Bridging the Community Through the May Day Fete: The May Day Celebration at Oregon Normal School

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Figure 1. May Day Fairy Queen and the Queen’s Attendants, 1916. All images are courtesy of Western Oregon University Archives and have permission for publication.

Abstract: In 1902, a new tradition began on the Oregon State Normal School campus: the May Day celebration. Touted as “an ardent joyous welcome of springtime” and “the most anticipated social event on campus”, the May Day Fete featured a series of events held on a single day early in May, including the winding of the May Pole, an evening dance, costumed drills, sporting events for both men and women, jokes, singing, pageantry, the procession and crowning of the May Day Queen, and the awarding of the trophy in a challenge between the school’s senior and junior class. May Day extended into the community; invitations were issued to other Normal students in Corvallis and Eugene, as well as teachers and their students throughout Polk County. Stores closed early in neighboring towns, and citizens of all ages from the surrounding area were invited via The Monmouth Herald to the annual event where everyone cheered and dined together. This article recounts the history and popularity of May Day in Polk County and includes photographs and documents from the event throughout the years, from its inception as a public celebration of springtime up until it molded into what are now campus homecoming events.
Brief History of May Day
The history of the springtime May Day celebration spans a multitude of centuries, geographic locations, and customs. The first May Day celebration cannot be pinpointed to a specific date or place. Author Allison Thompson argues against a common misconception that May Day revolved around “an ancient pagan fertility holiday” that embraced “the maypole as a phallic symbol.” Thompson and historian Ronald Hutton claim that from 1240 until the early part of the nineteenth century, in England at least, there were wide variations in how any individual May Day custom was observed - variations over time, variations between villages or between village and city, and variations based on individual tastes and prejudices as influenced by the budget of the sponsor of the festivities. Factors such as local pride and interest determined the extent to which people celebrated the springtime event.

While early celebrations are difficult to recount, the early revivals found in the mid-nineteenth century emulated “Merrie England” and “Merrie May Day” celebrations from earlier centuries. Familiar May Day images during the time of Tudor England include Morris dancers, May Lords and Ladies, the iconic maypole with flowers and later ribbons, and the eventual linking up with the folklore surrounding the popular outlaw character of Robin Hood. Historian Ronald Hutton further discusses the

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2 Thompson, May Day Festivals, 22.
3 Thompson, May Day Festivals, 18.
connection between Robin Hood and May games in the early sixteenth century, as well as Robin Hood’s link to May Day plays and pageants in the twentieth century.¹

The early revivals were usually organized by local clergymen or gentry; other common images included the folk customs of having a May Queen, flowing dresses, flowers, and games to ring in the season of spring. These early revivals led to more scholarly explorations of May games, merry-making and other traditional popular customs through work published by major literary figures, poets and artists in the early nineteenth century in both Great Britain and the United States.⁵

May Day celebrations emerged in the United States in the 1830s and gained momentum into the early part of the twentieth century. This occurred as both formal and informal manifestations practiced by young girls at their finishing schools and academies.⁶ May Day was first introduced informally as a way to commemorate the coming of spring and the end of the school year through the use of dances, plays and athletic games as outlined in the early revivals in Europe. Some instructors saw this as competition to the formal course of physical education instruction, as well as a possible threat to girls’ health and well-being; thus, with its emphasis on folk and aesthetic dances, light tumbling, drills and other gentle forms of movement, the May Day program formed a perfect opportunity for the physical education instructor to demonstrate how her charges had improved during the year.⁷ From there, May Day festivities on campuses extended to include other aspects of earlier May Day celebrations, including the May pole, games, music and pageantry.

Oregon State Normal School Celebrates May Day
The majority of college May Day festivals originated between 1901 and 1920; many of the colleges were small, under 1,000 students. While there are some variations among colleges and even over time within the same institution, the typical May Day fete had five main components: the procession of the costumed participants, the crowning of the

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¹ The theatrical plays about the outlaw Robin Hood were tied to May games and plays since the early sixteenth century due “to the character’s association with summer, greenery and careless pleasure.” Author Ronald Hutton describes how interest in the outlaw spread socially as well as geographically with Morris dancers (also heavily associated with early celebrations of May Day). Common references to Robin Hood in May Day celebrations included the May queen being met with royal guards dressed in green as the Merry Men, Robin Hood’s company usually including Lady May, Friar Tuck, Little John, and Maid Marian (Hutton, 271). These plays continued with May Day celebrations on American campuses in the 20th century, including at Oregon Normal School. For more information, see Ronald Hutton, The Stations of the Sun (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), chapters 23, 24, 25, and 28.

⁵ Hutton, The Stations of the Sun, 295-296.

⁶ Thompson, May Day Festivals, 38.

⁷ Thompson, May Day Festivals, 52.
May Queen, the presentation of folk or aesthetic dances, the winding of the May pole, and the play or pageant produced for the Queen’s entertainment. Oregon State Normal School (OSNS), a small, rural school located in Polk County that offered classes in teacher training and managed the local training schools and rural teaching centers, honored both of these trends, as the first school in the mid-Willamette Valley to hold a May Day celebration, which occurred at a nearby field referred to as Cupid’s Knoll on May 5, 1902.

