

Commencement makes the move to Under the Oaks

Sam Calvert
Sports Editor

Vickie Somers was on a mission. Her position was in the purchasing department, and it was her job to find 5,000 chairs for commencement. But they weren't just any 5,000 chairs. Every one of them had to be the same color, and this was proving to be a challenge.

Somers remembered she had a friend at Duke University, also in purchasing, and she gave her a call. From her, Somers found a company in Durham with enough chairs. There were only "Duke blue" ones.

"At least they were all the same color," she said. "We used those for several years."

The year was 1987, and Elon University was attempting its first commencement Under the Oaks.

Previously, the ceremony had been held inside Alumni Gym, where there was no air conditioning and seating was limited.

Then-Provost Warren Board introduced the idea of moving graduation, and the conversation began.

"Board encouraged a lot of discussion," said Ron Klepcyk, dean of student affairs at the time. "He insisted we do commencement outside."

Once the decision was made, Elon staff had to decide how commencement would operate in a different location. Those involved had to assess how things were done inside and look at how that translated to an outdoor setting, evaluating each person's responsibilities.

"I don't think students realize how many people it took to pull that off," Somers said. "It was all hands on deck."

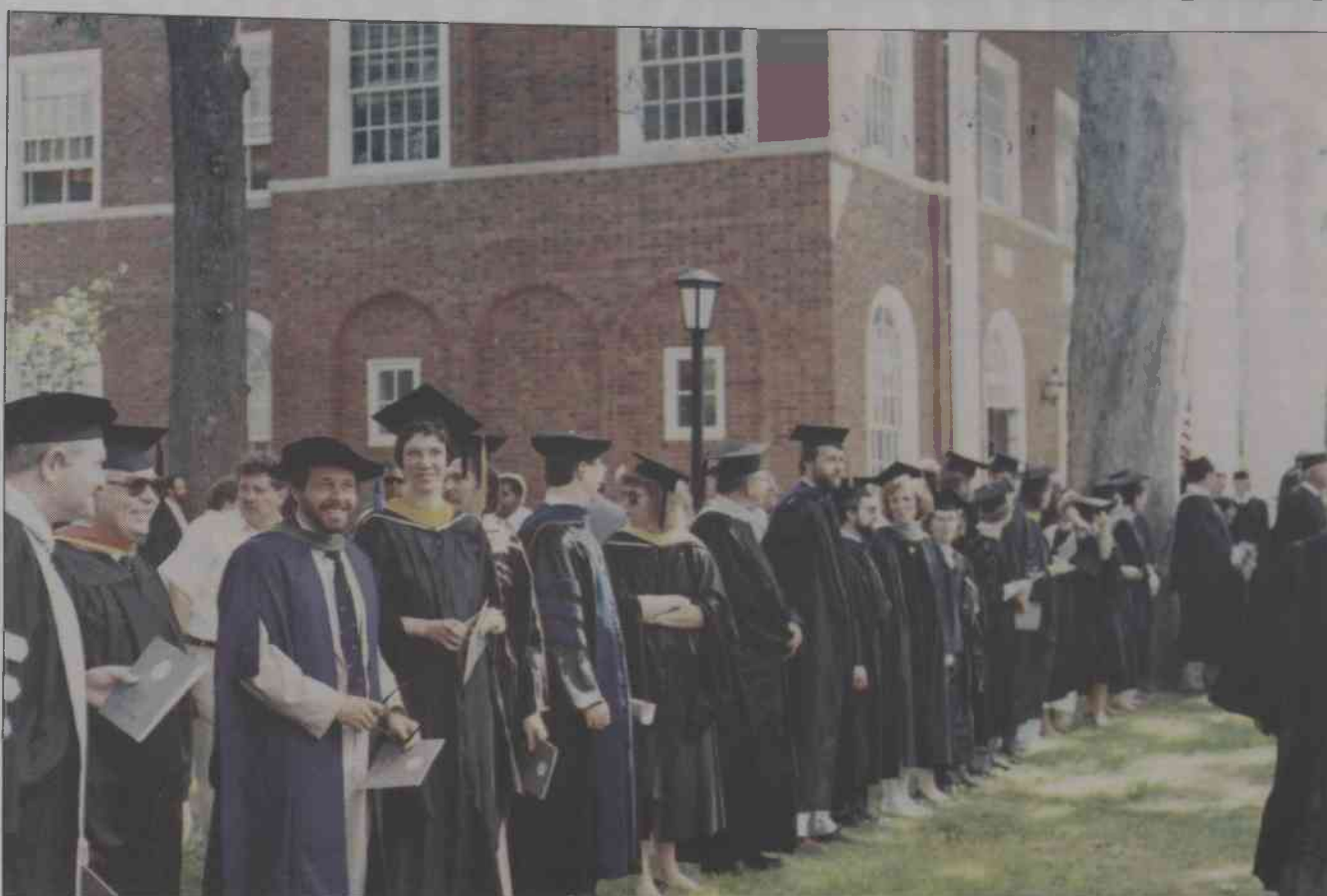
Klepcyk was in charge of getting the students across the stage in a speedy manner.

Registrar Mark Albertson and the rest of the office had reign over the diplomas, making sure they were in alphabetical order and ready to be handed to the graduates during the ceremony.

