First there was a loud whistle and then a scream, "Get the mober!" It happened every morning just after the chimes rang eight. In a flash, seventy-five wild young freshmen rushed the one unlucky sophomore who stood alone tightly grasping a red and blue scarf. As the younger class ran to tear it from him, the older boys scurried to protect their classmate and retain possession of the handkerchief, as well as their honor. It happened in the rain or sun; weather never got in the way of a good flag fight. When the bells rang again, signalling that it was time to stop and head into class, few seemed to hear the signal above all the hollering. The competition continued with more wrestling, spitting and swearing until the youths ran out of steam. No one ever really understood the reasons for these battles, and no one really seemed to care.

This was a common scene on the Pennsylvania campus a century ago. In 1885, the College of Arts and Sciences, the institution's chief undergraduate school, enrolled less than one hundred young men, most of whom invariably came from upper class families, the best prep schools, and the most elite social circles. For this homogeneous group, higher education was not focused on intellectual or scholastic pursuits, but rather on enjoyment. One's college years represented a playful and self-absorbed time, the last opportunity to pull pranks, fight and wrestle. These were the final years, it seemed, in which one could express his youth and carelessness. And Pennsylvania's campus provided the grounds for the games, rituals and class fights which were essential to every college boy's experience. A student's first two years at the University of Pennsylvania centered around the rivalry between the freshman and sophomore classes. Throughout the school year, the freshmen would struggle to meet the challenges set by the sophomores as a rite of passage into the privileged world of the University. From the 1880s to the 1920s, Penn students developed a series of rituals to express their class unity and school spirit.

Even before the University moved to its current site in West Philadelphia, students had created an array of traditional activities. One of the oldest and most renowned was the annual Bowl Fight. This custom originated in December, 1865 when the Sophomore class presented a wooden salad bowl and salad spoon to the Freshman class's lowest "third-honors-man"— the freshman with the poorest academic record— in mock courtesy. This ceremony soon turned into a more physical clash between the two classes. The sophomores soon realized that it was more entertaining to place the "dishonorable" freshman directly in the bowl. In response, the first-year men attempted to break the bowl in pieces. By 1886, the student newspaper, The Pennsylvanian, was publishing articles advertising the event. Claiming front page head-lines day after day, the fight was clearly well established and anticipated. The articles addressed anything from the history of the battle to a full set of the game's rules:

1. There shall be two judges, one from the senior class and one from the junior class.
2. The length of the contest shall be fixed and determined.
3. If the freshman bowl man is carried beyond the boundaries, he is free.
4. If the bowl man isn’t placed in the bowl within 15 minutes, he is free.
5. The sophomores retain the bowl if the game is a draw.
6. The bowl shall be made of cherry wood, 22” in diameter, 6” deep, and 1” thick.1

Over the years, the sophomores used bowls made out of stronger and stronger woods and when the bowl became unbreakable, the competition was again revised. By the turn of the century, the sophomores no longer sought to capture the designated frosh in order to deposit him in the bowl; rather, each class attempted to pull the coveted prize away from the other. The class with the greatest number of hands grasping the bowl at the end of the allotted time period was declared the victor. But as the ritual developed and the rules were tailored, the Bowl Fight became less a team effort to retain their honor and more a series of clashes between individuals. The game was being transformed into a fight.

From bruises to concussions to fractured bones, the annual conflict took its toll on the young men. Over the years the Bowl Fight never failed to send at least a few youths to the nearby hospital. This violence was accepted as a normal part of one’s college years, approved and legitimated by the administration. Bowl fights served as the first in a series of numerous competitions between the classes which occurred throughout the year.

Another long-standing rivalry was the Push Ball event. Like the Bowl Fight, this contest had an elementary design and set of rules. The push ball itself was approximately five times the size of a medicine ball, though unusually light. During the thirty minute match, it was not supposed to touch the ground. The object of the game was to volley the over-sized object over the opposition’s goal-posts. Participation in the competition was effectively limited to the tallest players who could keep the ball above the smaller boys’ reach. As few students were able to contribute to the match, most found amusement waging warfare amongst members of the rival class. As in the Bowl Fight, these sideline skirmishes rapidly gained centrality in the Push Ball game.

