Commencement!
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“We'll remember always, graduation day.” No, this Keepsake isn't a remake of the "oldies but goodies" classic Graduation Day sung by The Lettermen and later the Beach Boys “(and it certainly isn't a line out of a tune by the same title from Chris Isaak or Kanye West!). It is a potpourri of commencement highlights at K-State!

On September 2, 1863, Kansas State Agricultural College admitted its first class of students at the original Bluemont Central College building located at the northwest corner of Claflin Rd. and College Ave. In June of 1867 commencement ceremonies for the first graduating class where held in the Bluemont chapel. The class consisted of three females and two males who heard the commencement address delivered in Latin and English!

Before long commencement was held in a downtown church, usually the Presbyterian building at Poyntz Avenue and 4th Street. In 1883 the location shifted to the chapel in the center section of the newly constructed main college building on campus (named Anderson Hall in 1902). Commencement remained there until K-State’s auditorium was available in 1905 (it burned in 1965).

When the graduating class, and the crowd that attended, became too large for the auditorium,
efforts were made to hold the exercises in Memorial Stadium, weather permitting; the first commencement in that location was in 1934 (west side).

With the Construction of Ahearn Field House, commencement moved indoors in 1951.

Commencement was held in K-State Stadium after it opened in 1968 (and later McCain Auditorium after it was built in 1970).

With the opening of Bramlage Coliseum in 1988, commencement moved to that site. In May 1991, the All-University commencement ceremony was discontinued, prompted by the uncomfortable length of the event, the size of the class and audience, and the number of individual colleges that wanted their own ceremony. As a result commencement organizers divided the ceremonies between days and locations, including Bramlage, McCain Auditorium and K-State Salina. On May 14 and 15th, 2010, approximately 3,000 students will receive undergraduate and graduate degrees from nine colleges and the graduate school. Commencement at K-State Salina is May 8. The Class of 2010 will be the 143rd to graduate from K-State!

The following are a few interesting highlights of K-State commencements past!

Graduation events during K-State’s early history were elaborate and lasted over several days. At different times they included a baccalaureate sermon, speeches, class programs, public examinations, military drill and “sham battle” by the college cadets, and individual orations by each graduate. For example, in 1875, K-State president John Anderson, an ordained minister, delivered the baccalaureate, an address was made before the YMCA, examinations took place over three days, one evening was devoted to the undergraduates’ exhibition, another address the next evening then orations by the seniors and commencement exercises in the Presbyterian Church. Individual orations by the graduates were discontinued in the late 1800s when the number became too large; this tradition was replaced by inviting notable speakers to give commencement addresses.
In 1894 the faculty voted for the president to request that members of the audience at public events during commencement week cease from throwing bouquets and other gifts on the stage for the graduates; the presenters were asked to give such items to the ushers for delivery.

In 1880 a public plowing match took place during commencement week!

In the 1880s the foreman of the “Farm and Garden” was instructed to police the campus and have visitors hitch their horses in designated areas only so as not to damage college property.

Prior to 1900, young children had become such a distraction at commencement ceremonies that kids under the age of 12 were excluded from events.

In 1910, president Henry Waters approved the request of the graduating class to wear caps and gowns at commencement after several senior classes had made unsuccessful attempts to have the faculty grant them permission to do so. With the addition of academic dress, came the procession of students, faculty and deans from Anderson Hall to the old auditorium for commencement exercises.

For a number of years the students petitioned to have the faculty and deans to wear academic dress. In 1926, the Council of Deans voted to require those who sat on the platform at commencement to wear caps and gowns.

In 1921 the newspaper reported that the college baseball team held the alumni team scoreless in the annual varsity-alumni game.

The first summer school commencement was held in the auditorium on July 31, 1925.

Governor Frank Carlson presented the commencement address in 1947. He was the first K-State alumnus to serve as governor of Kansas and the first to give a commencement speech.

The first televised commencement took place in June 1960; it was broadcast over WIBW-TV, Topeka. The 2010 commencement will be shown on K-State TV.
An on again, off again commencement tradition has been the inclusion of the “shepherd’s crook.” The senior class created this wooden artifact in 1898 to represent the senior shepherd caring for the undergraduate sheep. That year the senior class attached its colors to crook in the form of ribbons and passed it on to the junior class. For the next 40 years it was the object of pranks when it was repeatedly stolen and hidden, broken, repaired and finally lost in 1938. It was later found and displayed at class reunions. Beginning in 1994, a brass replica was carried at numerous commencements until the last few years.

Although this Keepsake is not intended to serve as a complete history of K-State’s commencement and graduation ceremonies, readers should find this information interesting and informative as a snap shot of our university’s remarkable past. So, maestro, let “Pomp and Circumstance” begin!

Selected sources: University Archives including Vertical File-Commencement History, college catalogs, commencement programs, KSU History Index, newspaper articles from the Industrialist and Collegian, Photograph Collection-Subjects, Royal Purple yearbooks, History of Kansas State Agricultural College by Julius T. Willard