PETER CARINI: Welcome back to *Hindsight is 20/19*, the podcast where we look at 250 years of Dartmouth’s history through 25 objects from the Library’s archival collections, one per decade. I’m Peter Carini and I’ll be your host for this episode.

Some decades are just difficult. The 1880s is one of those. It’s not that nothing happened, but it’s just an odd time period. I mean, can you think of something major from the 1880s off the top of your head? I don’t mean just Dartmouth, I mean nationally. Sure, if you’re into the history of science there’s the rise of electricity and the invention of the light bulb. Yes, the Brooklyn Bridge was completed and opened for traffic and Mark Twain published *Huckleberry Finn*. Gunslingers like Wyatt Erp and Jesse James gained names for themselves. But really, can you tell me what Chester Arthur was up to? How about William Henry Harrison? It’s just not a decade that really stands out.

It’s the same at Dartmouth. Believe me, I looked. I delved deeply into the financial crisis that engulfed the College at the time. I investigated President Bartlett’s conflict with the faculty and the alumni. I looked at the history of the Agricultural College that became the University of New Hampshire after it separated from Dartmouth. But it really felt like so much inside baseball, even to someone who wallows in the College’s history on a daily basis. Not the stuff of a scintillating podcast episode.

I was stumped. I was even a bit worried. Then a colleague reminded me of this object I’ve run into over and over again while looking into some of the more scurrilous Dartmouth traditions and I had it! Hazing. Oh yes, we’re going to go there.

I’m holding this little, disc of wood in my hand. It’s maybe about the size of a quarter and maybe as thick as four quarters stacked together. [drop it on the table] Don’t worry, it’s not breakable. It has writing on it that states “Taken from ’85 Sept. 16, ’82.” The writing is in black, but has been outlined in red. This innocent looking piece of wood is actually part of one of the more violent of the freshman sophomore “competitions” known as Cane Rush.

But before we dig into Cane Rush, let’s take a look at the issue of hazing at Dartmouth. Like most colleges of any age, Dartmouth has a long and complex history with hazing.

In fact, a certain kind of hazing often associated with English public schools, known as fagging, defined as working hard at a tedious task, was actually written into the College’s official rules in 1780. The rules stated that “Freshman shall at times appointed for diversion do the necessary errands for all Senior Classes, who have themselves served a freshmanship provided they be not sent more than half a mile.” You can imagine what this type of rule led to in the hands of less than scrupulous upper classmen. In 1795, the freshmen, fed up with running errands, decided to run them as a group with a band for accompaniment. When the faculty objected, the class agreed to forgo this privilege when they were upper classmen on the condition that they wouldn’t have to continue to run errands. This led to the official abolition of this rule, though similar practices persisted unofficially well into the 20th century. Interestingly, it was the students, as much as the faculty and administration who objected to hazing and they several times tried to do away with the practice.

In the 1869 the editors of the *The Dartmouth* bemoaned the lack of originality of the current sophomore class who could only manage things as mundane as oiling or spreading molasses on the chapel seats. In 1870s, the Editors called for the abolition of the practice of hazing. A vigorous back and forth went on between the editors and those who saw hazing as an essential part of College life.

In 1898, the students voted to ban all hazing. What’s interesting about this is that many practices that we would consider hazing today, remained in place even after hazing was banned. It was only those who went too far who were seen as being in violation of the moratorium. The regular hazing of the Freshman continued unabated so long and no one got hurt or otherwise damaged the College’s reputation.

So why were freshmen the target of hazing? Well they were new to the College for one thing, but it also had to do with class loyalty. In the 19th century, class loyalty was highly valued and it was encouraged through a variety of competitions, primarily between the freshman and sophomore classes. When I say competitions, I’m not talking about carefully organized baseball games, but rather something much more ad hoc and chaotic. This brings back us to our object for this episode.

Cane rush grew out of an old tradition that under classmen were not allowed to carry canes. Dartmouth has a long history with canes. In the early years of the College canes were seen as a symbol of gentlemanliness and maturity and the Freshmen were not considered worthy of this distinction. Later, the senior class would all purchase the same cane as symbol of their class unity, not dissimilar to a class ring. In 1902 this developed into the Indian Head cane. Seniors would carve their initials into the same way you might sign someone’s yearbook.

