

A Campus Tradition

MAY DAY



Sue Garbutt,
May Queen, 1941



In its early years, one of the most colorful and anticipated events at S.G.S.N.C and G.S.W.C. was the annual May Day celebration. The first May Day occurred in the spring of 1913, beginning one of the school's most treasured traditions. Every student took part in the event, and scores of visitors came to the campus to be entertained by the festivities.

The Play Day-May Day Brochure of May 10, 1941, states "This is not an exhibition of picked dancers and soloists, but a Festival in which most of the students take part, many of them making their own costumes. Faculty and students work on various committees to make our festival a success." The first May Day celebrations were held on the lawn in front of Converse Hall then were later moved to the outdoor theater in Drexel Park.

The campus celebrations of May Day were often based on the traditional Old English May Day ceremonies that celebrated Spring. However, it was not uncommon for each May Day celebration to have a theme. Each theme gave the event an almost carnival-like atmosphere with the students dressed in elaborate costumes performing special skits and dances. The themes ranged from "Sleeping Beauty" to "Springtime in the South." Ms. Lenora Ivey and Ms. Marie Motter chose a new theme each year. While the themes of the May Day ceremonies changed from year to year, the spirit of the festival remained the same.





The climax of the festival was the winding of the brightly colored May poles, a characteristic feature of an Old English May Day. A box of candy was often the prize for the group having the most tightly wound May pole. After the winding of the May poles, the Queen received homage from her loyal subjects as she and her court processed from her throne. Guest were requested to remain seated until the Queen and her court had left.

Through the years, May Day was combined with other events and activities. Play Day was added to May Day in 1930 to create the exciting combination Play Day-May Day. For this new event, prospective students and seniors from high schools in South Georgia and North Florida were invited to the campus for a day of varied

sporting activities, games, and demonstrations. In the evening, the traditional May Day celebration took place. In 1937, the Play Day-May Day event was filmed in Technicolor by Dr. Earl Phelan, a professor at the College. In 1938, Play Day-May Day also included a Homecoming for alumnae as well as the first official Parents Day where students invited their parents to be guest of the college for a day.



In addition to the selection of a theme and months of planning each May Day had a Queen who was chosen in March or April from the senior class by popular vote of the student body. The May Queen presided over the May Court which included a Maid of Honor, Ladies in Waiting, Flower Girls, and Train Bearers. The Court consisted of 12-14 girls from the student body but usually from the senior class. The Flower Girls and Train Bearers were often the children of grandchildren of alumnae.

Elaborate planning and detail went into the selection of the Queen's dress and the dresses of her court. The May Queen's dress was often white, but it was not uncommon to see the May Queen wearing bridal pink while the Maid of Honor wore cornflower blue. All carried flowers ranging from Shasta daisies to talisman roses.



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The May Day ceremony officially started with the crowning of the May Queen, but the activities for the day actually started in the morning for the freshmen. By custom, the freshmen woke early to decorate the May Queen's throne and its setting.

After the coronation of the Queen, she was carried to her throne where she could watch alongside her court and guests, a colorful program of special dances honoring spring. "Both the peasants and the Lords and Ladies dance during the festivities. To the strains of frivolous music, dainty maidens, and strolling players pay homage to their Queen with dances, pantomimes, and foolish capers. The country folk dance their hearty, vibrant dances and the Lords and Ladies descend from the throne of the May Queen to dance the minuet on the green." (Pinecone, 1934).

