

Homecoming Traditions and Purple Squirrels

Slippery Rock Homecoming is a special time of the year for college students because everyone comes together to celebrate. Alumni come back to their old stomping grounds, frats put up provocative signs trash talking the opposing football team saying “IUP likes feet pics,” and campus organizations team up to build mind blowing floats for the parade.

It wasn't until my Junior year at Slippery Rock that I actually decided to attend some of the homecoming festivities. I actually went to the parade. And I have to say, besides the freezing rain and numbing cold winds it wasn't that bad, and I will definitely remember my experience. One of the organizations I'm in, Sigma Sigma Sigma Sorority, built a float with our friends from Kappa Delta Rho, a fraternity here on campus. Our float, to say the least, was pretty sad. Of course, we had the smallest possible trailer which could only hold up to six people, and even that was pushing it. If the weight wasn't distributed evenly the whole trailer would rattle up and down and shift everyone around on it. We for sure thought someone was going to fall. But no one did.

It wasn't decorated as extravagantly as all the other ones either. There was silver wire with yellow, orange, and red colored tissue paper taped around it meant to act as leaves bordering the trailer, and fire colored ombre signs displaying our names, Sigma Sigma Sigma and Kappa Delta Rho in the back. How this design came to be and how it relates to the theme is beyond me. I wanted no part in making a train wreck of a float.

It is tradition for seniors to ride on the float, even if they didn't help decorate it. So, while all my friends were standing on the float, I was walking along side them passing out candy that we bought from the Dollar Store so has probably been sitting in the store for a very long

time. Gross. Anyways, we had five seniors show up to the parade which ended up working out because the boys also had three seniors and even just our five seniors were really pushing the limit.

The other floats were different, more thought out. One was towering over the rest, sustained with plastic piping and a hula hoop in the middle for a trapeze artist to swing from. The trapeze artist was elegant like leaves swaying in the wind. She was graceful, confident like the pipes were made of stone and not plastic. She stayed there suspended in the air as if she were a feather in the wind. Another sorority, Alpha Omicron Pi, had a rainbow archway of balloons expanding the length of their trailer. It was welcoming and comforting as if the balloons were inviting everyone to cheer along with forty people piled onto the float. Another float had had a juggler and a clown walking next to their float which I thought was a nice touch. We didn't have any extra bonus people like that walking on the sides of our trailer, it was just the rest of us that couldn't fit on the float throwing out candy that probably wasn't even good because it was from the dollar store. So, who knows how long that candy had been sitting in there. As much as I wanted to take a Reese's for myself, I didn't. We threw potentially stale Milk Duds, mini Hershey Bars, Almond Joys, Reese Cups, and all were gobbled up by the kids.

As compared to past floats that I have seen, all of these would be outdone. In the 60s there were elegant and extravagant Disney floats that people actually looked like they took time to make. There was a *Cinderella* carriage that looked to be right out of the movie. There was *The Little Engine that Could* that actually has more than one moving trailer. It was three trailers together to make a train. In 1969, our Sigma float, "We Look – We Will See," won second place, and apparently our sisters back then earned second grand prize for over-all achievement. As far as I am aware our floats have not won since I have been a part of the sorority which has been

since 2017. People used to put in so much effort and energy into these floats. Nowadays no one would do anything like that. We made our float the day before, which people could probably tell. The art of building and making the float has definitely gone downhill. Maybe because young adults today have become so lazy? Maybe school has become harder and that stress is more prominent and demanding than making some float? School in the 1960s could not have been as stressful than as it was now. I mean there are way more options for degrees, the university has more colleges within itself, such as the college of liberal arts. More options, more stressors. People today put all their energy into writing papers, studying for tests, preparing for daily mental breakdowns. The floats just are not as well made as they once were.

Our theme was Britney Spears circus, and while walking the entire length of main street we jammed out to the classic Spears songs like *Oops I Did it Again*, *Toxic*, *Circus* and that's it because all her other songs swear and we didn't want to risk the kids hearing those words. Some of us danced with the little kids lining the street. Which made the road to main street the best part because most of the little kids were there; they were all bundled up in winter coats and gloves but were still out there clutching plastic bags in hand ready to catch candy. It warmed my heart to see how excited they got because at least someone was having fun. Seeing little kids excited about candy means that maybe I should be excited too, I mean I am walking in the parade and should be waving and smiling at the people on the streets.