Photographs of the Bowl Fight and other events at the turn of the century reveal faculty members applauding and hissing the participants. The fights were viewed as a healthy demonstration of school spirit, and as initiation rituals for the younger students, testing the courage and character expected from a college man. One student from the class of 1910 remarked, “It is good fun and it does a young fellow a lot of good to go through that kind of experience. It teaches him to shut his jaws tight, to bear pain unflinchingly and to fight under a disadvantage.”2

Student rowdiness was not restricted to organized games and contests; it was intertwined in their daily lives. Discipline was a significant issue and often the subject of vehement disputes between the faculty, administration, and trustees, all of whom claimed ultimate jurisdiction over the problem. It was not uncommon for students to be punished for cursing in the campus chapel or tossing raw eggs at their professors. Their conduct in the class room was chaotic and their attitude toward authority disdainful. In the 1910s and 1920s, college was appreciated more as an opportunity to escape one’s parents than as a chance to pursue intellectual quests.

The University during the late nineteenth century barely resembled today’s Pennsylvania. The institution, while it awarded the first degree to a woman in 1878, was unquestionably masculine and strongly discriminatory. The few women who were permitted to enroll were restricted to courses in biology, fine arts, and education and were denied access to a broad, liberal arts curriculum. The idea of incorporating females in the Wharton School and the College was scoffed at by the male faculty and students who considered professional courses improper for a woman. Not only were the
few female students segregated from the males in the classroom, but they were denied access to all university facilities. Women were forced to seek off-campus housing, as the University failed to provide facilities for them until the Sergeant Hall dormitory was opened in 1924. In addition, women were barred from lunch rooms, gymnasiums, and the Houston Club. Male students enjoyed little interaction with the opposite sex, yet few objected to this isolation. The faculty and administration encouraged their boys to believe that the University belonged to them, and that women interfered in one's freedom of speech and behavior.

Free from the presence of women, the men evidently experienced few restrictions upon their behavior. The traditional fights were not merely periodic events, but part of a daily routine. Each morning, the classes would gather in their designated corners in the Assembly Room in College Hall prior to general announcements. Scuffles would inevitably break out as one class would try to oust another from their territory. The feuding always included the freshmen and sophomore classes though occasionally upperclassmen would ally with their younger counterparts. Alumnus Cyrus Adler remembers, “The Corner Fight was a serious affair. Students would don their canvas football jackets as ordinary clothing was torn to pieces. Everything was allowed but slugging.” Mr. Richett recalls that the fights often blocked doorways and spilled out into the halls and stairwells. “This breech of rules brought dire punishment as I well remember. On one such occasion, ’78’s most noble fighter, Jason, was spotted by Provost Stille, called into the office, and wasn’t seen again for two weeks.”

Over time, the number of organized rivalries mounted. Poster, pants, and flour fights became annual events. The poster and pants fights, which began in the last years of the nineteenth century, were part of the larger freshman-sophomore Campus Fights that occurred each fall. These initiation rituals would commence when the sophomore class posted a green sign on the door of College Hall with strict regulations and disdainful advice for the “freshies.” It was the freshmen’s duty to outsmart their elders and tear down this heavily guarded object. If they succeeded in tearing even a corner off the sophomore’s poster, they were declared victorious. As in the bowl fights, there were many losers on both sides. It was quite
common for ten to twenty students to be injured in these brawls.

The second stage of the Campus Fights took place the following morning. Similar to the Poster Fight, the sophomores would blockade Houston Hall, then called the Houston Club, while the freshmen would climb over one another in an attempt to reach the door. This series of competitions climaxed with the notorious Pants Fight. The sophomore president’s pants served as the coveted trophy in this battle. In the contest, the second-year students surrounded their class leader in a circle while the freshmen attempted to penetrate the ring. Because de-pantsing one boy was not enough to entertain hundreds of rowdy students, the fight branched out into a raging brawl. After the fight, the triangle would be littered with count-less pairs of trousers and underwear.