Although May Day was advertised as an OSNS campus celebration, citizens from the town of Monmouth were invited and participated in the event along with students from both the normal and training schools. The inaugural event was billed as an afternoon activity that included “a Maypole bearing the mottoes and emblems of each separate class and the athletic association, each pole draped with the respective colors.” In addition to a Maypole dance, the event featured sporting events, the crowning of the

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8 Thompson, May Day Festivals, 112-113.
9 The Oregon State Normal School, located in Monmouth, Oregon, was founded as Monmouth University in 1856 by the Disciples of Christ. It was renamed in 1865 as Christian College and consolidated with Bethel College nearby. In 1881, the school established a “normal department,” which was a primary method of teacher training at that time. The following year, the school was renamed Oregon State Normal School and became a public institution that focused on educating teachers and working with nearby children at the local training schools. After the school closed from 1909-1910 due to limited state funding, it reopened as Oregon Normal School in 1911. For a detailed history of Western Oregon University, see Ellis A. Stebbins and Gary Huxford, Since 1856: Historical Views of the College at Monmouth (Monmouth, Or: Western Oregon State College, 1996).
10 Of the three largest schools located in the Mid-Willamette Valley (Polk, Marion, and Yamhill Counties) at this time, Oregon State Normal School held the first May Day celebration in 1902, followed by Linfield College in 1904 and Willamette University in 1909; Marvin Henberg and Barbara Kitt Seidman, Inspired pragmatism: an illustrated history of Linfield College (Portland, Ore: Carpe Diem Books2007), 47; Robert Moulton Gatke and Robert D. Gregg, Chronicles of Willamette (Portland, Or: Binfords & Mort. 1943).
12 “May-Day Festivities,” 5.
May Queen and her procession, and a promenade concert by the Normal School Cadet Band open to the public. One noteworthy piece of the first May Day formal was the crowning of a male queen, John Tyler – this was due to “an unusual number of pretty girls in school, with the committee not being able to choose just one. A young man was chosen to be queen of May, John Tyler.” The Oregonian noted that, “the envious feelings usual on such occasions were avoided, for the ladies could not envy Queen John Tyler.” Regardless, the 1902 event focused more on sporting events for all to participate in: downhill and barrel races, potato and one-legged races, tug-of-war and a golf match.

The event was a major success: by 1903, the neighboring town of Independence reported that “the custom of celebrating May Day [bids] to become of the fixed events of the school calendar.” Administered by a faculty committee, the second May Day celebration featured “a float and hand-built carriage that carried the royal procession along with ladies of the faculty and students decked in school and class colors with flags and flowers, along with a carriage of citizens…An elaborate throne with canopy and decorated with bunting and a profusion of green boughs, blossoms and flowers.”

May Day was reported on in exquisite detail, so much that readers could visualize the event play by play:

The coronation ceremonies were as follows: after a flourish of trumpets by the royal heralds, the grand marshal and queen’s guards took position forming a broad avenue leading from the floats to the throne; another trumpet flourish and the flower girls marched down the avenue strewing flowers and singing a beautiful May song; grand flourish of trumpets and the royal procession started to the dignified march by the Royal Guards Band, the Archbishop leading, followed by Queen Crystal leaning on the arm of the Lord High Chancellor, the page bearing the train, the maids of honor bringing up the rear. The Archbishop ascended the dais in front of the throne, the Chancellor presented the queen while guards, flower girls, and maids of honor grouped themselves in picturesque attitudes. With the words “I crown thee, Crystal, queen of the May, in the name of the august faculty and thy loyal subjects, the

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14 Unfortunately, in no publication is it discussed why a man was chosen as queen in 1902, the only year I found that to have happened at Oregon Normal School; “May-Day Festivities,” The Morning Oregonian, May 7, 1902, 5.
16 “May Day Exercises,” 2.
students of the State Normal School…the band played “God Save the Queen”…the night closed with a promenade concert by the Normal Cadet Band at 8PM.17

The community was quite involved in May Day, to the point where the school encouraged their participation via local newspapers and was even granted a place in the procession on their own carriage. May Day activities continued in a similar fashion for the next decade, until a new tradition was invented: the awarding of a trophy by the Normal School president.

**The Institutionalization of May Day at Oregon Normal School**

The May Day celebration at Oregon Normal School (ONS) followed many national trends in education occurring at that time. In one of the books produced for colleges and schools to use in preparing for May Day festivals, Jeanette Lincoln, the former director of Physical Training for Women at the University of Illinois, described the May Day Festival as “becoming an established anniversary event in the country…In colleges and schools it supplie[d] a long-felt need for playground pastime and gives opportunity for a great number of children and “grown-ups” to engage in the spirit and merriment of the day.18 Secondly, pageantry was fast becoming a popular institution through schools and colleges in the United States. The American pageant was a visual experience with many facets: it was a work of art, secular not religious, an evening or afternoon of entertainment, taking place outdoors on a site itself a symbol of the event being celebrated.19 A definition of pageantry from 1914 described it as “something between a play and a procession…usually containing any or some of the elements of fancy costuming, dramatic scenes in prose of verse, instrumental or vocal music, dancing, pantomime, and tableaux.”20

While many pageants were written and standardized for elementary school children via the American Pageant Association starting in 1913, Oregon Normal School took pride in creating pageants every year written by teachers and students and performed by both Normal School students and the children at the Training School. This new emphasis was due to the hire of a new faculty member in the physical education department, Miss Laura Taylor, in 1914. Taylor provided a different perspective on the campus

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17 “May Day Exercises,” 2.
celebration of May Day, bringing with her knowledge of the origins of the holiday and its customs, as well as new ideas and training in physical education and pageantry. Taylor was placed on the planning committee and gave a public lecture on the history of May Day.

