

# The Black Knight

by Jean McCord (this article appeared in the *Alfred Reporter*, 1977)



He's bruised and broken, and arrived somewhat coated with plaster, but the Black Knight is back on Alfred's campus after an absence of 38 years. Accompanied by an armed guard, he appeared at the 1977 Reunion Luncheon - at which point outgoing Alumni Association President Rose Mary Baker Burger '52 pointed out that he had "returned to the University, not to the age-old process of disappearing and reappearing between the odd- and even-numbered classes."

For those who don't know (or have forgotten) about the Knight, he first appeared in picture and print in the 1907 Kanakadea [yearbook], in which the Class of 1908 says "Our mascot is the statue from the top of the former history-room stove. This was found on the campus the next morning after the stove disappeared, and was appropriated for a class mascot." The picture shows a knight posing with the class members, complete with a sword, long plumes on his helmet, and what looks like an awkwardly-held golf club; by the time the Class of 1910 picture was taken for the 1909 Kanakadea, the "golf club" had already disappeared. The writeup in the 1910 Kanakadea calls him the "'Iron Knight of the Even Numbers,' who crowns with victory the course of every class who can win and possess him."



He was handed on to the Class of 1912, then 1914, then 1916, without undue excitement being reported in the yearbook, and in the 1916 Kanakadea he is first referred to as the "Black Knight of the Even Classes." In October, 1922, however, when the Class of 1924 tried to have its picture taken, a pitched battle was fought between the Class of 1924, which had the Knight, and the Class of 1923, which wanted it. This started near the library, then moved to a "naval engagement" in Kanakadea Creek - where the statue was lost in the mud and found by someone in the Class of 1923. 1924 members quickly recruited the freshmen of the Class of 1926, and rejoined the battle on North Main Street, near the Delta Sigma Phi house which became a makeshift hospital. Finally, after "several football men were engaged to such an extent as to injure prospects for the St. Bonaventure game, a truce was called. As both sides were fighting in a badly exhausted condition, this seemed the only solution." (Fiat Lux, October 17, 1922)

Two stars of this battle - Catherine Neuwiesinger Stearns '24, who hid the Knight in her middy blouse and ran off with it, only to have it snatched away from her; and Edward (Soupy) Campbell '24, who slipped the Knight down his trousers and faked a leg injury so that he and the Knight were carried off the battlefield together - were at the 1977 Reunion to renew their acquaintanceship with the Knight and to expand on what actually happened.



It is clear that the Knight achieved his present battered state during this battle, as the October 24, 1922, Fiat Lux reports that in the Senate meeting "A motion was made and carried that the parts of the Black Knight be returned immediately to the Senior and Junior class presidents and that the Junior class be allowed to have its picture taken unmolested." The odd-numbered classes had gained possession of "several bronze appendages such as the base, legs, arms and shield."

In the 1926 Kanakadea, the maimed Knight's picture appears, looking just as he does now, and the first "legend" appears:

"In an obscure corner of the library annex, in the early 1900's a group of students huddled about a black, unpolished stove, embellished by naught but a bold, black knight.

Nobody knew who was responsible, but a few days later the inefficient old stove was seen jolting peacefully down the creek of the famous roaring banks.

Not long afterward, the Black Knight came mysteriously into possession of two students, one of an odd class, the other of an even.

Just how it became an even class possession and mascot, nobody is sure, but a life-long class feud began, and until '22 the valiant even classed held possession of the integral Black Knight.

In '22, however, when the Juniors were being "shot", an odd classman brutally assaulted the lady carrying the Black Knight and tore it from her grasp. Thereupon ensued a scrimmage which still lives in song and story.

The Black Knight was finally secured, battered and worn, scarred and maimed, but still the Black Knight of tradition - who holds his head proudly and defiantly.

