What do a gum-covered tree and a curious shape that cropped up in a sidewalk have in common? Both are part of an exclusive repertoire of practices, legends and stories unique to the collective tradition of Truman State University.

Some of the best and most memorable times of our lives most likely occurred during our college days. School traditions often help to define a college experience that not only unites current students but also creates fond memories for alumni. When thinking back on the “Good 'Ole Days” at Truman State University, what comes to mind?
Tradition at Truman State University reaches across the span of time. In the early days of the University in the late 1800s, a 16-foot-deep lake occupied the area now known as the Quadrangle. Atop the lake grew water lilies that, as tradition has it, adventurous young men would swim out to collect for their girlfriends. The lake was also home to another mischievous tradition, the annual Halloween attempt to drive an old carriage or buggy into the lake.

Once the lake was used to put out the flames of the burning old Baldwin Hall, we were left with the Sunken Garden which has taken on its own romantic traditions. Many claim that if one walks with his or her sweetheart through the garden at night, then they will be together forever. Others say that if sweethearts share their first kiss in the garden, they will end up married to each other.

Jangling Keys and the Hickory Stick

Athletic events present a great number of opportunities for University traditions. Jessica (Neighbors) Hill, a 1999 Truman alumna and her husband, Jason Hill (’00), remember the excitement of Saturday football games and the crowd’s shaking of car keys at kickoff. “My parents, who attended the University in the ’60s, went to Saturday afternoon football games just like I did, and they probably pretended to study on the Quad on a beautiful fall afternoon, too,” says Jessica.

Sporting events have the ability to bring a busy and varied student body together in support of a common cause. Edie (Ford) Erzen and Dick Erzen, who both graduated from Truman in 1949, recall when some of the students, mainly athletes, thought that since the athletic teams were called the Bulldogs, they needed a live mascot. “They pitched in some money and a fellow by the name of Jim Ufert (’48) from Wood River, Ill., bought a pure-blooded bulldog and took care of it,” said the Erzens. “He took it to all of the football and basketball games and turned it over to the cheerleaders who kept it on the sidelines during the games.”

Though the Erzens noted that they had not seen a live mascot at games in later years, a new bulldog has
been seen wearing a purple jersey around Truman's home football games this past season.

Dick Erzen also remembers the lack of housing for athletes back in the forties and trying to make a room in Kirk Auditorium feel like home. “Bunk beds were put in rooms, stairways and even the projection booth,” says Dick. “They were not the most ideal places for studying as card games, usually Hearts, were going on all day and night, and if you lived in a stairway, guys were going through your room at all hours of the day and night.” For at least one year, Dick and another student athlete had bunks on the landing of the stairway going up to the projection booth.

Athletic rivalries between schools have been known to keep alumni coming back to their alma mater over the years. “Rivalries level the playing field because records don’t really matter; it’s just all about that game,” says James Walton, a junior from Hinsdale, Ill., who is a wide receiver for the football team. Walton says the rivalries make them play harder because the bragging rights mean so much. “Your season can be changed by one game; it can up the morale of the whole team and the school or take it down a whole lot for the rest of the season,” says Walton.

One such tradition of rivalry has existed for many years between the football teams of Truman State University and Northwest Missouri State University at Maryville, Mo. At the close of the 1930 football season, U.W. Lampkin, who was serving as president of Northwest at that time, sent then President of the University Eugene Fair a stick of hickory wood. Lampkin had found the stick on the grounds of Fair’s childhood farm and sent it as an award for the 20-7 win by the Bulldogs over the Northwest Bearcats. Adopting the gesture as an annual tradition, Lampkin suggested that the winning school would display the stick as a trophy for the ensuing year until the next year’s game.

The tradition has continued over the years, and Truman alumnus Will Sass (’72)(’77) remembers the ongoing battle for the hickory stick during his college days. “It was always a tradition to go to Maryville or they would have people come to Truman for the big game,” says Sass. “It was a lot of fun, we always had a lot of guys out there to support the team.” As a member of Phi Sigma Kappa, Sass also remembered fraternizing at the Phi Sig’s house on Northwest’s campus when Truman traveled to Maryville for the games, using University tradition as an opportunity to branch out.