A second national trend that also occurred at Oregon Normal School was the leadership of the May Day celebration. From the 1890s through World War II, college and urban May Day festivals fell under the purview of the Physical Education department, where instructors used the May Day program as a showcase for the year’s work in dance and drills.21 Under the direction of Miss Taylor, May Day began a new focus on pageantry, drills, and dance in 1914, which lasted another 20 years.

Miss Taylor was a graduate of Columbia Teachers College in New York, which was known for producing college physical education instructors who were trained in “pageantry symbolism and aesthetics” and known for “taking their knowledge and their

21 Thompson, *May Day Festivals*, 49.
enthusiasm to the schools, colleges, and universities at which they subsequently directed May Day pageants.”

Miss Taylor took this knowledge and created an optional academic course to the Normal School’s curriculum: “Festival and Pageant Making,” which was offered during the spring term and whose aim was “to aid student[s] in selecting suitable occasions and subjects, in select[ing] related materials to make a balanced whole involving problems, artistic, creative, lyrical and dramatic.”

The class was offered during the same term that May Day was produced on campus as a way to not only teach students about how to run such programs as future teachers, but also as a way to merge the Normal School and Training School for practice and to better manage the celebration on campus.

![Figure 5. Miss Laura Taylor, Physical Education Department, from the 1914 The Norm.]

**Continued Growth: 1912-1916**

While those trends were occurring around the United States and on the Normal School campus, the May Day event continued to grow into a gala event, receiving local attention and articles in the local newspaper, the *Monmouth Herald*, months in advance of the event.

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22 Thompson, *May Day Festivals*, 76.
Fast becoming the most popular event on campus, the location moved from Cupid’s Knoll to the Normal School campus and expanded from an afternoon event to an entire day celebration. A new tradition was born in 1912: ONS President Ackerman awarded a silver cup to the class wearing the prettiest and most original costume. The town of Monmouth continued to be encouraged to attend through bi-monthly announcements in the Monmouth Herald. Additional activities in 1912 included a costume parade by Normal School students and the Training School children, a grand march of the royal procession around campus, individualized drills and dancing by each class, a dramatization of Robin Hood, and a baseball game between the Normal team and the Normal Cadet Band. May Day even received coverage in The Morning Oregonian (the state’s largest newspaper) in an article describing the day’s events and a photograph of students winding the maypole. This demonstrated to readers across the state that May Day was turning into the premier event at Oregon Normal School.

Figure 6. President’s Cup awarded to winning class, ca. 1922.

One of the compelling aspects of May Day at schools throughout the United States was how they were easily personalized by each generation of students.24 By 1913, the President’s Cup had turned into a contest with three to five judges from outside Monmouth ranking all contests of the day, including the parade, Maypole winding, athletic events (namely tennis), and the drills. It was touted as “a permanent event of the school, with an aim to make it a day full of interest and entertainment not only for students and teachers but for the public generally.”25 The 1913 May Day was noted as having more involvement from the community than in years’ past; the Monmouth Herald reported that “there was a large attendance of the citizens of Monmouth and

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25 “May Day at the Oregon Normal School,” Monmouth Herald April 25, 1913, 1.
vicinity…and that the Normal appreciated the Monmouth [city] band for the music furnished and the [city of] Independence Ball Club for making it possible to have a matched game of baseball.”

The May Day event not only built camaraderie among the campus but also with the nearby Monmouth community.

The 1914 event continued to invite and involve the greater community. The student yearbook reported that the seats were filled and overflowing and the campus dotted here and there with groups of friends and out of town people. The party continued into the evening with the Polk County Band giving a free concert in Monmouth’s Main Street Park Bandstand to “a large and appreciative audience, a feature which was the number of automobiles lined up, there being 17 present at one time.” The involvement of the band was one of the bridges to gaining local support of the May Day festivities, as it played an important role in the community: the community supported the band so much that it erected an eight-sided wooden bandstand in Main Street Park.

Figure 7. Female students playing tennis with crowd of spectators watching outside Campbell Hall. Slide #LS 2009.10.2.

26 “State Normal School Notes,” Monmouth Herald May 9, 1913, 1.
27 Oregon Normal School, The Norm (1914), 73.
The following year improved on invitations to the general public with the *Monmouth Herald* printing the schedule of events in the local newspaper a month in advance. Specifically, the newspaper announced that “an invitation has been extended to the teachers of Polk County to be present, and in all probability many of them will be with us. It is also hoped that the ranchers of Polk County may plan to give a holiday to their families by visiting the Normal School on that day and witness the exercises.” Local news asked nearby farmers to “bring well-filled baskets and have a picnic dinner in the grove and enjoy a social time with their neighbors.”