The 1931 Kanakadea shows a picture of the base, both feet, and one leg only - and with it a poem:

*The Black Knight  
The Even classes proudly boast  
Of a mascot, brave,  
A relic of an old black stove,  
Long since in its grave.*

*The Evens still are prone to laugh  
At our oddity,  
But we retain the part which means  
Supportability.*

*This duel ownership was caused  
(Some perchance know not)  
Some years ago by a class fight -  
Each a portion got.*

*Each Junior Class receives in stealth  
Trophy treasured.  
One a legless knight now guards;  
One a knightless leg.*

Then, in 1934, the Fiat Lux printed a "legendary" story greatly at variance with earlier accounts and with a picture purported to be the Black Knight, but actually of a statue of "King Alfred," which was shown in the 1931 Kanakadea and identified at the time as the mascot of the odd classes (along with the "knightless leg"). The article, however, claims that the Knight was in possession of the odd classes. The odd classes probably had King Alfred rather than the Knight, since the real Knight surfaced again in October 1935.

The 1935 Fiat Lux headlines read "Seniors Rescue Kidnap Victim in Bank Vault - 'Black Knight', Stolen Eight Years Ago, Found Safe in Hornell After Diligent Search - Campus Terror-Stricken - New Outbreaks Threatened as Even-Numbered Classes Regain Long-Lost Trophy." The story begins "Death stalks the Alfred campus again ... Strong men shiver in their beds and pull the covers over their heads; students are seen walking in grim little groups of four or five for common protection ..." The story goes on to tell of the "finding" of the Knight "in the vaults of the First National Bank in Hornell, closed for

several years" by John Nevius and Stuart Schatz of the Class of 1936. In recounting the "legend", the Knight is identified with King Alfred. The picture, however, shows the Knight as he is today.

In January, 1936, the Knight appeared at a Theta Theta Chi dance, safe because of "a solemn pledge made by the odd classes." The Knight spent the night at the sorority, but was attacked the following afternoon as he tried to leave. Odd class members subjected Evens and neutrals to "a competent frisking," but the Knight remained in custody of the even classes.

Fall 1939 showed the Knight ready to ride again. The Fiat Lux claimed that in 1937 "the Knight had competition - from two other pseudo-Knight," but that in 1938 two members of the Class of 1939 found the real Knight in the files of the Library basement. The "Class of 1942 won it by taking the Frosh-Soph fight."

And here the Knight evidently dropped off the face of the earth - until in May, 1977, Ralph Rhodes, President of the Class of 1942, wrote to the Annual Fund Office: "If you ever want the 'Black Knight' returned, please let me know. It was last seen on campus in the Fall of 1939. Ellis Drake, Dean of Men at the time, asked me to retire 'it' - which I did."

Brief inquiry into what the Knight was made it clear that we did want him back - and Rhodes arranged his arrival in time for the 1977 Reunion.

Various claims were made about the Knight during his 38-year absence, the most substantial story running from November 21, 1950 to February 20, 1951, when the Fiat Lux reported that the Knight was allegedly found by an unidentified person in Kanakadea Creek, "in a rubber case, wedged under the falls by the steam plant." It was allegedly given to Paul Gignac '53, then stolen by Arthur Hyman '52 in order to preserve the honor of the even classes. Both Gignac and Hyman were at the 1977 Reunion, where they proceeded to cloud the issue. However, the last word in the 1951 Fiat Lux was that the Knight was a fake. More likely, his whole "appearance" was a hoax.

Also, members of sixties classes have said they remember fighting over the Knight. When pressed, however, they admit that they never actually saw what they were fighting over.

He's back now, and he's had a bath to get rid of the worst of the plaster in which, at some time, he was encased to protect him. M. Elwood (Mike) Kenyon '17 built a base for him. The Black Knight now rests in the University Archives in Herrick Memorial Library.

Update 2005: The Black Knight was transferred to the Powell Campus Center and put on display in a specially made case outside the Knight Club. Unfortunately after only a few months on display, someone broke into the campus center in the middle of the night and smashed the case, taking the Black Knight. Let's all keep our fingers crossed that it's returned safely and soon to the campus where it belongs.