
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Homecoming

When I left home for college, my grandfather drove me from Chicago to Macomb, Ill., in his 1970s beige Chrysler Newport. My belongings didn't take up much space in the big old Newport, which reinforced the smallness I felt at leaving the comfort of home for the unknown of college. The trip took about four hours and my feelings went from worry to wonder to joy and back again.

When grandpa and I arrived at Western Illinois University, we learned I had been "mis-coded" as Michelle—not Michael—and was assigned to an all-female residence hall. Of course, I was thrilled, but sadly the mistake was discovered before I could even unload a single lonely bag.

My reassigned room was 415 Olson Hall and my first roommate was an anxious fellow who didn't stay long enough for me to even learn his name. The next roommate was perhaps not quite anxious enough and his laidback style proved less than optimal for residence hall living. By the time the first day of classes arrived, so did Joe. The third time was a charm. We enjoyed a great friendship throughout our freshman year as we worked through all the newness of home-away-from-home.

Moving away from home is a big deal. It means growing up. Moving into Olson Hall gave me an extended family, a place to grow, to make mistakes, and a home that once again, I was required to leave.

However temporary our years in college may be, those initial freedoms found by moving away from home are significant – so significant that we have created an entire tradition around our college home-away-from-homes – homecoming.

We will celebrate homecoming on the Emporia State University campus this month. The tradition dates back to the fall of 1922. The Sunflower yearbook for 1923 describes

this new tradition as a special effort, "...to get all the graduates to return to the old stamping grounds and reimburse some of the spirit that will keep them young."

Through the years, our homecoming traditions have been as varied as the times. During the 1920s, students designated multiple homecoming queens each year including a queen for beauty, one for cleverness, and one for athletics, among others. In 1936, the students altered tradition and elected a single queen and changed her title to Peggy Pedagog to more accurately reflect the mission of Kansas State Teachers College – a tradition that held strong through the mid-1960s. During the 1970s, students eliminated homecoming royalty from the festivities altogether. But, by the 1980s the tradition returned.

These variations on a theme are true for all of the homecoming activities. We've had years with a parade and years without. We've had burlesque shows, variety shows, and Broadway musicals. Sometimes students held big homecoming dances following the football games and sometimes the community hosted a concert at the Civic Auditorium – John Denver, for example, was the headliner in 1972.

Despite all the variation in festivities, I think the 1923 yearbook writers got it right. The important thing is to keep drinking in the spirit of your home. Whether that is your childhood home, Olson Hall, or perhaps your larger community, there are connections to keep with friends who've come before and connections to make with those who will come after. Let us continue to reinvent our traditions as we celebrate both leaving home and homecoming.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