Reports of the 1915 May Day celebration all indicated that it was yet another success, for both the Normal School and the surrounding area. The *Oregonian* reported that: “More than 1,000 persons gathered on the Oregon Normal School campus Saturday to witness the annual May Day festivities. Considering that there were only approximately 300 students enrolled at ONS, it was quite a crowd. Many visitors brought picnic dinners and enjoyed a holiday; even the merchants closed their stores to join in the fete, and many of the alumni made it a home-coming day.” The 1915 School yearbook claimed the crowd was so large with folk from all of Polk County that it made one think of a Fourth of July celebration, typically the biggest event of the year for the community.

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The 1916 May Day celebration continued the trend of increased participation by the community. The *Monmouth Herald* reported that “all of Monmouth plans to take a holiday and the stores of the city will close from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. so that all may attend.” The crowd included distinguished guests such as Governor Withycombe with judges from Salem, Independence and Portland. The theme in 1916 was “Old English May Day,” much like those of the early revivals of the nineteenth century. This May Day Festival was distinctively different from previous ones, in that it aimed to celebrate the Tercentenary of William Shakespeare’s death, being carried out as an Old English May Day during the time of Good Queen Bess and William Shakespeare. After years of growth in the ONS May Day celebration, it fell directly into the revivals of Old English lore being represented at schools and colleges all over the country.

![Figure 10. Old English May Day Queen, Myrtle Cloyville, and her court celebrating the Tercentenary (300th anniversary) of Shakespeare’s death in 1916.](image)

**A Break in Tradition: 1917-1920**

After years of increased growth and popularity, the Oregon Normal School May Day celebrations were halted with the official entrance of the United States in World War I in April 1917. A decision was made to eliminate the Normal School’s May Day exercises due to war with Germany. Student funds set aside for use in the celebration

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were diverted towards funding a large patriotic event for both students and citizens of Monmouth. With war still raging in Europe, the 1918 May Day exercises were abandoned as well.

With the end of World War I in November 1918, the Oregon Normal School student body requested that May Day exercises be observed again. Meetings were held in April 1919 by the faculty committee, led by Miss Taylor, and students selected a May Queen and scheduled practices. May Day plans were completed and the date announced and advertised as late as May 9; later that week, however, it was announced that Monmouth and the Normal School were “in the grip of influenza,” complete with a quarantine ban on social activities.\(^3^5\) The Normal School was experiencing the third wave of Spanish influenza to hit the Monmouth area, the first and second waves having spread on campus in December 1918 and January 1919. According to local author Scott McArthur, some 40 Normal School students were stricken and the county health officer ordered the school closed for two weeks.\(^3^6\) Although Oregon Normal School and the nearby training schools reopened at the end of May, no May Day exercises were held for a third year in a row.

After three years of no May Day exercise, the Oregon Normal School students voted again to give up their traditional celebration, this time due to a new event that began during the war years: a combined Junior and Senior Class Day. This event also took place in the month of May, and students decided not to celebrate both in 1920. So for a fourth year in a row, no May Day activities were observed at Oregon Normal School. Even so, the academic course on pageantry and festival making continued to be taught at ONS during this time, preparing students to create such productions with children, as well as prepare for the time when May Day was once again celebrated on campus.

**Back with a Vengeance: the Return of May Day**

After a five-year hiatus, the Oregon Normal School began actively planning the revival of the May Day festival in 1921. A new tradition emerged as May Day was combined into the Junior Class day event, which was referred to as Junior Weekend. The event continued to be celebrated by people outside of campus; the *Monmouth Herald* printed the event schedule in advance with the message:

> A most cordial invitation is extended to the general public to attend all of these entertainments. It is suggested that families from the country

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\(^3^5\) “No New Cases Since Sunday,” *Monmouth Herald*, May 9, 1919, 1.

and towns nearby plan to bring lunch baskets and spend the day, Saturday, eating a picnic dinner in the grove on the campus. It is hoped many will find it convenient to attend this celebration as an excellent series of entertainments is being prepared...faculty and students will be pleased to have the people of Monmouth and vicinity as well as those of the surrounding towns come and enjoy the programs with them.37

Two new additions to the combined event were an evening dance party attended by students at the Normal School, as well as Oregon Agricultural College (now Oregon State University) and the University of Oregon. Male students at ONS also played a more prominent role by offering an evening stunt program (known as the 1921 Revue) open to the public the night before the May Day festival. The combined event drew large crowds from around the state, including Governor Olcott, and was reported with

37 “Many Features on May Day Program,” Monmouth Herald, May 6, 1921, 1.
photographs in the *Oregon Sunday Journal*. Even with a noted few years’ absence, the May Day celebration at Oregon Normal School remained one of the premier events in the state associated with the spring season.

The number of boys who participated in the May Day weekend increased again in 1922 with the addition of a vaudeville/burlesque show in the chapel. The *Monmouth Herald* reported on the continued support of the Monmouth and Polk County communities, along with the innovation of providing seats for a larger part of the crowd, making it more convenient for all to see.\(^3^8\) The theme of Old English and Merry May Day were once again a hit with the crowd.