Everyone was clapping and cheering as we passed them. People we didn't know were waving, kids were dancing, alumni were screaming. People were taking pictures of us dancing and singing, the three judges were laughing with us as we stopped in front of their table. Probably because our float was depressing and scored very lowly in the categories like appearance, relation to theme, appropriateness, creativity. and whatever else they use to judge

the floats. It wasn't what I expected, but I mean that in a good way. The excitement of the kids and our old alumni and even just random people on the streets screaming really amped up the whole experience. Yes, our float was garbage but the people still acted as if it wasn't. Everyone was so pumped to be back in Slip to see the next generation continue what they had done for four or more years.

The parade was more fun than I was anticipating considering it was like standing in the ninth circle of hell; it was so damn cold I could my breath in front of me. Let's just say my expectations were pretty low. Once I woke up and looked outside any excitement I had vanished immediately. I could hear the wind whipping against my apartment, I could feel the freezing air coming through my window. I thought it was going to be terrible.

After the parade, we ended up near Old Main, one of the oldest buildings on campus. I live at the Heights which is about two to three miles away from Old Main. Now, I really did not want to walk all the way back there. My roommates and I had a ride planned to come pick us up after the parade, but that fell through. So, we were stranded. It was still raining and it was still cold.

"Its not that far of a walk, you'll be fine." My roommate, Kylee, said to Lexi, our other roommate.

"Are you insane? Yes, it is far."

Kylee tried to hide her eyeroll but ultimately failed. "Get your steps in."

I trudged on behind them, not wanting to complain in fear that Kylee would tear into me. We took a back way that we knew so we wouldn't hit Main Street traffic. Kylee was leading the

way, Lexi was calling her boyfriend to wake him up so he could pick us up, and I was trying to not think of all the food that I did not have at home to make a decent lunch.

Things could be worse, right? It could be downpouring but instead its just a sprinkle. It could be colder, but at least my fingers don't feel like they're going to fall off.

"Are we there yet?" Lexi asked while frantically typing on her phone.

"Does it look like it?" Kylee said without turning around.

"Did you get ahold of him?" I asked.

"No, I texted his roommate to go wake him up."

I could hear Kylee snicker ahead of us, "You had his roommate wake him up? Lexi, he was up until three am!"

She ignored Kylee and went back to frantically texting on her phone. Wow, this was such great roommate bonding.

We got to the light to turn onto Grove City Road, heading towards Giant Eagle. So many cars came whizzing pass us, moving on to the next homecoming festivity: the tailgate. Which was where we are heading next, if we ever made it home.

"He's calling me!" Lexi shouted. We all stopped walking and waited until she hung up before bombarding her with questions.

"Is he coming?" I asked.

"Yeah, he'll meet us at Coffaros's."

Coffaro's bowling alley/pizza place was right across from us, the only "hip" place in town for college students to do anything fun. Cars upon cars were zooming down the road all exiting from Giant Eagle, a street down from the bowling alley, and not giving us the chance to cross.

"We're gonna die." I said.

"We are not, someone is eventually going to let us cross."

"Why did the roommates cross the road?" Lexi looked at both of us waiting for our answers.

"To get to the other side?"

"No, to go home."

"Oh my god, I hate you." We all started laughing so hard that the cars just became blurs in front of us. "This is what sleep deprivation looks like."

Suddenly, we could see Matt driving towards us; he lets us cross while following behind.

Thank God.

We hopped into the warmth of the car and finally headed home. On the drive back, we told Matt about the parade, about all the little kids, about the same five Britney Spears songs we listened to. We told him about the floats and how we probably didn't win but it didn't matter because at least it was fun. Everyone could tell he was so tired, but he acted like he cared about what we were telling him, so it's the thought that counts, right?

Two hours later, and we were finally on our way to the tailgate. People had been blowing up our phones asking where we were and when we would get there. It was still cold, and I was not in the mood to talk to a bunch of people. Or to be in the same vicinity as so many drunk people. Again, I was anticipating the worst.

“Thank you!” we shouted to our friend Tyra for driving us.

“What color is the tent?”

I shrug. “I think they said we have a green one next to a blue one.” All three of us looked around at so many green tents next to blue tents. This was insane. I had been to the tailgate one other time my sophomore year, and it was worse than this. It was downpouring the entire time, luckily, it stopped raining and I thought the sun was even going to come out soon.

