James Cox

University of Iowa MECCA Week:
A Week of Parties, Pranks, and Memories to Honor St. Patrick

Saint Patrick was an Engineer, he was, he was.
Saint Patrick was an Engineer, he was, he was.
For he invented the calculus,
And handed it down for us to cuss.
Erin-go-brah-rah, for the Engineers.

Saint Patrick was an Engineer, he was, he was.
Saint Patrick was an Engineer, he was, he was.
For he invented the 'lectric light,
So Engineers could study by night.
Erin-go-brah-rah, for the Engineers.

Saint Patrick was an Engineer, he was, he was.
Saint Patrick was an Engineer, he was, he was.
For he invented the logarithm,
To count the whiskers of Bolshevism
Erin-go-brah-rah, for the Engineers.

Saint Patrick was an Engineer, he was, he was.
Saint Patrick was an Engineer, he was, he was.
For he invented the monkey wrench,
To screw the lawyers on the bench.
Erin-go-brah-rah, for the Engineers.
(Semi-Official MECCA Song, assumed to be a drinking song, found with MECCA Archive Material)

MECCA Week was an annual celebration of the College of Engineering at the University of Iowa. The celebration was marked by official events, awards, parties, a scavenger hunt for the Blarney Stone, competitions, and pranks against the law students.

St. Patrick's Day Engineering Origins

The tale of St. Patrick as an engineer began at the University of Missouri in 1903. Engineering students were lamenting the fact it was such a long period between holidays and professors were giving them a heavy workload. They decided that St. Patrick was an engineer because he removed the snakes from Ireland and so St. Patrick's Day should be an engineering

holiday. Following this decision, the Missouri engineering students decided they would all cut their classes and have a holiday. In the following years, events were added which included a march of the engineering students to the chapel where they found (a person costumed as) St. Patrick, a knighting ceremony, a Blarney Stone, a parade, and St. Pat's Ball. President Richard Jesse, who initially tried to halt these celebrations would, in 1907, not only approve the engineer's holiday but gave the entire university an hour break in the morning to observe the celebration.[1] This story would catch hold and St. Patrick became classified as a Sanitary Engineer. St. Patrick would ultimately become the Patron Saint of Engineers.

Origins at the University of Iowa

The first celebration of St. Patrick at the University of Iowa was on March 17, 1910 and was called the "Engineer's Celebration of Saint Patrick's Day".[2] In 1967 Frederic Goodson Higbee, a member of the Engineering Faculty from 1905-1952, wrote that this event "gave students an opportunity to 'blow off steam,' to exploit the work of the College, and to mix a worthwhile demonstration of student effort with an appropriate amount of fun and relaxation from the demands of engineering study."[3] Another explanation for the starting of this celebration was in the *Daily Iowan* from 1965 which claims that "most class cuts occurred on St. Patrick's Day. The main reason was that St. Patrick is the patron saint of the engineering profession. Class cutting proved highly unpopular with the faculty. It was thus decided that an officially approved celebration would replace class-cutting."[4] The College would form the Associated Students of the College of Applied Science (AS of AS), an organization that consisted of all students of the college with the express purpose of organizing and conducting the celebration. When the name of the college changed to the College of Engineering, the group would also change its name to

the Associated Students of Engineering (ASE). The first "Engineer's Celebration of Saint Patrick's Day" consisted of a parade, a play, a knighting, and a search for the Blarney Stone.

Members of St. Patrick's Parish argued that the association with their Patron Saint with the "antics and buffoonery of the Engineers" was inappropriate. [5] Thus, in 1913, it was announced that the name and date of the celebration must be changed. Students decided on the annual MECCA Celebration. MECCA stands for the main engineering departments of Mechanical, Electrical, Civil, Chemical, and Architectural. It was also claimed by these students that "MECCA suggested a pilgrimage or the return to a place one has left."[6] The celebration that started with a few tired engineering students at the University of Missouri had taken hold at Iowa and the celebration would grow.

Official Programs

As "Engineer's Celebration of Saint Patrick's Day" and MECCA week became part of the calendar, official events were planned by the AS of AS. From the first celebration to MECCA Week, official events would change and be added.

The 1910-1912 "Engineer's Celebration of Saint Patrick's Day" were similar in their schedule with a parade, Blarney Stone, Knights of Saint Patrick, and a show. *The Daily Iowan* of March 17th, 1910 describes the events planned for the first celebration as a parade that demonstrates "engineering ability and artistic taste", the introduction of the Blarney Stone scavenger hunt, and "a three-act minstrel show, predicted to be the hit of the season, will be staged by the enterprising builders of bridges."[7] The first parade had over 5,000 spectators and 20 floats. Senior Engineers participated in a scavenger hunt for the Blarney Stone a 3' by 2' by 2' stone block. The clues for the scavenger hunt would be engineering problems or riddles and the answers would provide the next step in the search. The seniors of that year would be knighted

as Knights of Saint Patrick that evening. Those seniors would then work together to hide the Blarney Stone for next year's senior class.[8] The evening concluded with, as *The Daily Iowan* from 1910 described, "a big vaudeville show put on by the combined histrionic talent of the 'peppery' engineers."[9] These early years of fun and humor would lead to changes in future events.