![1923 May Day Pageant in front of Maple Hall.](image)

The May Day celebration continued to increase in size and popularity in 1923. *The Oregonian* reported that over 2,000 people attended the most elaborate event ever held on the Monmouth campus.\(^3^9\) As the red-letter event of the year, the town was taxed to capacity to accommodate the crowds that came to witness the festivities, with every incoming train and stage being loaded for the last two days.\(^4^0\) Some traditions were still embraced: old traditions such as the bell ringing from the old bell tower to signify the commencement of May Day reemerged, while the picnic lunch where local citizens and

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\(^3^8\) “Merry May Day and Its Programs,” *Monmouth Herald*, May 12, 1922, 1.


campus community alike gathered under the campus trees to enjoy the day was still publicized and encouraged.

The 1924 May Day Fete saw the largest crowd yet, as well as one of the most newsworthy events in its history. The number of community members flooded the Normal School campus, with over 3,000 people witnessing the festivities. Reported on in statewide, city and school newspapers, several visitors to campus were injured during the pageant:

The only thing to mar the pleasure of the day was the falling of the spectators seats on the south side of the court which resulted in injury to several people...The fall came while the Springtime of Oregon pageant was being presented. The stand was not crowded and an automobile located at the end of it helped to ease the fall.41

While the accident caused some delay in the program due to panic, traditional highlights such as the colorful drills, Robin Hood pageant, crowning of the May Queen and winding of the Maypole were discussed in lengthy detail after the celebration.

After the collapse of seating the previous year, the 1925 May Day Fete experienced a number of upgrades related to the high number of community members who came to the event. The Normal School introduced a more systematic approach to accommodate all the visitors on campus:

A special feature of the May Day exercises this year was the order and system displayed in handling students and spectators. The enlarged tennis courts proved an ideal place for the events and as no parking for automobiles was allowed around the courts there was room for all to see.42 Ushers [placed] chairs on the terrace facing the tennis courts and as many people as can be accommodated in the space [were] given seats. Rules [were set] in place for seating, an information booth was maintained on the front of campus, and designated areas for parking.43

In addition to the systematic changes in organizing the May Day festival, the most widely photographed part of the event was the male burlesque spoof of the May Queen and procession. Although the event still carried the traditional activities of Merry May Day, the crowd fully embraced the male students and their comedic rendition of May

41 “May Day Contests Won by Seniors,” Monmouth Herald, May 9, 1924, 1.
42 “May Day Doings Bigger and Better,” Monmouth Herald, May 15, 1925, 1.
43 “May Day Crowd is Now Awaited,” Monmouth Herald, May 8, 1925, 1.
Day held the night before. This act was in direct alignment with national trends: by the mid-1920s, men’s role had changed from passive spectator roles to young and testosterone-driven engagement in May Day spoofs, pranks, or scraps.\textsuperscript{44} 1925 was the most visible year for male engagement with the May Day Fete, building since the 1921 male stunt program.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 13. Men’s Burlesque Show, May Day, 1935.

Although 1921-1925 saw a surge in programming and number of community spectators, 1926 had an unexpected turn of events: May Day was canceled due to a smallpox epidemic. Between 200 and 300 Monmouth residents, many of them students at the Oregon Normal School, were vaccinated against the disease. This left a number of female students ill from the vaccine and resulted in the cancellation of the annual May Day celebration.\textsuperscript{45} The student newspaper, \textit{LAMRON} ("Normal" spelled backwards) reported that “This decision comes not only as a disappointment to the students and faculty, but also to the friends who look forward to visiting the campus on these gala days, for the May Day pageants that have been given here-to-fore under the supervision of Miss Taylor have won so much praise and favorable comment from the larger circles.”\textsuperscript{46} The \textit{Monmouth Herald} called the decision “a disappointment to students and residents of Monmouth alike, for the day has become an annual

\textsuperscript{44} Thompson, \textit{May Day Festivals}, 120.
\textsuperscript{45} McArthur, \textit{Monmouth, Oregon}, 206.
\textsuperscript{46} “A Few Events May Be Saved From Abandonment of May Day Program,” \textit{LAMRON}, April 26, 1926, 1.
holiday.” Although the spring dance was held at a later date, the 1926 event did not occur with the usual traditions.

The smallpox outbreak in 1926 did not put a damper on planning for the May Day celebration the following year. The LAMRON described spring and the Junior Weekend (which includes May Day) as:

Interesting events for everybody; it means an all-school vaudeville in which the men do some traditional stunts; it means the traditional May Day with its May Day Queen, its class processions, its May pole dances, folk dances, original drills, color, music; it means athletic contests and games with excitement running high for it also means the class contests for the President’s Trophy; it means an entrancing outdoor Junior Prom, an all-school party on the courts, to end it all; and last, but it really is first, it means a campus breakfast to start the early May morning with zip and zest for “May time is play time at O.N.S.”

The Oregon Normal School continued to embrace its traditions surrounding May Day while adding new acts to the day. The 1928 Fete saw an increase in the number of student organizations participating in the program, giving the program a more inward campus focus. While traditional drills and acts still took place, the student body put an emphasis on the election of a May Queen and the school dance. One example of this can be found in a poem entitled “Who Shall Be May Queen?” featured in the school newspaper, The LAMRON.

