

May Fete: Northwest's lost rite of spring

Celebrations of all kinds are deeply woven into the fabric of life at Northwest. Commencement, Homecoming, Walkout Day and the Yuletide Feaste are just a few of the special gatherings that help ease the routine of studying and going to class.

During Northwest's early years, the annual May Fete was a popular event that signaled both the return of mild spring weather and the impending close of the academic year.

The first such festivals were organized by women enrolled in physical education classes and consisted of folk dances performed around a traditional maypole – the high vertical beam wreathed with flowers and colorful streamers that has been part of European folk tradition for centuries.

As time passed, the number of students involved in Northwest's "May Day" celebration grew steadily, and sometime in the early 1920s the term "May Fete" was coined.

By 1923, more than 120 students were involved in what had become an ornate pageant highlighted by the coronation of the Queen of May. Lethel Garten wore the first crown and held court amid a bevy of costumed dancers in flowing robes.

In 1935, more than 600 people participated in an event that featured elaborate scenery, ornate costumes, an orchestra, a chorus and comedic acting and dancing.

Three years later, in 1926, there were four queens, which allowed each class to pay royal homage to its own representative. The celebration

also was expanded to include schoolchildren enrolled at Horace Mann.

The heyday of the May Fete came in the late



1920s and early '30s when it was directed by physical education instructor Nell Martindale. Arriving at Northwest in 1928, Martindale had already acquired a reputation for organizing elaborate May Day celebrations at the University of North Dakota.

During her tenure at Northwest, Martindale worked to make each May Fete more elaborate than the last. In 1935, more than 600 people participated in an event that featured elaborate scenery, ornate costumes, an orchestra, a chorus and comedic acting and dancing.

It was the biggest Fete ever – and the last. Martindale left Northwest at the end of that year, and the event was consigned to history. It lives on only in old photographs, yellowed newspaper clippings and faded memories. ■



(Top) Students take part in May Fete by wearing elaborate costumes and flowing robes. The event also had a pageant that crowned a student the Queen of May.

(Bottom) Richard Barrett and Hermene Baur stand in the "Bucket of Love" float. The celebration of May Fete reached great popularity in 1928 before ultimately ending in 1935.