

# A Half-Century of Class Scraps At The Pennsylvania State University

by

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Class scraps once had an almost sacred place in student life, with the recurring plea of how, without them, to keep alive and maintain college spirit. The close relationship between class rushes, or class scraps as they were called at Penn State, and class spirit cannot be overly stressed. In 1890 the student monthly identified college and class spirit as “the first out-croppings of that after-spirit which leads a merchant to compete with his neighbors, a lawyer to prosecute his case to its utmost limit, a general to harass his enemy and drive them into their inmost breach.” In short, “spirit” was thought of as that competitive desire to be the best in everything, which characterized the highest level of the American personality. I contend that a belief in the worth of scraps in producing such a spirit was held not only by the students, but also by the administration; and only under these circumstances could the brutal scraps of the late 1880’s have persisted into the twentieth century.

It was late in the 1880’s before the classes at Penn State became large enough to carry on class movements which would promote and demonstrate class spirit. Class rushes were the order of the day at colleges throughout the country, and it was widely accepted that such physical striving for a common purpose was one of the best avenues to class spirit. A rush usually took place between the two lower classes, and amounted to, in its crudest form, a mass brawl. A slight show of presumption on the part of the freshmen class was all that was necessary to prompt a rush between the arch-rival lower classes. It has been the duty of the sophomores, since freshmen first appeared, to teach them their proper place; and the accordingly correct behavior. Theoretically this custom, known as hazing, bonded freshmen together under common persecution, and was paramount in developing their class spirit. A rush, it appears to me, provided freshmen the rare opportunity of meeting the sophomores on equal ground. The brutal conditions of such a chaotic battle was no picnic to be sure; but the sophomores could hardly pull rank under such conditions, and the tensions of hazing were released in more ways than one. In addition, fighting together probably produced more of the desired class feeling than did suffering together. An example of a rush in its vilest form would be the breaking of canes by the sophomores, accompanied by the breaking

of noses by both classes, after the freshmen had dared to carry canes to the morning chapel service. Shortly after their crude beginnings rushes evolved, on most college campuses, to a more sophisticated level. The aforementioned cane-rush can serve as a prime example. As the definition of a winner was added to the melee, a true contest was born. At the University of Pennsylvania a "cane-man" stood in the middle of a field with a cane while the two lower classes rushed at him on a given signal; after a specific period of time the fighting was stopped, and the class with the greatest number of hands on the cane was declared the winner.

Of the several reasons for the fading away of class scraps at Penn State, the rise in student enrollment is by far the most important. When the first scrap was held in 1887 the average class size was about 20, and by 1916 the average class size was over 550. The most obvious result of any kind of mass activity involving as many as 1,000 men was the danger to life and limb, and specific rules were necessarily drawn up to minimize this hazard. The first scrap rules were published in the student newspaper in 1904; these rules did little, if any damage to the spirit of the scraps, but they did set a precedent for the numerous regulations that followed. Students lost interest in the highly structured scraps which evolved, but the scrap tradition persisted until the news of a student's death in a class scrap at the University of Pennsylvania hit the campus in 1916. Substitute contests, such as the tug-of-war, continued to be used to promote underclass rivalry and spirit until the early 1930's when a President with ideas about growing up, a grand Intramural program, and the Great Depression pushed the old scrap tradition aside for good.

Class scraps once epitomized the collegiate way of life. Start at the bottom frosh, work hard, tight well, never give up, and soon you'll earn the right to live. The class scrap was a little bit of America: everyone had an equal chance, and the victory was oh so sweet.