![Figure 14. “Ballots to be Cast for May Day Queen Nomination,” LAMRON, April 2, 1928.](image)

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47 “May Day Plans are Abandoned,” Monmouth Herald, April 23, 1926, 1.
48 “Spring Brings Preparations For Annual May Day Fete,” LAMRON, April 4, 1927, 1.
49 “Ballots to be Cast For May Queen Nomination,” LAMRON, April 2, 1928, 1.
The May Day Fete continued to be open to the general public and was met with crowds so large that many people had to stand through the popular burlesque performance the night before. The 1929 Fete was equally as large, with mention that “the railroad station is all humbug compared to May Day on the ONS campus.”

The Monmouth Herald acknowledged the abundance of May Day festivals, by reporting “although it is getting so that many May queens are selected in Western Oregon at this season of the year and rival May Day programs are numerous, the Normal celebration of the old English festival never fails to draw a throng of people.”

1930: Celebrating 75 Years of Monmouth’s Campus
The 1930 May Day Fete was exceptionally large, in that it included the celebration of three additional events on campus: the 125th anniversary of Lewis and Clark arriving in Oregon, the 100th anniversary of the first group of Americans to leave for Oregon and

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50 Oregon Normal School, The Norm (1929), 125.
51 “Students Await Turn of Weather,” Monmouth Herald, May 2, 1929, 1.
the 75th anniversary of the founding of the school. The newspapers also referred to this weekend as the annual homecoming event, one of the first times this term was coined on the Oregon Normal School campus. In addition to the routine scenes associated with May Day (May Queen, May pole and other dances), the pageants were filled with pioneer themes and music that depicted scenes of the coming of Lewis and Clark and their physical hardships. The Monmouth Herald ran an article with an invitation to the general public to:

…Help with making this weekend even better than the biggest success in the past. Everyone is urged to wear the costume of the years 1830 to 1860. Dig into your attic and produce great-grandmother’s gown, rejuvenate her little parasol and join the fun. Not only the girls but all the men are expected to join in the drifting back to years gone by. We hope to see beards and long hair cuts to match the pioneer costumes. In the words of the famous Nelson, Monmouth “expects every man to do his duty.” Come and do your bit.  

The Oregonian reported on this huge anniversary event in Monmouth with a number of articles, noting the combination of the traditional pageant with a pioneer theme and May pole dance. The multi-themed event was a huge success, and included more than 200 students dressed up in pioneer day costumes, with some of them depicting the part of Native Americans.

With the 1930 May Day celebration, it became noticeable that the increase in number of students attending Oregon Normal School made planning for May Day more difficult than in years past. Student enrollment had tripled; the Oregon Normal School was standardized by the U.S. Department of Education; and an increase in the number of male students occurred with the hire of a football couch and a new emphasis placed on athletics, especially football. The most noticeable change to the May Day event was that the evening dance was divided into multiple locations due to the student crowd being too large for any one location in Monmouth. Regardless, both the campus and surrounding community still enjoyed the annual May Day celebration at Oregon Normal School.

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52 “Leila Pound Wins Honor of May Queen, Pioneer Days to be Revived in Pageant” Monmouth Herald, April 17, 1930, 7.
53 Stebbins and Huxford, 93.
Figure 16. Scrapbook images from the 1930 combined May Day activities from the 1931 *The Norm.*
Changing Tide: 1931-1935

The beginning of the new decade witnessed a lot of turmoil and change at Oregon Normal School. Hearings were held on campus in 1931 after a committee was convened to investigate affairs at ONS under President Landers, who later resigned in the fall of 1932. The next ONS President, Julius Churchill, was remembered as leading by authoritative rule, one in which his relationship with student government suffered badly over how student fees were to be used on campus. These administrative challenges, along with deep budgets as a result of the Great Depression, altered campus events including May Day.

In 1931, the annual invitations to the citizens of Monmouth and surrounding areas and the printing of the day’s schedule in the Monmouth Herald stopped. The newspaper no longer featured weekly front-page articles, instead placing the May Day coverage, if any, towards the back of the paper. Invitations to the general public were replaced with a standing invitation to campus alumni. The LAMRON switched its focus to the election of the May Queen and dance, and to alumni memories.

By 1932, the emphasis has dropped from “May Day” (a springtime celebration of the season and the end of the academic year) to “May Fete,” which held a different connotation at the Normal School. While a May Queen was still elected by the student body, much of the event had become overly focused on athletic matches throughout the day, which corresponded with the new campus emphasis on athletics. Songs published in the LAMRON pointed to an inward focus on the campus instead of the community. May Day shifted to the second day of the two-day Junior weekend, with the placement of athletic competitions and the vaudeville show on Friday, and Saturday being reserved for the Queen’s procession, spring dance and some athletics, which remained open to the public. Academically, the pageantry and festival planning class finally ran its course, and stopped being offered in 1933 after almost 15 years.

While no specific reason exists for the change from a public May Day celebration to a more campus-centric approach, there were a number of factors leading up to this change, including: the shifting campus dynamic from female dominant to increased male student enrollment, a significant increase in student enrollment, the growth in campus buildings, and the standardization of education at ONS from the U.S.

