

Traditions Night Block Party

Thursday, September 23, 2010, Bobby Dodd Stadium

Dr. G.P. “Bud” Peterson

President, Georgia Institute of Technology

(As written; not necessarily as delivered)

Welcome

Good evening everyone. Welcome to T-Night. We're talking about traditions, and T-night itself is a tradition. We hope after you leave tonight, you'll have a new appreciation for the history of Georgia Tech and you'll understand why you should be proud to be a Ramblin' Wreck from Georgia Tech.

These are exciting times, and in fact, for Tech it is a year of celebrations. We're celebrating Tech's 125th anniversary. It's the 50th anniversary of the Rambling Wreck. And, it's the 50th anniversary of the integration of Black students at Tech.

How many of you are freshmen, or should I say RATS? You can be proud of yourselves, and you can be proud of Tech. Here's why. You are the best qualified and most diverse freshman class in Tech's history, and you are among the largest. You are attending one of the best public universities in the nation. When you graduate, you will be prepared as a leader and innovator, and join the more than 125,000 proud Georgia Tech alumni throughout the world.

We're here to talk about traditions and history, and have a little fun. What I do want you to remember is that our biggest tradition is excellence.

John Heisman

Because we're in a football stadium tonight, I thought I would start with that. It is interesting to note that in 1903 the Tech Athletic Association hired its first full-time football coach. John W. Heisman agreed to \$2,250 and 30% of the net gate receipts from all varsity games. The only problem was, we didn't have a gate. We didn't have a field. So we built one. In his first year, Heisman led the team to victories over Tennessee, Florida and Cumberland, a tie with Clemson, and a 23-6 win over Georgia.

Women at Tech

While Tech opened its doors as the Georgia School of Technology, in 1948 the name changed to the Georgia Institute of Technology under Tech's fifth president, Blake Van Leer. We can also thank him for bringing women to the Institute.

I know it is hard to believe, but for the first 67 years of the Tech's existence, women weren't allowed in Tech's full-time programs. Under the leadership President, Blake Van Leer, that all changed.

In the spring of 1947 President Van Leer proposed to the Board of Regents that they consider changing the policy at Georgia Tech. The proposal was controversial. There were a number of letters in the Technique from students opposing the idea. The list of reasons for this opposition included a need to rearrange dorms and classes - Tech might even have to install bathrooms for women - and perhaps one of the most compelling reasons was that it might make it harder to get football tickets!

The regents actually rejected President Van Leer's proposal to admit women. The exact reason is unknown, but it was probably related to either football tickets or bathrooms.

What happened next, however, is a great example of the power of women working together. President Van Leer enlisted Tech's librarian, Mrs. Dorothy Crosland, to help. She had been Tech's librarian for 20 years and had great personal influence with several of the regents and others in the community. Tech's First Lady Ella Van Leer and Dot Crosland helped to mobilize a number of outside women's groups. They worked on the issue for three years. The Tech student council adopted a resolution favoring the admission of women, and the faculty and administration strongly supported the admission of women as well.

On April 9, 1952 the regents voted to admit women on a full-time basis. In the fall of 1952, Georgia Tech welcomed its first female students to campus, Diane Michel and Elizabeth Herndon.

[Pictures of Elizabeth Herndon, Diane Michel, Shirley Mewborn.]

Tech's first two women graduates in 1956 were Diane Michel and Shirley Clements.

Shirley Clements Mewborn, who served as the first female president of the Georgia Tech Alumni Association and was a successful executive, has been an inspiration to thousands of Tech women and the Shirley Clements Mewborn softball field is named in her honor.

Today, 1/3 of Tech students are women, and they lead 42% of student groups. Tech is the Number One producer of female engineering graduates in the country.

Drownproofing

Tech has had a number of great traditions over the years, some of which we continue to practice, and some we don't.

(Photo of Drownproofing 101 class)

If you were a male student from 1940 to 1985, you couldn't graduate without taking Drownproofing 101. Swim coach Fred "Crankshaft" Lanoue taught water survival skills. Students were required to float and swim with wrists and ankles bound and use only their teeth to retrieve rings from the bottom of the pool. In the late 1950's it was included in the U.S. Navy's survival training.

George P. Burdell

(Photo of George P. Burdell silhouette on Time Magazine cover)

I was asked my favorite tradition, and that is a man who shares my name, at least in part, George P. Burdell. He has continuously been attending Tech since 1927 when student Ed Smith was mistakenly sent two Georgia Tech enrollment forms. He enrolled himself and George P. Butler, his high school principal and an avid UGA fan. He later changed the last name to Burdell. George graduated from Tech, but has remained to earn multiple degrees. In addition, he briefly continued his education at Harvard. On at least three different occasions, he has signed up for every class offered at Tech. He flew a B-17 Bomber with the 8th Air Force in England during World War II, and has documented service in almost every war ever since. He earned a varsity letter in basketball at Tech. He has authored numerous letters to the editor at the Atlanta Journal. One of his most impressive feats occurred when TIME Magazine conducted an online poll to choose their person of the year for 2001. He led all the candidates in the poll until the magazine removed his name. He has been paged at sporting events, on airplanes, and in hotels all over the world. I've received e-mails from him. And I'm honored to say he attended my investiture ceremony last year, although I didn't have the opportunity to meet him. When we had the groundbreaking for the new G. Wayne Clough Undergraduate Learning Commons, we had a hardhat waiting for him with his name on it. Sometimes when I am speaking, I add his name to the special guests that I thank for coming. So, to all of you students, including my friend George P. Burdell, welcome to Georgia Tech.