

The Belles *of Saint Mary's*

900 Hillsborough Street

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Graduation, More Than A Tradition

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One of Saint Mary's outstanding features is its grasp on tradition. Even though change is inevitable, Saint Mary's has worked very hard to maintain the qualities that make it such a unique place. Most of the events at Saint Mary's such as club walks, recitals, classes, social functions, as well as life in general contain a large piece of the school's history. Perhaps the most traditional event at Saint Mary's, however, occurs only once (maybe twice) in the life of a Saint Mary's girl. That special event is, of course, graduation.

The first Saint Mary's commencement was held in 1879. "The most thrilling of public occasions were those of commencement week at Saint Mary's. When the concerts and other entertainments drew crowds." Commencement day was a lot more serious, however, as graduates in long white dresses filed into Smedes Parlor to read their senior essays. Afterwards, the school proceeded to the chapel to hear the honor roll and distinctions read by Aldert Smedes. Then, the main address was given, usually by the bishop of North Carolina. Next, the graduates were given their diplomas, tied with blue and white ribbons. After each girl had received her diploma, the graduates knelt before the bishop



The Saint Mary's graduating class of 1994

for the benediction. Following this was a recessional hymn. Then, "It was all over but the parting and the tears and the love that we will always have for our Alma Mater," wrote a 1895 graduate.

1906 was the last commencement held in the parlor using the decorated temporary platform. The graduates remained the same in their long white dresses. The student marshals also dressed in long white dresses, were distinguished by their sashes. The chief marshal wore a white sash, and her assistants wore blue ones.

In 1925, it was announced at commencement that the yearbook's

name was being changed from the Muse to the Stagecoach. An authentic 1840's stagecoach was parked in the grove to symbolize the change.

There are still many events that occur at commencement which are symbolic even today. The newly elected chief marshal still drops the traditional handkerchief. In the 1970's a "new tradition" was added by closing the front doors of Smedes hall to signify the end of another academic year, which is done after the handkerchief is dropped. The professors all line-up according to how long they have been at Saint Mary's. The

teachers who have worked here longest are in the back of the line, the newer teachers process in first.

Even though the commencement exercises are held in front of Smedes, and not in the Parlor as they were over 100 years ago, the graduation itself still contains most of the same rituals as it did in 1879. The history and symbolism play important roles in the ceremony because commencement is not only a day of excitement and anticipation for the future that lies ahead, but it is also a remembrance and love for this place that the graduates are leaving behind.



Suzanne Jones drops the traditional handkerchief at graduation on May 7, 1994.



Lucy White and Stacey Smith lead the procession of eighty-eight jubilant high school graduates down the walk through the circle.