

# “Frosh” Beanies: a 20th century tradition

By Jeff Sauve

**B**EGINNING IN THE FALL OF 1909, a long-standing tradition began with the dreaded sophomore’s command, “Button Button Frosh.” First-year Ole men were instructed to drop everything and put both hands on top of their beanie buttons; then turning around, repeat these words: “I am a little freshman as green as green can be, I wear my little beanie for everyone to see.”

After completing this recitation, the lowly “frosh” was to enslave oneself with alacrity to that sophomore and perform any menial task requested. This tradition of wearing the green beanie began with first-year men (by the 1930s it also included their female counterparts) and, remarkably, lasted for 60 years.

The beanie derived its name from the early 20th century slang term “bean” meaning “head.” This badge of newness was originally intended to unite underclassmen. In the early 1920s Dean Henry Thompson remarked, “The green cap isn’t a symbol of inferiority but serves as a mark of distinction between the new men and the upper-classmen that stand ready to be of service.”

Apparently his words went unheeded by the sophomores of 1922. One alumnus recalled being awoken at 5 a.m. to the “drumming of quick feet in the hall, lower floor on Ytterboe’s men’s dorm.” What ensued was deemed by some as the “War of the Beanie.” One frosh was thrown through a transom and suffered a broken leg. Several weeks later, 22 sophomores shanghaied an even dozen frosh, trussed them up and rolled them down the hill in front of Old Main. The Beanie War was officially declared finished by the administration and the 22 sophomores were expelled.

Each year the sophomore class determined when the beanie would come off for good, typically before the Christmas holiday. Otherwise, the beanie itself could be removed if certain conditions were met: winning of oratorical matches, interclass football games or tug-of-war.

As the years passed, the beanie symbolized an ever-increasing debasement, with rules such a “no dates all week,” “part hair in middle and shave only the left side of the face,” “carry books or dishes,” “pants rolled up to the knees and mismatched shoes.” Women students routinely had their faces smeared in lipstick or magic markers. In 1957 one zealous sophomore, using what he termed “frosherized shears,” clipped all the hair below the beanie from the heads of 35 frosh.

S.W.A.F. Day (St. Olaf Welcomes All Freshmen) marked the official end of sophomore tyranny and celebrated the welcoming of the frosh into the St. Olaf family. With dramatic flair in 1949, a grand torchlight processional made its way to the brow of Old Main where a mighty bonfire was kindled with discarded beanies. Sophomores pledged to honor the frosh as grandly as they formerly abused them.

By the late 1960s, the beanie — now black and gold — was out of synch with a changing nation. A number of frosh women protested the tradition by fasting while

several men secretly burned their beanies near the Science Center, apparently unafraid of retribution. In 1969, student body president Gary Smaby said the tradition “had become a tasteless activity. I think the student body has changed and will no longer tolerate such activities.”

Tolerance for another tradition — Homecoming Queen — came to an end one month later when a pig named Alice Swineson was entered as a protest candidate against the competition, which some considered absurd and trivial. 🐷

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This group of beanie-clad “frosh” was photographed in 1951 in the Lions Den, a snack-room located in the basement of Rølvaag Library from 1941 to 1960. Above, a poster issued by the class of 1912 lists 14 rules that frosh were “commanded to obey.”