To this day, the final score of the Bulldog-Bearcat game is marked on the hickory stick, which holds scores dating all the way back to 1908. In an article about campus legends that appeared in the Feb. 5, 1998, issue of the Index newspaper, Catherine Pezold (’98) remarked, “The hickory stick rivalry is important to football players but is also a unifying tradition for the entire campus.” Walton also noted, “It gives you something to really look forward to every year.” Not only is the hickory stick tradition important to the competing schools, but it also represents the oldest continuing rivalry in Division II college football.
Tradition is also important in the remembrance of the past. It gives us reason to pause for a moment from our busy lives to pay tribute. Since 1928, the senior class president or valedictorian(s) at Truman have laid a wreath at the foot of the Joseph Baldwin statue found on the Quadrangle in front of Kirk Memorial. The statue was part of the 100th birthday celebration of the University’s founder in 1927. The symbolic ceremony pays tribute to Baldwin’s educational ideals and standards. Spring and summer commencements, as well as other special occasions, such as the ceremony for Barbara Dixon’s installation as the 14th president of the University, provide opportunities to include this small but significant tradition.

In addition to giving us a chance to look back, tradition also gives us something to look forward to. “When I think about Truman’s traditions, I remember always looking forward to those annual events, like Truman Week, Homecoming, Parents Day, Truman Day, and Greek Week,” says Truman alumna Jessica Hill. “It seemed like there was always something fun just around the corner.” She notes that some of those traditions have been around for years creating a connection to Truman’s past. “Others were newer, and we felt we were part of establishing a tradition that hopefully would last,” says Hill.

While many of the same traditions live on, sadly, many of the newer traditions on the University campus have already disappeared. Recent graduates may remember the gum tree and “the potato,” which have already vanished.

The gum tree, originating without much ado, was simply a tree on the Quadrangle that became home to the discarded chewing gum of passersby. Over time, the gum covered the tree, and it became somewhat of a tradition for students to stick their gum there as they passed. Some said that placing gum on the tree as they passed would bring them good luck.

In October 1999, Larry Hunter of the Physical Plant reported that the tree had been sawed down the middle and pushed over, the practical joke of some midnight vandals. While some were happy to see the demise of the gum tree, a student quoted in the Index observed, “It may have looked ugly, but it was tradition.”

The tree’s remains were even carted around in the Homecoming parade that year, one last hurrah. Though another imromptu tree on the Quadrangle has begun gathering used chewing gum, the legend of the gum tree seems to have been hauled away with the original.

Another extinct tradition is that of the “sacred potato.” Until 2001, a small section of the concrete sidewalk between Violette and Dobson Halls was the home of this potato-shaped mystery. Like the superstition associated with stepping on the seams of a sidewalk, many students avoided stepping on this section of the sidewalk due to the myths that arose over the years about the powers of “the potato.” One of them included having bad luck on finals should a student step on the peculiar potato-shaped section of the sidewalk. With the paving of the sidewalk a few years back, this unusual campus tradition came to an end, leaving behind only its memories and the occasional story to be told.

University students also considered their favorite hangout spots to be the source of many traditions of gathering. Alumni reunite over the years and remember the good times spent at their establishment of choice. The Erzens remember “The Huddle,” a popular spot in the 1940s where students could get a great breakfast for about 50 cents. Many others remember meeting up with friends and faculty at the “Bulldog Inn,” another former hot spot.

Over the years, new gathering spots have replaced some of the old haunts. “You were really part of the college experience when you got coffee at “Rock n Java” (Washington Street Java Co.) or made a late night trip to Pancake City,” says Jessica Hill, one of the University’s more recent grads.

Steve Justice, a 1970 alumnus who works with Truman’s Alumni Association, says, “All those people that come back want to talk about all the things that take place on campus, all the things they did, all those things they remember – those are the things they want to talk about. It’s important to them; it’s lifetime memories. When they come back together after 20, 40, 50 years...it’s those traditions that are the focal point of their discussions.”

The specifics may change, the physical locations may disappear, but linking generations of current students and alumni past and future ensures a legacy that keeps us connected with the University – making it less like an institution, and more like a home.

**Tradition is what keeps us coming back.**

Sasha Rassi is a senior English major/MAE student from St. Louis, Mo.
Seeking Truman Traditions

Students, faculty and staff have been voicing a desire to record old traditions and to create some new memorable traditions to leave as a legacy. The new Student Alumni Association is currently working to promote some school-wide traditions they believe will help create bonds for the many students who share a home and a school here for a few years.

The Office of Advancement is putting together a collection of Truman traditions so that they can be recorded as part of the University’s history. Send your favorite Truman tradition to:

Truman Traditions
Office of Advancement
McClain Hall 100
100 E. Normal St.
Kirksville, Mo. 63501
Fax (660) 785-7519
drood@truman.edu

The gum tree featured in the homecoming parade after it was cut down by vandals.