
What to acquire and preserve, to understand a university

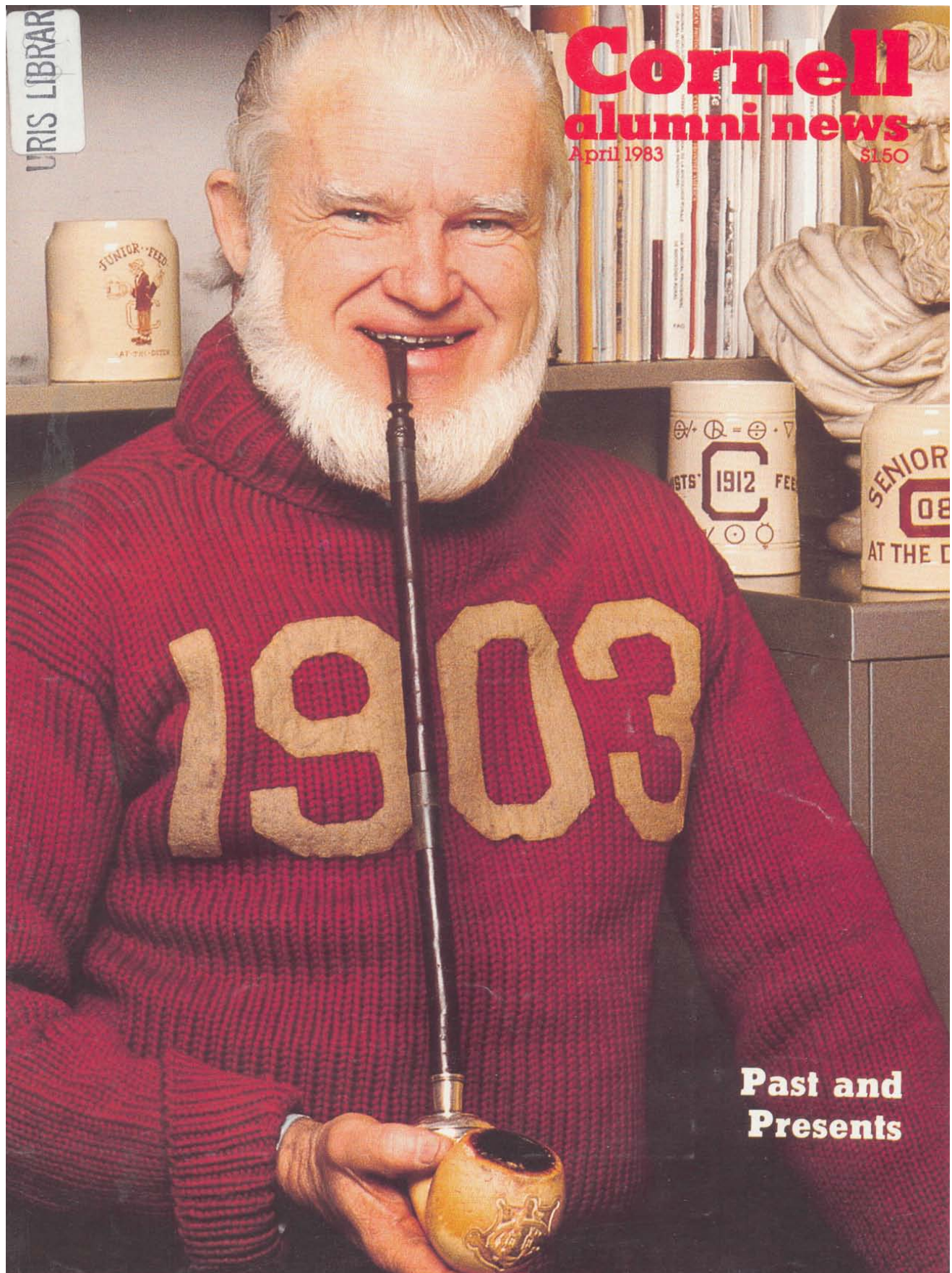
by Gould Colman

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(cover story)



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Cover

Gould Colman '51, the university archivist, smokes the Class of 1878 pipe, amidst other items of historic interest. He discusses his job in the next column.

What to acquire and preserve, to understand a university

Gould Colman '51 has gathered and interpreted evidence of the university's past nearly continuously since he first arrived on the Hill thirty-six years ago. The fruits of his labor are found regularly in this magazine in pictures and accurate information obtained by us from the University Archives. In a talk to the annual workshop of class officers earlier this year, he explained how a university saves and records its past, and what role alumni might take in the process. The following article is adapted from that talk.