During the years in which these traditions gained support and popularity among the student body, the University was expanding into a very different institution. Under Provost Harrison’s administration (1894-1910), Pennsylvania experienced dramatic changes in size and shape. Enrollment jumped from 1,200 in 1894 to 3,750 in 1910, an increase of 10 percent annually. In response to the growth of the student body, the Provost embarked on a series of expansionary measures. Thirteen new buildings were erected including the University Museum, Chemistry, Law, and Dental buildings, the Wistar Institute, the Gymnasium, Houston Hall and Quadrangle dormitories. In addition, new departments and schools were opened. The evening school, summer school, and extension programs were added. With the erection of such buildings as the Quadrangle, many more students were afforded the opportunity to live and socialize on campus. The new dormitories and Houston Club provided the perfect settings for class fights and initiation rituals. Although enlarging, the University remained small in comparison to present times. The still intimate Pennsylvania community was nurtured and unified by these new facilities which allowed students to live, play, and socialize together on campus.

Regardless of the dramatic increase in size of the student body during President Harrison’s sixteen-year administration, the type of student attending college was no different than in the past. The college was still comprised of carefree, wealthy, elite young men who created a club-like atmosphere and were still interested in games, fights, and class rivalries. As in the past, a good Bowl Fight meant more than a good grade.

With the growing size of the student body, participation in the organized fights increased tremendously, and so too did the problems. Contests which had consisted of less than a hundred participants before 1900 drew as many as ten times that number by 1915. The acting Physical Director of the University was well aware of the problems that could arise from the increase in numbers:

The university has outgrown the class fights, which no longer settle the moot question of underclass activity.... Freshmen and sophomores no longer enter these so-called tests of superiority in the spirit of frolic, they go into them feeling that they must do so for the name of their class and without the light-hearted spirit formerly prevalent. The fights are now contests of brute strength and though waged without malice, are liable to result disastrously at anytime.”

In spite of the concern, nothing was done to restrict the competitions and the fights took place as planned. In 1916, the Bowl event witnessed a massive turnout of over 700 students. Through the muck and freezing rain that fell that afternoon in January, the greatly outnumbered freshmen rallied hard for victory over the sophomores. When the battle was finally concluded, the freshman had won, but they had also lost. Underneath the sixfoot-pile of thrashing boys, one freshman refused to move. Many thought he had only been knocked out by the fierce struggle. However, when they
attempted to rouse him, his body lay motionless and cold. William Lifson, still clinging onto the bowl, had failed to hold on to life. His body had been mangled by the weight of his classmates and his head forced deep into the thick mud. He had suffocated.

The tragic death of William Lifson had significant repercussions on the future of class rivalry and tradition. The Bowl Fight was quickly banned and other customs were lost along with it. Students and administrators alike agreed to prohibit the fights that had become extremely detrimental to the welfare of the participants and the image of the University. In a statement shortly following the catastrophe, Provost Smith implied that such traditions were sacred pieces of student life, but conceded diplomatically that Pennsylvania had no choice but to eliminate them. Addressing over two thousand people at Lifson’s memorial, the Provost advised,

It teaches us one lesson, boys. We must be ready. We don’t know who will be the next to be called. You must make things right with the Author of every good and right deed. You students owe it to yourselves and to this institution that in the future every form of activity shall be eliminated that would in any way bring about a recurrence of that sad, sad death yesterday. We must simply wipe out these conditions.6

Following the tribute, the Undergraduate Assembly voted in concurrence with the Provost’s motion. The Evening Bulletin recorded the making of the new policy: “Resolutions favoring the abolition of class rivalries and urging the institution of interclass athletic contests, under faculty supervision were adopted by undergraduate organizations last night.” It seemed for the moment at least that the era of obstreperous traditions had come to a close.