During Cane Rush, the freshmen would show up at some public place or event—chapel, a less than welcome requirement for students in this time period, was a favorite—carry several canes. The Sophomores, hoping for some fun, and an excuse to disrupt the peace, and avoid chapel, would post lookouts. When the lookout spied the freshman approaching with a protective gaggle around two or three of their number carrying canes, they would shout a warning to their fellow classmates and the fun would begin.

Well, fun is one way to put it.

The Sophomores would charge out of Chapel and give chase. The idea was to wrest the canes from the Freshman. The contest was apparently without rules, and quickly devolved into violence to both persons and property. It would last for hours with students chasing after each other, leaping over fences, running through public and private spaces and fighting all over campus and indeed the town. The students even went to the extent of stripping to the waist and greasing their bodies to make themselves harder to apprehend. As you can imagine it was not a contest that the College administration viewed with much favor and it did not help with town/gown relations either. The winners would cut up the offending canes and distribute the pieces among the class member, which is why we have this little disc.

Despite the scowls of the faculty and the President, cane rush was such a big deal that it warranted reporting on it in the New York Times, or maybe the 1880s were as slow on newsworthy events as they are on podcast worthy events!

While it’s tempting to view this particular tradition as unique to Dartmouth, it was in fact a common tradition at colleges and universities across the country. A quick search on the internet turns up references to the tradition at Harvard, Columbia, Washington and Jefferson College and New York University. At Harvard *The Crimson* reported that Cane Rush came to a screeching halt in 1884 when a Freshman, fleeing his aggressors with a cane, struck one of them on the shoulder only to discover that he had assaulted not a fellow student, but the President of the College. Not to be outdone, the President struck him back bloodying his nose.

Over the course of the 19th and 20th century, Cane Rush appeared, was banned by the faculty and reappeared, in what I think of as the push-down, pop-up effect. This is where the students come up with some enjoyable (to them) distraction from their studies that eventually gets out of hand and is band by the faculty and/or administration, only to have it immediately re-emerge in a new guise. A good example of this, discussed by Sara Holston in the episode “c. algebraicus mechanicus,” is the tradition of math burial. When the faculty forbade the burial of books on the Green, the student turned to burning them on a pyre. Cane Rush has a similar history. When the faculty banned it, the students came up with Football Rush and when that was banned brought Cane Rush back…or is it the other way around. Well, who knows for sure and it’s not really important either way, since I’m sure you get the point. While the students and even the faculty didn’t view this has hazing at the time, it would definitely fit the definitions today.

Freshmen were the most likely targets for hazing whether individually or as a class and most early Dartmouth traditions revolved around freshmen being harassed by sophomores in ways not dissimilar to Cane Rush. Another example of these class hazing traditions is the Freshman Picture Fight. This is one of the oddest of all the traditions, though like Cane Rush it is not unique to Dartmouth. The idea was that Freshmen would have a class picture taken somewhere within the limits of the town of Hanover that included at least one of their class officers. It was the job of the Sophomores to stop them. This rivalry reached such extremes that the freshman would secretly send their class officers to White River Junction the night before the picture to assure their safety. When the Sophomores learned of this tactic, they started to systematically hunt down the freshman class officers and beat them up so badly that they were confined to the infirmary due to their injuries and could not escape town. It was about this time that College authorities stepped in to end this tradition.

Despite student and faculty attempts to end hazing, it remained a part of College life until 1993. Even then it was only banned by the College because the State of New Hampshire created a law that makes hazing illegal. Cane Rush appears to have disappeared in the mid 20th century, though firm dates for the beginning and ending of these types of traditions are really hard to pin down. The Indian head cane remained a Dartmouth tradition into the mid 20th century. The vestiges of Dartmouth’s fascination with canes can still be seen today. During Commencement when members of the various secret societies march carrying canes representing their society.

Thus, canes remain an important part of Dartmouth student life. Even though cane rush has probably, thankfully, disappeared.

Thank you for listening and we hope you continue to enjoy *Hindsight is 20/19*.

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