

Venetian Nights – A University of Wisconsin-Madison Tradition by Emily Eubanks for the University of Wisconsin-Madison Archives.

[title slide]

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[image 1]

The Venetian Night Illuminated Water Parade and Festival was a popular campus celebration held from 1911 to 1930 where students participated in an evening parade of lighted and decorated canoes and floats. It took place along the shores of Lake Mendota between Park and Frances Street with live music and a fireworks display.

[image 2]

The first Venetian Night on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus was planned by the canoe club Nitchi Cheeman in May of 1911.

[image 4]

The program for the Venetian Fete included a canoe parade, a pyrotechnics display, a float decoration contest, and an individual craft decoration contest as well as music performances by the UW Regimental Band, the Glee Club and the Mandolin Club.

[image 5]

Though the event was postponed due to rain, the first Venetian Night was a huge success with a reported ten thousand spectators. From that point on, Venetian Night became a favorite annual tradition on campus.

[image 6]

Venetian Night's popularity through the years allowed it to evolve and expand over time. In 1912, Venetian Night became part of the Spring Carnival. The Spring Carnival or Water Fete usually included track and crew tournaments during the day with the Venetian Night spectacle in the evening around 9:00 pm. Also, the fete's program grew to incorporate four separate competitions: a pier décor contest, a float décor contest, a canoe décor contest and a music contest.

[image7]

Each category would have from one to three prize winners with each receiving a loving cup. Mostly fraternities and sororities participated in the tournaments, but some campus groups and departments were involved as well.

[image 8]

Though the Venetian Night committee generally provided students with candles, lanterns, light strings and wire, several of the participants used much more elaborate and intricate decorations in order to win the contests.

[image 9]

Some of the winning themes included: a battleship, a lighthouse, King Tut's tomb, a Medieval Castle, a pirate ship, Sleeping Beauty, Mount Vesuvius, a Japanese Pagoda and "The Spirit of Mendota".

[image 10]

Supplemental contests were not the only addition to the Venetian Night program. The agenda later involved a flaming exhibition of a fire dive, a performance by the Haresfoot Club, an aerial maneuvers show by the Royal Airways Company and night surf board riding.

[image 19]

By the mid-1920's, Venetian Night also underwent a transition in venue. The Venetian Fete became disassociated with the Spring Carnival and was integrated with the Mother's Weekend line up. Venetian Night was then held in conjunction with other Spring traditions that included the Senior Swing-out, the Dance Drama, a crew race, the Men's Smoker in the Rathskeller and the Mother's Banquet.

[image 11]

Through all of these developments, Venetian Night may have changed aesthetically, but the event remained the same in its ability to delight spectators and fill them with a sense of astonishment and wonder.

[image 12]

Even with Venetian Night's general popularity and success, the event had some hiccups over the years. During the event's second year in 1912, there was a fireworks accident.

[image 20]

The fireworks mistakenly caught fire and started shooting off uncontrollably towards nearby campus buildings and boats. Fortunately, there was no serious fire damage and only two people suffered minor injuries.

[image 13]

In 1925 some of the participants in the Venetian Night canoe décor contest damaged non-university property. A group of students rented four war canoes from Camp Indianola which they completely destroyed. The students were billed \$200 for the canoes, but never made a payment, which then caused the University to be involved. Also, the event was generally unpredictable due to erratic weather directly affecting its occurrences and was thus postponed multiple times.

[image 14]

On top of the glitches of Venetian Night throughout its existence, the event was also cancelled multiple times. The Student Life and Interests Committee of the Faculty “abolished” the event “in the interests of the scholastic work of the students” (Alumni Magazine, “From the Campus”, 1915) in 1915.

[image 15 and 15.5]

The Venetian Fete was called off for a second time from 1927 to 1928. Though no explicit reason for the withdrawal of the event is known, it can be presumed that the postponement of the fete in 1926 influenced the decision.

[image 16]

Despite a strong renewal of Venetian Night in 1929 and 1930, the final termination of the event occurred in 1931 due to the unpredictability of weather, a surplus of spring events and a lack of funds. Although a Venetian Night Revival was planned for 1951, it is unclear whether or not the fete took place.

[image 17 and 22]

While the University of Wisconsin-Madison no longer hosts a Venetian Night Illuminated Water Parade and Festival, the tradition was recently restored by an organization called Dane Buy Local from 2009 to 2010 and by Drake & Company Staffing Specialists for 2011.

[image 24]

For one evening in September, a parade of illuminated boats and a fireworks show are held on the shores of Lake Mendota to promote local businesses.

[image 23]

Though the boats are motorized and the lights are electric, the feeling of awe and wonder is still the same.

[credit slide]

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