Colman went on from his undergraduate years to earn a PhD in American history in 1961; serve as historian of the College of Agriculture; publish *Education and Agriculture*, a history of the college; head the Cornell Program in Oral History in the University Libraries; and then was named university archivist in 1972. He also found time in 1976 to be coauthor of *Area Development through Agricultural Innovation*.

Cornell is always moving along. It is becoming and has been becoming since Ezra Cornell and Andrew D. White realized that the higher education they had known was not sufficient. My colleagues in the Cornell University Archives and I can prove that Cornell has been becoming for at least 125 years because, among other evidence, we have the papers of President White and Ezra Cornell, not just speeches and articles where they faced contemporaries and generations to come, but also diaries and family correspondence which enable us to look behind appearances.

The university benefited from the survival and good health of other universities. The intricate dance of competition and cooperation in higher

education is documented by the records of Cornell's academic departments and administrative offices and in personal papers which faculty members or their families have donated to the University Archives.

East Avenue on the Cornell campus was once lined with the Ostrander Elms, and with homes of the faculty and of the university president. Classrooms, laboratories, and library were only a short walk away, and the quadrangle was handy for faculty and students inclined to play baseball. Much information about professors and students in that community was readily available to observers. Students so observed, in letters home and in the Cornell Era and other publications, which are also preserved in the University Archives.

Researchers from the US and abroad, established and beginners, come to our reading room in Olin Library or, in the happy instance of some collections such as the papers of Willard ['01] and Dorothy Straight, obtain access through microfilm. Usually these scholars are exploring large questions: aspects of the New Deal, the impact of McCarthyism on higher education. Such use advances scholarship. In considering * 'becoming Cornell' I want to move along less traveled roads in order to make them better

Connected with large and small events are antecedents and consequences which may have greater significance for becoming Cornell than the events themselves. In other words, things are only part of what they are. Take antecedents: A six-page manuscript in the University Archives entitled "Remarks by Arthur W. Brodeur, Big Red Barn, March 3rd, 1978" takes note of Mr. Brodeur's departure from Cornell for another position in Boston. The remarks are witty, humorous, replete with literary references, just what a Cornell audience would expect from the principal speech writer for Cornell President Dale Corson.

In case you think Art Brodeur '58 didn't deliver the remarks, let me assure you that he did, but that does not mean he wrote them. Who did then? Acting on a tip from Glenna Thaler, assistant director of the Cornell University Council, I put the question to Dale Corson. Yes, he said, I wrote the speech. It was a reversal of roles for a colleague and friend.

Consider the Cornell Graphic, a photo-newspaper published by students from 1923-1926. Officially speaking, the Spring Day issue for 1926 does not exist. It was confiscated for reasons not readily apparent today but all too evident to those who maintained Cornell's standards of morality in the 1920s. Perhaps I should have omitted the Spring Day issue when microfilming the Cornell Graphic for long term preservation but it was included because it exists, thanks to Col. Jerome Loewenberg '29. He was a fraternity brother of the business manager.

When the issue was confiscated Loewenberg managed to save a few copies, one of which is now in the Archives. And there is more to the story. A community sense of outrage or rather an adult sense of outrage on behalf of the community was not satisfied with confiscation. The editor of the issue was expelled and the business manager placed on disciplinary probation.

The written word was risky then, even when presented with reason and references. In November 1928 an article entitled "Student Marriage" appeared

in *The Columns*, a student journal published from 1926 to 1929. The author was Huntington Sharp '29. The article began, "Five thousand undergraduate men and women at this university are in constant and intimate social contact. We ask, what should our physical relations be that we may live our college years most happily and successfully?"

After a well organized presentation with respectful references to university authorities the answer appears three pages later in the concluding sentence, "Apparently education must endeavor to eliminate promiscuity and society must revise its economic standards to make room for undergraduate marriage."

The scholarly treatment did not save the author from censure for selecting an inappropriate subject. What became Cornell's wave of the future, in 1926 was a student making waves. "The reaction of the university was explosive," Sharp wrote in a recent letter. "First the entire *Columns* staff was suspended; then the business staff was reinstated; third the editorial staff was then reinstated except for me. I went on probation, threatened with dismissal, kept on probation the balance of my junior year, reinstated at start of my senior year."

Lest you conclude that Cornell was unusually sensitive to matters of sex and gender among its students, Sharp reports that his father, a professor at Boston University, was horrified and so was his mother.

