there a minute. The other side must haul him down. When our man won, we therefore rushed forward & put him up, formed a circle round him & thus guarded him. We won three out of four, the fourth was draw, and every time we put our man up.

Then again we formed for a push rush, but this time in one solid column. In this we just held our own & that was all. It ended by all the front freshmen rows falling.

Then came the "shirt rush." The freshmen form in a long line & proceed along a fence for three blocks, yelling '89 all the time. We[,] yelling '88[,] rush in & grab a fellow & try to tear his shirt off. If we drag him out in the street[,] the seniors jump in & release him,-if they can. I have samples of four fellows' shirts. It is here that the seniors' dusters come in handy. We yell our numbers '88 only when we are in trouble so that if I heard someone yelling '88 I knew he was a classmate overpowered by freshmen & I rushed to the rescue. If I caught hold of anyone I just give my numbers in a low voice. and if he is of the same class he returns them & I leave him alone. That is the way it is worked. I write you this letter only to describe the rush.

Your loving son

P. T. Sherman

P.S. Love to Lizzie<sup>6</sup> of course. I am hoarse from yelling "eighty eight."

---

5. The Sheffield Scientific School was housed in North Sheffield Hall, a brick building built in 1872-1873 and named after its benefactor, Joseph E. Sheffield. It was razed in 1967. Nanci A. Young, Yale University Library, to editor, June 15, 1989.

6. Mary Elizabeth Sherman (1852-1925), one of P. T. Sherman's sisters.