54 In a letter dated August 26, 1931, Governor Julius L. Meier addressed his concerns regarding the ONS and President Joseph S. Landers to the Oregon State Board of Higher Education; Ellis A. Stebbins and Gary Huxford, Since 1856: Historical Views of the College at Monmouth (Monmouth, Or: Western Oregon State College, 1996), 109-111.
55 Stebbins and Huxford, Since 1856, 124.
Department of Education. Oregon Normal School was shifting from its origins to include other academic disciplines and interests such as athletics.

Although it had undergone changes to some of the original traditions, people still talked about the popularity of the May Day festival on campus. A 1934 local radio program called “Who’s Who in the Faculty Series” featured Miss Laura Taylor and her role in building up the May Day program. It told of how alumni and visitors recall with particular interest and pleasure of the truly beautiful May Day festival still presented on campus under Miss Taylor’s direction.  

Reimagining May Day: 1936-1947

Starting in 1936, the annual May Day celebration was absent from the Oregon Normal School’s catalog, yearbook and newspaper, as well as the community newspaper, just five years after one of the greatest celebrations on campus. May Day was replaced with a spring formal dance sponsored by the student club Collecto-Coeds, whose purpose was to aid coaches in handling spectators at athletic functions and to oversee all school affairs. By changing the sponsorship of the spring dance, May Day was surpassed by Homecoming and other alumni events at the end of the year. The only tradition kept alive was the crowning of a queen. The school did not celebrate any specific May Day activities from 1936-1940 under the sponsorship of the Collecto-Coeds.

The absence of any May Day events coincided with another major change to Oregon Normal School’s identity and population. In 1938, the school was renamed Oregon College of Education (OCE) and was fully accredited to expand its curriculum. During this change, enrollment continued to grow until World War II; when in 1942, the male student population plummeted. By 1943, there were only 3 male students on campus, and only 147 female students enrolled. Social life on campus was boosted with the presence of men training at Camp Adair fifteen miles south of Monmouth. Girls from OCE were transported on weekends to dances on the base, and men were brought to the campus for various events.

While male students were away fighting the war, in 1943 the May Fete started up after a five-year hiatus, serving as “a modernized rejuvenation of the old time May Day

57 Oregon Normal School, The Norm (1936), 57.
59 Stebbins and Huxford, Since 1856, 136-137.
celebrations at the school,” including an invitation to the public like in years past.\textsuperscript{60} These celebrations almost modeled the earliest May Day exercises, where men did not participate in most activities. Activities included the election of a May Queen and court, May pole dances, dancing on the tennis court and new athletic events such as ping-pong. The popularity and coverage of the May Fete paled in comparison to years’ past. The Collecto-Coeds eventually aligned the children’s Play Day at the Training School with the May Fete, much like in previous years on the Junior Weekends. During this time, the college issued public invitations again, although the crowds were never as large as they were in the 1920s.

Figure 17. 1944 May Day scrapbook photo of Queen and Princesses and schedule. Note the style of dress was not traditional May Day garb.

After the end of the war, the enrollment of men at OCE exceeded that of women, 198 to 145; this trend continued for the next four years.\textsuperscript{61} With the increase in male students, athletic teams were once again thriving on campus. For the next two years (1946 and 1947) the athletic club the Wolf Knights collaborated with the Collecto-Coeds to resurrect planning both old and new May Day activities, the focus being on

\textsuperscript{60} “May Queen Program in Campbell Hall,” \textit{Monmouth Herald}, May 14, 1942, 1.

\textsuperscript{61} Stebbins and Huxford, 140.
the coronation of the May Queen and her court. Instead of being open to the surrounding community, as in decades past, the event had officially turned into a campus event, with The LAMRON reporting, “This is the one day of the year belonging entirely to the students.”

May Day Tradition Put to Rest
Although 1946 and 1947 saw a brief revival of a May Day celebration on the OCE campus, it did not last for long. The following year started another absence of May Day events; after building up the May Day tradition for 33 years, it was replaced by Homecoming, alumni events and other formals such as the Sweetheart Ball. In 1960, the LAMRON reported that May Day was to be celebrated for the first time in several years on the OCE campus, including a public band concert, baseball game, street dance and winding of the May pole, events taken from the founding May Day activities. However, except for that year, May Day had vanished from the OCE campus.

The demise of the May Day celebration on the Oregon College of Education campus was not unlike other schools; most of the urban and rural community-based May Day celebrations continued throughout the 1920s and 30s and through the early 1940s, though they diminished in frequency, size, and ambitiousness of scope. Thompson recalls how many colleges ceased to hold the elaborate May Day pageants in the 1930s and 1940s. The dramatic decrease in the number of May Day events happened both in the United States and abroad; Ronald Hutton described how after 1930 the impetus behind the revived May games faltered as a result of the weakening of many communities and the closure of local schools that supported such events.