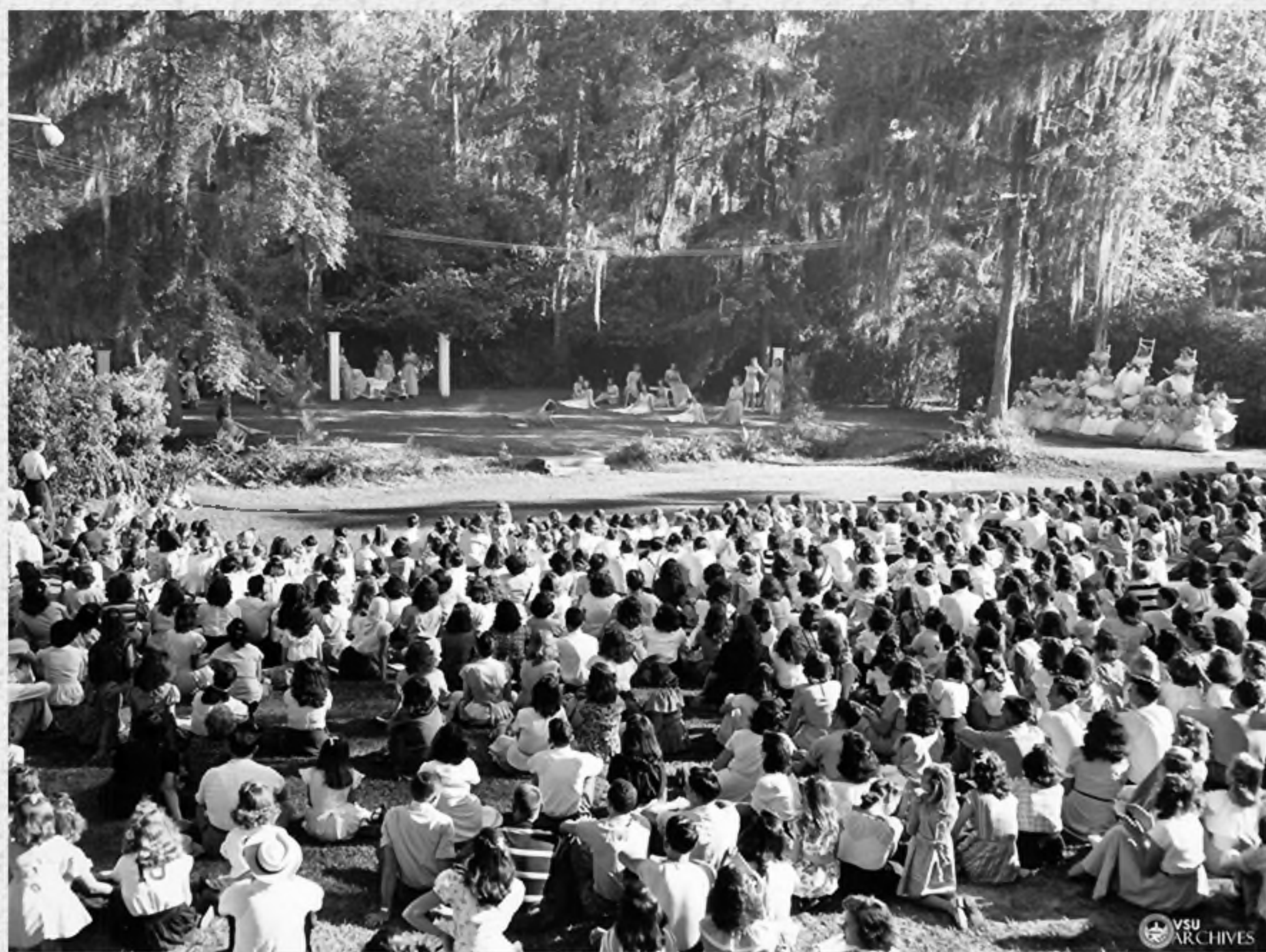


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Due to wartime conditions and restrictions, the annual Play Day-May Day event was discontinued after the 1942 celebration. From 1943-1947, the College started a new tradition of a Spring Festival which was held in March to allow visitors the opportunity to enjoy the spring blooms of azaleas, dogwoods, and the red buds on campus.

Play Day-May Day resumed in 1948. The last Play Day-May Day combination was held in 1955. In 1956, one of the last traditional May Day celebrations included an Honor's Day ceremony.