Despite the new administrative restrictions, rowdy student behavior was slow to die. Forbidden to organize class fights, the students redirected their energies into an equally problematic activity whose origins date back to 1910. In that year, a diligent engineering student from the class of 1912, Joseph T. Rowbottom, lived at 23 Bodine. He spent a great deal of time studying, frequently into the early morning hours, and was often ridiculed by his classmates for being a bookworm who refused to partake in the extra-curricular social life. According to Rowbottom, six fellow students, considerably less studious than himself, returned to the quad late one night in 1910 after several hours of drinking. Either to seek help in locating their beds or merely to torment their cerebral friend, the boisterous group let out the first historic howl, “Yea Rowbottom!” When Joseph leaned out his window to try to quiet them, the drunken students were further inspired to rouse the whole quad. Racing around the triangle and placing their ringing alarm clocks on window sills, the offenders found great amusement in the disruption they had created. The following day, Rowbottom, having nearly forgotten the disturbing events of the previous night, arrived at his fraternity house for dinner. To his horror, his brothers greeted him with dozens of ringing alarm clocks. The call of “Yea Rowbottom” henceforth signaled the cue for spontaneous pandemonium, an opportunity to release pent-up energy and frustrations.

When Rowbottom returned in 1917 for his fifth reunion, the unruly facet of the tradition was born. While visiting his old fraternity, Delta Tau Delta, Joseph was quickly spotted by the freshman class president. The young man ran off and reappeared with hundreds of other students interested in catching a glimpse of the man responsible for their popular ritual. Uneasy about the connection of his name to this tradition, Rowbottom refused to face the mob assembled outside the fraternity. The students, disgusted and disappointed by his refusal, became riotous and the situation quickly grew out of control. Trolley cars were pulled from their tracks, bottles smashed, debris scattered, and property defaced. With the curtailment of organized fights in 1916, the collegians had few outlets to release their tensions, sexuality and energy. From this evening forward, “Rowbottom” served just such a function. The event was either spontaneous or clandestinely planned, rendering it virtually impossible for the administration to control. Generally occurring in the long-awaited spring, Rowbottoms became an annual release for all Pennsylvania students.

As the new rioting spilled into the community, it began to attract negative attention to the University. No longer an amusing custom, Rowbottoms developed into an excuse to disregard all conventional standards of conduct. Forbidden to engage in aggressive competitions with one another, the students diverted their energies into physical destruction outside of the University. While the old organized fights were potentially dangerous, they were limited to the campus boundaries. And while the old traditions were rooted in the desire among the freshmen and sophomores to compete, the Rowbottom tradition was an assault upon Penn’s residential neighborhood. The characteristics of the old customs
pride, rivalry, competition, honor— were no longer present. The violence had become public and as a result, the University rapidly acquired a negative image.

Tarnishing the University’s stature was of little concern for most students. Their enthusiasm for strenuous competition and physical combat appeared unquenchable and irrepressible. Acknowledging the necessity for such release, Provost Smith and the Board of Trustees inaugurated Hey Day on May 23, 1916. Designed as a dignified ceremony honoring scholastic success, this new tradition was an effort to rechannel the old competition into a more controlled environment. Accordingly, Hey Day became a composite of serious ceremony and interclass rivalry. The featured events alternated between monotonous homilies of the Provost and well-anticipated physical competitions. It juxtaposed the solemn presentations of school songs and the annual tug-of-war between the younger classes. The day concluded with faculty-supervised boxing and wrestling matches held at the old athletic field.

Despite its original purpose, Hey Day was quickly surrounded with controversy as the event became increasingly uncontrollable. Resembling the Rowbottom pandemonium, Hey Day posed disciplinary and legal obstacles. In the first four years of this new tradition, a total of fifty students were arrested, and more than sixty thousand dollars worth of public and private property was damaged. It appeared that the spirit of old was slow to die. In response to these incidents, the University implemented harsh, preventive measures from probation to expulsion. The administration did not, however, consider terminating the ceremony itself. Hey Day continued and the skirmishes were handled as they occurred. Truly befuddled by the students’ unruly behavior, the administration was unable to thwart further uprisings.