How far does the University extend into the lives of people it touches? A vision of Cornell as happy oasis in a troubled world is described somewhat self-consciously in the Junior Week Guide for 1914, a sixty-four page publication in handsome leather cover dedicated "To you, Miss Junior Week Girl." Those fortunate girls were welcomed with these words: "We, as college men, live in an atmosphere entirely foreign to the outside world, revolving, as it were, in a sphere of our own. We want you to acquaint yourself with our little world and be happy in it, at this, the gayest time of the year."

As university archivist I am often reminded that Cornell extends beyond the bounds of Fall and Cascadilla creeks and the Medical College in New York City and the Agricultural Experiment Station at Geneva. A well-worn copy of *Songs of Cornell* which once belonged to Frank Hibbard '14 bears the dedication, "Songs I would like to sing with you." We may presume from the dedication that the book was used as a courting device although according to Mr. Hibbard's daughter the words were romantic license.

"Mother," she wrote, "couldn't sing." However, the book was not lost as a prompter of family bonds. "My father and I," his daughter continued, "wore the book out with his violin and my piano playing." The boundaries of Cornell were thereby extended, however invisibly, until Mr. Hibbard's daughter came forth with the evidence.

I share this story to make a point more than parenthetical. In the event that your memory contains evidence about becoming Cornell which should be in the University Archives, the address is 101 Olin Library. I have learned much about Cornell from talking with Cornellians but sorry to say, I have forgotten much. We need to get recollections into a form which will stand the test of time. We need to get personal papers and other records where they can be preserved and retrieved.

The Class of 1912 represents a time when class consciousness was at its height, which I note as well because we have many records and mementos in the Archives from that four-year group. For them, rites of passage marked progress from entry to graduation—the mud rush, freshman banquet, cap burning parade, sophomore smoker, junior feed, and so on.

Class unity was promoted in a lead-off ritual, the mud rush, by the threatening sophomore pictured in a poster that announces the event:

*The time has come ye Frightened Frosh,
When in the mud your face we'll wash,
We'll print our numerals in your gore
We'll leave you with few clothes before
And far less clothes behind—
So hide your faces in the slosh
Oh tender, terrored, trembling Frosh.*

The mud rush, actually a tamed down version of class hijinks of earlier years, coincided with the freshman banquet. In the poster the booted soph tells the abused frosh, “Wow I wish you had a banquet every day!!”

Usually the work of getting together class books which update the activities of class members twenty-five years or so after graduation falls to one or two dedicated people. To indicate how valuable I consider these compilations to documenting the work of Cornell I assure you if I could regulate the gates of Heaven I would make a wide passage for Willard Beahan of the Class of 1878 and his successors in these endeavors.

We are indebted to Mr. Beahan for a survey of his class thirty years after graduation. We have the many biographical sketches he prepared, but we also have his correspondence with class members, the source material from which he worked. Among the records of progress up the career ladder I was struck by a single word “housewife” after the name of Esther G. Williams in the class book. How would you summarize what Mrs. Williams had written to Mr. Beahan from Ashtabula, Ohio in May of 1909?

“It was my ambition to be a lawyer and I commenced the study of law with—my father—but as I progressed I found it less and less attractive and finally gave it up—before I had enough for admission to the—Bar. It was such a long time ago that I scarcely ever think of it and really do not think it worth mentioning in the—History—because I did not make a success of it you see—

“I taught Latin and English and various other things in the High Schools of Jefferson and Ashtabula for three years and spent a year in Santa Fe, New Mexico with my uncle Geo. W. Julian—as his private secretary—when he was Surveyor General of the Territory. I do not think of anything else I did or tried to do except to have a good time at home. I was always very successful at that.”

Grateful though I am to Mr. Beahan I prefer the approach taken in the twenty-five year books of the Classes of 1956 and 1957, allowing class members—within limits—to have their say. In 1957 Mrs. Williams’s letter would have been published in its entirety.

Back to boundaries: Some years ago when immersed in research in the stacks of Mann Library I was approached by Henry Murphy, the Mann librarian who was accompanied by a middle-aged couple with a carefully wrapped bundle. The couple was noticeably nervous. Finding me was evidently a matter of importance and success in the quest, a matter of considerable relief. The bundle turned out to contain the scrapbook which the gentleman's father kept while a student at Cornell sixty years earlier. During his declining years this book had been one of his greatest pleasures. Now his family was bringing the scrapbook where it would be understood and appreciated. Cornell's boundary was extended in the lives of a truck driver and his wife as they entered a university for the first time to bring closure to a father's life.

—*Gould P. Colman '51*