In the early 1990's, May Day Celebrations were held by the Valdosta State University Music Society at the spring outdoor Wind Ensemble concert. They were staged in the Fine Arts Amphitheater, and each one featured a May Queen, Ladies in Waiting, and Train Bearers. The Queen and her court presided over the festivities and the wrapping of the May pole.



VSU ARCHIVES

QUEEN OF THE MAY



Virginia Paulk, 1934



Margaret Sumner, 1931



Virginia Hutchinson, 1935



Virginia Clark, 1933



Ruth Norman, 1930



Betty Buckner, 1951



Martha Wilkes, 1942



Susan Tullis, 1954



Ann Fordson, 1949



Jo Anne Story, 1951



Betty Buckner, 1951



Virginia Zipplies, 1939



Wanda Bishop, 1955

May Day Observances Still Retain Effect Of Old World

By Harriet Singletary

May Day observances in the United States have lost all the ritualistic and symbolic character of their Old World originals. They have become merry springtime sports participated in by girls in the schools and colleges.

Students of old customs have traced the May Day celebration back to the Floralia of the Romans, the festival in honor of Flora, the goddess of flowers. The festival was instituted in Rome in 238 B. C. and was celebrated from April 28 to May 3. Undoubtedly the Romans, during their occupation of Great Britain for four or five centuries, introduced the festival there.

In the course of time, what is known as the morris of Moorish dance was introduced, with the dancers dressed in fantastic costumes. The May Day customs of the Puritans and the Parliament of 1644 forbade the erection of May poles. This prohibition was repealed after the Restoration. In 1661, after the revival of the old customs, a May pole 134 feet high was set up in London. It remained until 1717 when it was destroyed by Sir Isaac Newton and removed to Essex as a support for his great telescope.

It used to be thought that there was a magic in certain rites performed on May Day. Pepys in his diary tells of a trip to the country by his wife to wash her face in the dew as she had been told that it was good for her complexion. The ritual for this ceremony required that the girl should go into the fields and, just as the sun was rising, wash her face in the fresh dew in a place where no one could see her.

In various parts of England May-dolls used to be dressed and carried about in a small chair by the girls. Sometimes the doll had a smaller doll in its lap, and both were decorated with ribbons and flowers. This was a survival from the images of Flora which were carried about in the Roman festival, and which in Christian times became images of the Virgin and Child. Another custom observed by little girls in some parts of the East was the making of May baskets to be hung, filled with flowers, on the doors of their playmates homes.

Our May Day celebrations here in America vary in the different schools and colleges, but there is usually a May Queen who is crowned with appropriate ceremonies. No festivals could be any lovelier than those which used to mark the calendar of G. S. W. C. Taking weeks of planning and preparation, they were participated in by every member of the student and attracted visitors from the neighboring towns. Although discontinued until after the war, the May Day-Play Day celebration at G. S. W. C. is still considered a permanent and well-loved tradition.