Throughout the twenties, University officials attempted to curtail outbreaks of student recklessness, but were unsuccessful. Beginning in the spring of 1921, Provost Penniman and the administration, in an attempt to satisfy the underclassmen’s need for competition within a more supervised and controlled environment, initiated a new tradition of athletic competition. Harkening back to the past, the winning class was awarded an honorary bowl to showcase its superiority. These Penniman events included football, baseball, basketball, crew and track. After its initial year, the bouts between the two youngest classes each April became established, well-anticipated rivalries. In addition, the old campus-wide fighting resumed. In blatant disregard for the revisions enacted after Lifson’s death, the Poster and Flour Fights were reinstated by the students as a warm-up to the more formal and organized events. While the Penniman Games were originally intended to replace the old, destructive interclass rivalries and...
The revival of the Pants Fight caused the greatest strife among University leaders. No longer confined to the intimate Quadrangle arena, students transformed the class fights into public displays of nudity or near nudity in the West Philadelphia community. In May of 1923, several members of the freshmen class were inspired to advertise publicly the upcoming Pants Fight. Sporting nothing more than their undergarments, the boys unabashedly ventured beyond 34th Street to ride a public trolley car. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported:

Five students were arrested Tuesday night, when, adorned only by summer under-wear, they drew gasps of horror from maids and matrons by trying to board a Woodland Avenue trolley car in which girls and women were passengers.7

It took another decade before the administration was finally able to modify the Penniman Games in compliance with their own interests. Writing in 1939, the historian of the University, Edward Cheyney, observed that student inclination toward rebellion and disorder was no longer prevalent. In recent years, women had begun enrolling in significant numbers, and as they became progressively integrated in campus life, activities like the Pants Fight and class brawls were no longer acceptable. In addition, the boys now seemed to have discovered more rewarding ways of asserting their masculinity.

In regard to the students there is a curious fact to be noted — that the old problem of discipline has almost vanished. Misbehavior in the classroom or about the buildings is nearly unknown. The reason is a matter of speculation: the presence of women, the greater interest of studies, the outlet of athletics, the interest in outside social questions, the multiplicity of extra-curricular interests, better teaching — all have been suggested as explanations of the fact that the childishness and trouble-making that played so large a part in college life in earlier days no longer exists in these.8

The men would inevitably be forced to modify their behavior according to the changing character of their school.

Pennsylvania's intramural athletic program experienced a period of expansion and transformation during the 1930s as well. The Gates Plan, promoted by President Gates, recognized the importance of participatory athletics for every student. Under this plan, a department of physical education offered courses and recreation to satisfy most interests. Most importantly, the athletic program no longer relied on Alumni backing but was fully funded by the University. Physical health and fitness were redefined as prerequisites to intellectual achievement as well as to the maintenance of stability on campus. In ensuing years, physical education gained prestige, legitimacy, and popularity. Although this reform was not individually responsible for the diminution of student violence, an increase in athletic opportunities for non-competitive students greatly affected the tone of collegiate life. There now existed alternative outlets for excess energy.

The new temper of campus life succeeded in destroying the mysterious element which was crucial to the existence of the traditional class fights. By the 1940s, most remnants of the former traditions had faded from view. The men discovered new interests such as the Penn "co-eds" and intramural athletics which proved more captivating than the ancient student pastimes.

The outbreak of the 1956 Rowbottom, however, hearkened back to the school's immature years. In this spontaneous upheaval inspired by an impromptu panty raid, hundreds of students barricaded Locust Street with rubble and debris collected from leveled buildings nearby. When the police arrived upon the scene, the students began hurling at the authorities rocks, eggs, bottles and any other garbage that had previously littered their campus and dorm rooms. Before the chaos had subsided, 157 students had been arrested. Not only was the administration determined to destroy the Rowbottom forever, but also many students were vexed by the damaging repercussions of the melee. The *Daily Pennsylvanian* reported:

The Undergraduate and Interfraternity Councils began an investigation today to determine how to prevent future Rowbottoms and methods for restoring the name of the University to good favor.9

For the first time, students saw that the destructive nature of the event penalized not only the community but also themselves. The magnitude of the situation was finally realized.

We have yet to witness a Rowbottom or for that matter any other old school tradition since 1956. And perhaps today's students truly long for the spirited traditions they have never experienced. In February, 1990, a small group of twenty men representing various classes streaked stark naked through the quadrangle at dawn. It was the second "quad streak" in two years. Their mission is to create a new tradition. More accurately, it could be the start of something old.
Figure One. Room in Lippincott House, Upper Quad, ca. 1901.

Figure Two. Room 235, Cleemann House, South Quad, ca. 1917.