Locally, while Oregon College of Education (and all of its previous names) was the earliest school in the mid-Willamette Valley to celebrate May Day, with an emphasis on participation from community members for the first 30 years, it was the first to abandon this festival. Changes in becoming an accredited teachers’ college, the

63 The term “May Day” is not used again until the mid-1970s, but this time in an extremely different fashion. The LAMRON reported on a series of lectures offered by the OCE May Day Committee in 1976 and 1977. Although public offered, these lectures were not related to the springtime tradition on college campuses, but was about celebrating international workers’ rights. This speaks directly to the changes that came from the 1960s and 1970s
64 Thompson, May Day Festivals, 88.
65 Thompson, May Day Festivals, 119.
66 Hutton, The Stations of the Sun, 301.
67 Oregon College of Education ended by 1960, followed by Linfield College in 1969; Henberg and Seidman, Inspired pragmatism, 47.
student population moving towards men outnumbering women, and the introduction of master’s degrees in the early 1950s were some of the factors and influences happening close to the time of the end of the May Day celebration. While there is no specific event to pinpoint why May Day ended, certain characteristics in the changing environment at OCE and society in general led to a new focus internally on campus instead of its past strong connection to bridging “town and gown” like in its past as a Normal School.

The May Day celebration is still talked about on the Western Oregon University campus. To celebrate the centennial of Maple Hall in 2014, which was the Normal School’s first gymnasium and where many of the May Day events were held, there is talk of a revival of the May pole dance program. Using archival materials to visualize the costumes and read intricate descriptions of the dances and music performed by students and children, Western Oregon University may see the first May Day celebration on its campus in approximately 50 years. The elements and meaning behind the celebration of May Day are still prevalent today, although the traditional pieces such as dance, pageantry, and the Queen coronation are no longer practiced.

Figure 18. Female Students dressed in May Day dresses performing drills in Maple Hall, the school’s first gymnasium, circa 1916. Citizens and spectators watch from the back and above the balcony.
Additional Sources: Referenced but not cited


May Day Collection. Western Oregon University Archives.

Oregon State Normal School Lantern Slides Collection (MSS 17). Western Oregon University Archives.

Figure 19. Oregon Normal School's May Day Celebration featured in *The Oregonian*, May 12, 1912.
**Damond Morris** is a scholar of the Great Depression and recently taught a literary summer course, Theatre of the Great Depression, which helped guide his theatre direction of the play Awake and Sing by Clifford Odets, set in the Great Depression. He is currently PhD ABD and a Graduate Teaching Fellow in the Theatre Arts Department at the University of Oregon (UO), with an emphasis on theatre history. His dissertation looks at the formative forces of the Oregon Unit of the Federal Theatre Project, under the WPA, including the Little Theatre Movement, West Coast Vaudeville and the Oregon State Mythos. He holds an MA from Western Washington University and a Masters in Sustainability Leadership (Oregon Leadership in Sustainability) through the PPPM program at the UO. Damond has been an instructor at Seattle University, Western Washington University and Skagit Valley College.

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**Kylie Pine** is the collections manager at the Willamette Heritage Center. Her work processing collections and fielding research requests has introduced her to a wide variety of fascinating materials held by the Center. She is excited for this opportunity to use the Willamette Valley Voices to enhance the Center's understanding of these collections and make them more accessible to the public. Kylie is a graduate of Willamette University and received her Master's Degree in Museology from the University of Washington. Most recently she worked on helping develop exhibits for the new Oregon State Hospital Museum that opened October 2012.

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**Ashley Sharratt** is the Museum Coordinator at the Linn County Historical Museum and the Assistant Records Manager at the Willamette University Archives. She realized her place in the archives and museum while studying for her B.A. in History at Willamette University. She completed her M.A. in Museum Studies from the University of Kansas in May 2012, after which she came back to Oregon.
Julie Voelker-Morris is an educator, editor, writer and artist. With a focus on gender and the arts, as well as ways of engaging undergraduates in instructional practice, Julie has been an instructor for the University of Oregon's Arts and Administration Program for 10 years. Additionally she serves as Copy Editor for the National Art Education Association’s journal, Studies in Art Education, and as Co-Editor for CultureWork: A Periodic Broadside for Arts & Culture Workers (http://culturework.uregon.edu). She has a special interest in issues related to gender and art, art and oppressions, and various elements of performance, process, and production of identity, particularly through theatrical and visual arts. The history of the arts and community engagement related to civic responsibility is of special interest as well. She has conducted independent research on the history of large-scale theatrical pageants in Eugene, portrayals of comic book superheroes, and local birth stories.
The Willamette Heritage Center seeks to "inspire, connect and encourage understanding, engaging community to preserve and share our heritage."

Willamette Valley Voices is the Center's bi-annual publication. The goal of the journal is to offer scholarly research about the history and heritage in Oregon's Willamette Valley, south of Portland, written by scholars, students, historians - professional and amateur, and those working in the heritage profession.

Its purpose is to promote historical scholarship focused on the communities of the area. Each edition is themed to orient authors and readers to widely varied and important topics in Valley history. Exploring the Valley's heritage is a part of a continuing process and dialogue of which Willamette Valley Voices is the newest vehicle for preserving the Valley's history and sharing its stories.

This issue offers articles about Community Celebrations. These celebrations give us an important sense of belonging. They help us answer questions about histories, communities and self and group identities. Community celebrations are important for socialization, for newcomers to an area and for a community's children. Through participation, young and old alike learn of their heritage and culture.