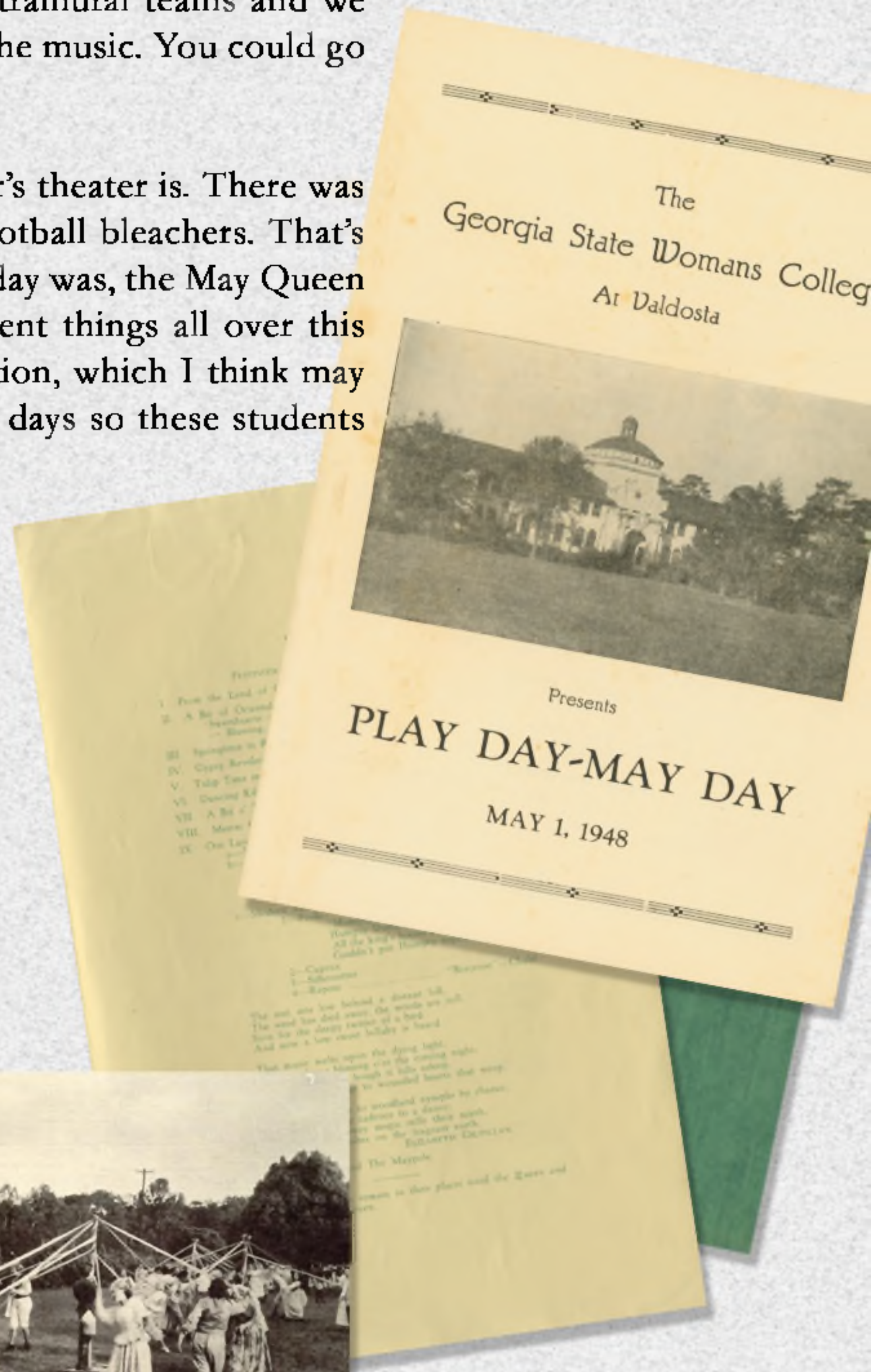
Campus Canopy, May 2, 1944



1953

"Oh, the festival. It was wonderful. Each club had something to do with it. They were in charge of one thing or another. The Sarenaders would sing. The dance group would dance. They would have all these May poles all over campus. We'd have the Lamba. The tgwo groups competed against each other. Let's see, the Lamba was one and what was the other? Kappa, I believe. We were intramural teams and we would wind the maypoles. We'd have programs all day long. You could go to see the music. You could go to the piano."

"Then the big end of May Day was to go to the park which is where Miss Sawyer's theater is. There was a beautiful open area there with trees and flowers and outside bleachers, like football bleachers. That's where we had May Day. We came all through there and that's what the end of the day was, the May Queen procession. But things were going on all day. Different clubs were doing different things all over this campus. All kinds of things all day long. It was a wonderful time. A lot of tradition, which I think may be they should do sometimes. Maybe just have one, maybe just do one of these days so these students will know what it was." - Mary Jo Lott Yeager (Women's Studies Oral History Project)



1948



1935

"May Day was a big day. A big day. It was wonderful. We got up before daylight and then got out and decorated and got ready and then participated and then rested all afternoon." - Jackie Studstill Harris (Women's Studies Oral History Project)



1931



1930



2007