



A Spirit that Transcends Time

By Kristin Scharkey

As I walk down the twisting hallways beneath the library, the architecture begins to get older, the light dimmer. My heels click on the floor as I enter the University Archives; a single room lined with bookshelves, small wooden tables covered in boxes and books.

University Archivist Kevin Leonard hands me an old black book, pages brown with age and tattered at the edges. It's embossed in gold—*The Northwestern*—and dates back to the 1800s. We tenderly flip open its cover and search through the dilapidated collection of student-written pieces. We find the article I'm looking for:

"Next Saturday, we will witness the first alumni game in the history of Northwestern," it reads. "Present students will have an opportunity of seeing former heroes in their old places."

This piece, dated November 18, 1897, marks the unofficial 'beginning' of Homecoming. That Saturday, the alumni would be defeated by the varsity squad 25-0 in a football game that began the tradition of trekking back to Evanston. Over the next decade, Northwestern alumni would continue to return to campus once a year, officially being named "Homecoming," in 1911.

Leonard hands me a stack of newspaper articles labeled 'Homecoming,' and I delicately finger through tales of pep rallies, dances, mixers, auto parades and home decorations. I read that by 1936, the festivities had grown to nearly 10,000 alumni gathering in Evanston; and with a chuckle, I find that students were outraged when the 40-year tradition was broken in 1937 when the parade was canceled after the decision to give the funds to charity.

I turn to the stack of photographs Leonard has left on my table. Almost all in black and white, I smile at Northwestern University Marching Band members from the 1920s and Northwestern cheerleaders in a 1930s parade. I learn that the homecoming queen contest began in 1956 and flip through picture after picture of the candidates over the years, all dolled up in their puffy white dresses and full bouquets of roses.

Article after article raves about the 1968 Dionne Warwick performance before a sell-out crowd of 5,000 in honor of the alumni. A newspaper clipping gushes about the 1981 Homecoming parade's grand marshal—an All-America quarterback who held Northwestern's record for most points in a single game—Otto Graham. And near

the end of the stack I discover a list of past homecoming themes: "Willie's Wonderland" in 1957 and "Get Your Ya-Ya's Out" in 1973.

Leonard brings me an article from 1972 *Daily Northwestern* writer Holly Sembrat: "Homecoming parade supporters come in different shapes and sizes," she writes. "Their ages range from 3 to 80 and beyond. But they share the belief that laughing out loud and huddling next to strangers to keep warm will be a good way to spend tomorrow evening." Apparently, some things never change.

And as I look over the mess that I've made in the archives, papers spilling onto the chairs next to me and photos wreaking havoc across my table, I come to the realization that Homecoming is an event that surpasses the constraints of time; it's much more than the parades and the concerts and the games.

It's a celebration of those who have gone before us, those who are here now and those yet to come; a gateway into the legacy of what it means to wear purple. So I close that big black book and pile high the folders. I push in my chair and walk out into Evanston's autumn wind, smiling as I remember all that it truly means to be a Wildcat.