The graduates had to be assembled in Whitley, brought out through the front door and filed into commencement from the back. Every move had to be mapped out.

"It was pretty uneventful," said George Troxler, then-director of cultural programs.

One big advantage of sitting outside was the seating. Without the limitations predefined by the structure of a building, Elon could add enough chairs to accommodate



Faculty members greet students before graduation in 1987. Students walk through the receiving line before taking their seats for the ceremony.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BELK ARCHIVES

everyone who wanted to come.

Throughout the years, commencement has been able to grow from 5,000 chairs in 1987 to around 11,500 chairs today.

Moving outside didn't come without its challenges, though.

Without a covering, weather became a factor.

"We focused from the beginning on the rain plan," Troxler said.

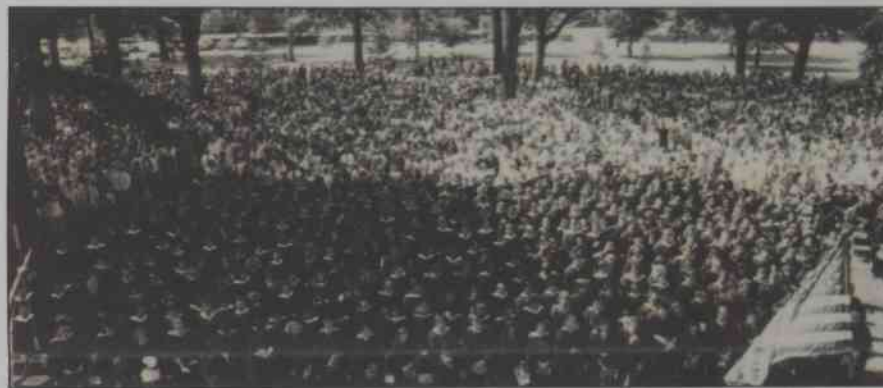
Only once since moving Under the Oaks has the university had to put such plans into use. In 1999, commencement had to be moved to Alumni Gym.

"It was crazy," Albertson said. "The hardest part was that it was the first time in my memory that we had to make an adjustment. Any time it's the first time, it always catches you off-guard, even with good planning."

Somers said everyone learned more from having to adjust that year than they every could have from planning.

Every other year, the weather has always come through for the graduates, as it did that first year.

"We've had really good luck," Klepcyk said. "But we all held our breath for that first one (outside)."



During the 1987 graduation, plans had to be made to accommodate for changes in weather.

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There were 5,000 chairs at the first graduation Under the Oaks in 1987. Today there are about 11,500 chairs.

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Tradition uncovered: The Elon oak sapling

Sam Calvert
Sports Editor

In 1991 Furman Moseley, Elon University alumnus and tree farmer in California, spoke at commencement. Along with his speech, he brought a gift that would live on in Elon history forever — tree saplings for the graduates to take with them as they scattered across the country and the globe.

"Each graduate got a redwood sapling," said George Troxler, the director of cultural programs at the time. "It was the same idea as now — of spreading Elon — but it just wasn't using an oak sapling."

The very next year, the tradition of the oak sapling began, with a switch in tree type. The graduates now receive nuttall oak saplings, a species of oak chosen specifically for its characteristics.

"They are one of the most hardy and the most adaptable oaks," said Tom Flood, the superintendent of landscaping and grounds. "These trees get taken all over the country."

While the oaks are hardy, they do not all end as grown trees. Sometimes,

the saplings do not make it past youth.

Landscaping hears all kinds of reasons for dead saplings, including "My dog ate my tree," Flood said.

For that very reason, he said Elon takes the left over saplings and plants them in 1-gallon pots to grow as replacements. That way, when alumni call about a dead oak, he can send them a new one.

"A really common reason is because they didn't have any place to plant it when they got out of college, but now, four or five years later, they have a house and want an oak," Flood said. "It happens all year long, so we always have extras."

Sometimes, everything doesn't go smoothly in getting the trees.

Last year, the heat caused problems in shipping the saplings. Flood said they were in poor condition when they arrived at Elon. He had to have them reshipped twice.

The final shipment arrived one day before commencement.

But while sometimes the preparation comes down to the wire, the saplings are always present come commencement time.

A look at the journey of the Elon oak sapling:

Step 1: Finding a Vendor

This year, the vendor was in Oklahoma. "It all depends on where I can get the largest quantity," Flood said.

Step 2: Shipping, Round One

The oaks are then shipped to a nursery in Virginia. There, the plants are put in plastic bags to keep the roots moist, and Flood travels to check on the saplings. "We have to locate the saplings, make sure they get here in good shape and are the right size plants," Flood said.

Step 3: Shipping, Round Two

Two days before commencement, the oaks are brought to North Carolina for preparation for the ceremony. "I personally go up and pick them up," Flood said.

Step 4: Preparation

On Friday afternoon, the landscaping team adds the tags to the plants, which are provided by the Alumni Association. "The information on the tags has information about the Alumni Association, as well as information about the plant and how to care for the tree," Flood said.

Step 5: Set up

Saturday morning, the team sets up the plants for commencement. "We bring them all out to the plaza area in front of Powell for the graduates to pick up," Flood said.