That was a good sign.

“I see them!” Kylee yelled as we push past drunk alumni and trying to get to our people.

Our tent was small, and it was overflowing with people. Everyone was decked out in Slippery Rock gear; not a single IUP supporter in sight making the opposing team look like they were afraid to trek into Slippery Rock territory. Ever since I had been here, every year our homecoming game was against IUP. We lost my freshman year in 2017. People were walking around with their faces painted half green and half white, some are wearing green afros, and some are wearing so many Slip colored beaded necklaces they look like college gangsters.

“Where have you guys been?” I heard someone say, but I wasn’t interested in sticking around here too long. Kylee brought red solo cups so the twenty-one and older people could play flip cup. *Are we even allowed to play drinking games here?* I didn’t want to get in trouble so I

frantically searched for a way out. I heard through the grapevine of sisters there were under cover cops out and about, and I was not about to risk getting an underage. Then I spotted our alumni tent a row back from us with a sign that said “Old Sigma Witches.” However, it had originally said “Old Sigma Bitches” but bitches had been poorly crossed out and witches had replaced it.

Well, it was probably more interesting that sticking around here. I grabbed my friend, Mikala, and we walked over to talk to some alumni.

All of them were already drunk.

That much is clear when we first got there. Everyone was screaming and munching on food. Maybe this was a bad idea? Our older sisters now introduced us to the even older sisters who we have never met or seen before in our time here. They were all so happy to see us coming over to talk to them; they wanted to know all about our chapter now. Who was our president? Do we have a sweetheart? Do we still sing the purple squirrel song? Mikala and I looked at each other.

We were surprised they were asking us so many questions. We didn't think the alumni would care. I'm surprised they even care if we have a sweetheart. We had actually just asked a brother from Theta Xi to be our sweetheart last semester because many of the sisters were really close with him, and he had always been super interested in our sorority's events. He would always donate and support our fundraising events for our philanthropies, March of Dimes and the Robbie Page Memorial Fund. He would always encourage his brothers to donate or come out to the events too.

“Our president is Ciah, you actually just met her,” I said pointing to tall girl at the edge of the tent. “We do have a sweetheart. His name is AJ and he is the sweetest person you will ever meet.”

“What fraternity is he from?”

“Theta Xi.” Mikala and I said at the same time.

“Will you find him and bring him over?” One of them asked.

We nodded hesitantly, *oh no, what are they going to say or do to him?* “But first, what is the purple squirrel song?”

They all started laughing. “Ready Ladies?” Then they all burst into song. It was the most unexpected thing I had ever experienced. These ladies were easily in their early fifties, all old enough to have kids our age, and here they were singing some ridiculous song that makes absolutely no sense at all. But they still all knew it, every word. They stood in a circle singing, “Purple Squirrel, Purple Squirrel, shake your bushy tail,” dragging out the ‘e’ and kicking one leg in their circle and kicking it out and while also shaking “their tails”. It kind of looked like the hokey pokey but not the hokey pokey.

Oh god, I hope their kids aren't here to see this.

When the song was done, they all started cackling and screaming at each other. I thought I was going to go deaf. Our president, Ciah, was so happy to hear the Purple Squirrel song. Apparently, everyone knew about it except me and Mikala.

As we walked away, I looked around only to be looking at a bunch of rowdy, drunk college students and alumni. Is this what Homecoming was now? An excuse to party and drink

all day long, and spend all of Sunday cleaning up campus while also nursing a hang over? While I did not drink during homecoming, I will spend my Sunday afternoon cleaning up campus in an event called Polish the Rock, where mostly Greek organizations are assigned to different parts of campus and are in charge of picking up the garbage. We are given rubber gloves and huge garbage bags to pick up the remnants of all the drunk people. I didn't even drink, but I had to be one of the cleanup people. Maybe one day, when I have left this place behind, I will be one of those rowdy drunk alumni who has come back for one last hoorah. *Dear God, I sure hope not though.* Lord, knows nothing will have changed, it would be like walking back in time to this moment right here, reminiscing on the same obscure, unanswered things.

Do people even know the backstory behind this tradition? Do they know that homecomings in the past have looked like? My guess would be no. No one cares about the history anymore, as long as they have an excuse to have a beer in their hand they won't. This tradition will never die out, but the meaning behind it will.