



Ask the Archivist: 'What's the History of This Hat?'

A question for Melissa Mead, the John M. and Barbara Keil University Archivist and Rochester Collections Librarian.

My father, Hiram J. Neun, attended the University, as did his five sisters, two cousins, and my mother. My dad kept a yellow and green hat that he always said was his freshman beanie. Can you tell me if that is true? —Mary Ellen Neun Parry '63, Belle Mead, New Jersey

The story behind freshman caps knits together 66 years of student traditions and some colorful etymology.

The first mention of organized cap-wearing at the University appears in a 1900 issue of the *Campus* (it would become the *Campus-Times* in 1955): "A large number of the Sophomore Class are wearing class caps. Some of the Seniors are doing the same, and the Freshman [sic] are likely to have a class cap soon."

There is no further mention of caps until May 1904, when the newspaper reports that the freshmen at Syracuse University "buried with appropriate ceremony a little green cap, indicative of their first year in college."

The fact that student publications at colleges and universities reported each other's campus news is important: any number of fads and rituals (school colors and caps included) were spread this way.

The Class of 1908 is credited with starting Rochester's tradition of freshman class caps (theirs were the "regulation gray Eton cap with green button"). Rather than bury the caps, they threw them on a bonfire at the end of the term in June 1905.



GREEN BEAN: Hiram Neun '33 handed down a knitted beanie (above) to his daughter; the Class of 1935 (top) keeps warm before Rush Rhees Library in green-and-yellow Frosh caps.

Why green, when orange was chosen as Syracuse's official color in 1890, and Rochester selected dandelion yellow in 1893? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "green" began to denote immaturity in the 14th century. First-years were more than just green—"The Pea-Green Freshman" is found in the 1903 publication *Some Songs We Sing at Rochester*. Dartmouth still has "pea greens," to complement its school color.

Rochester student handbooks cite caps as a freshman requirement between 1905 and 1937, and the caps also served an interclass-rivalry hazing purpose: sophomores set traditions for the freshmen, and for a time entrepreneurially sold the hats as a fundraising engine. Sophomores also made the rules for when hats could be officially

doffed—either by a specified date or if the freshmen won the annual Flag Rush.

Hiram Neun enrolled with the Class of 1933, but the group photograph in the *Interpres* shows the class headgear to be the Eton caps. "For exorbitant sums we were allowed to purchase very unbecoming green hats, which promptly shrunk several sizes after the first rain," reported Robert Metzdorf '33, '39 (PhD) on the "Class History" page.

Although your father withdrew for health reasons after his freshman year, he was readmitted with the Class of 1935: his knitted cap (the student handbook calls it a "toque") looks very like those worn by the freshmen of 1935—green with a yellow stripe, topped with a matching pom-pom.

World War II saw the suspension of many traditions, but by 1949 caps were back, and both men and women continued to wear them until 1967.

The earliest frosh cap preserved in the archives belonged to Julius Kuhnert, Class of 1914. Made of felted wool, it's green with a yellow button on the top. By 1934, the colors had changed to blue and yellow.

Cap, toque, beanie, or bucket? The archives welcomes any hat thrown in its ring: Jane Speyer Weber '66, '67 (MA) and Peter Tyor '66 graciously donated a yellow-and-blue beanie and a blue-and-yellow bucket-style hat, respectively, at Meliora Weekend 2016.

Need History?

Do you have a question about University history? Email it to rochrev@rochester.edu. Please put "Ask the Archivist" in the subject line.