With the demanded changes from St. Patrick's Parish in 1913, MECCA Week added an open house and a MECCA Dance.[10] The open house highlighted the projects of the engineering students. This event would become the traditional first event of MECCA Week. Every spring, starting in 1903, the engineers held a homecoming banquet and in 1913 this banquet was incorporated into the celebration as the MECCA Dance. The Knights of Saint Patrick would change their name to the Knights of Meccasacius. This was worked out "by a group of fellows smoking and talking together and can be attributed to the brilliancy of no one in particular" but it draws its letters from the 5 departments which spelled MECCA, then the State University of Iowa, SUI, and the College of Applied Science, CAS.[11] Then the last 6 letters, SUICAS, were written in reverse order, SACIUS, and combined with MECCA to make MECCASACIUS. The students wanted a formal organization so bylaws were drafted creating the Legion of Meccasacius. The bylaws indicated all students, alumni, and faculty who had been with the college for 4 years became members. All members were required to "pledge to do all in their power furthering engineering on the Iowa Campus and its developing institution; to promote the interest of the College of Applied Science of the State University of Iowa and of the engineering profession."[12] The parade and play were continued after these changes were made in 1913.

The next major changes came in 1926 when the MECCA Ball replaced the parade and the MECCA Dance and a night of short skits replaced the formal play.[13] The MECCA Ball

included a formal meal and along with a dance. The short skits were funny, dramatic, musical, or whatever else a student wanted to do. In 1929, a beauty pageant was added to the Ball where the engineers would crown a MECCA Queen. The series of short skits would evolve into the MECCA Smoker.[14] A "smoker" is a party for men only or is considered suitable only for men. This name change was first introduced during the 1940 MECCA Week. For the 1939 MECCA, *The Daily Iowan* explained there was an "annual informal party, [to] elect the royal quintet" from a large group of candidates for MECCA Queen.[15] When planning for the 1940 MECCA a "Mecca Smoker committee" was formed.[16] While this informal party became an official part of MECCA Week what happened remained unchanged. As one alumni reflecting on the Smoker said "it was great with the students blasting the profs and the profs dishing it back."[17] With the addition of the MECCA Ball and MECCA Smoker the staple events for the week were established. The primary events for MECCA Week were the MECCA Open House, MECCA Smoker, MECCA Ball, and the search for the Blarney Stone.

In the following years, fun awards and events would be added to the Smoker and Ball. Following World War II, veterans who had left school to serve in the war returned and wanted to "grow beards and dye them green for the smoker and the MECCA Ball"[18] which produced awards such as "King of the Beards", "Ugliest Beard", and other facial hair related awards.[19] The "Purple Shaft Award" was introduced sometime during the 30's or 40's. This was given to the students "favorite" or "most deserving" professor.[20] A way to earn the Purple Shaft is to give mountains of homework over the year or to plan a test for the middle of MECCA Week. Because MECCA Week was scheduled the week of St. Patrick's Day, drinking green beer and a bar marathon was occasionally part of the celebration. [21] Drinking specials were available during that week with a bar promoting "two hours of free beer for ASE card holders."[22] The favorite bar

of engineers was The Annex as it was "considered the '[engineers']' bar but some law students also frequented the establishment."[23] For the 1980 MECCA, The Annex ran an advertisement that said "We enjoy seeing new and old engineers."[24] These minor awards and fun activities would change each year as different MECCA committees would plan the week.

The only event that occurred at the 1910 "Engineer's Celebration of Saint Patrick's Day" and continued relatively unchanged was the scavenger hunt for the Blarney Stone. The first Stone was a 3'x2'x2' block and the second stone acquired is a granite stone weighing 35 lbs with the inscription "MECCA 1910" on it.[25] Initially, it was the seniors who hid the Stone for next year's seniors to locate. During the 50's, the responsibility of hiding the Stone shifted to the Engineering Graduate Students.[26] The clues to find the Blarney Stone consisted of complex math problems and word challenges. The Stone was successfully found for most of the history. The notable exceptions were the Class of 1911 and the Class of 1946, when seniors hid the stone too well for the Classes of 1912 and 1947. Between burying of the Stone in 1911, and the search in 1912 the directions had been lost. 28 years later, in 1939, members of the Class of 1911 wrote a letter which helped to find the original stone in the basement of the engineering building.[27] During this period, the hunt was suspended, but after the recovery of the Stone, the tradition continued until the 1947 MECCA Week when it was lost again. The specific reason it was lost in 1947 was not known for several years, but at the time the loss was attributed to "faulty burying on the part of the 1946 seniors."[28] The tradition would not end this time however. The Class of 1947 would provide a new Stone to be buried for the next MECCA Week.[29] In 1950, the Stone hunt was so challenging, some seniors elected to return to the hunt for the original stone. To search for the original Stone, the seniors went to the city dump, used "twenty sticks of dynamite to break through frozen ground," dug a hole six feet deep, but were defeated in the effort "when

it kept filling with mud and water."[30] That year a "mysterious telephone call" to the Engineering Dean's Secretary provided an extra clue that eventually led to the discovery of the 1947 Blarney Stone in one of the basement storage rooms of the Engineering Library.[31] It was eventually determined that the 1946 Class had buried the original Blarney Stone on the banks of the Iowa River and it was washed away during the spring floods that year.[32] The hunt for the Blarney Stone was the only event that began in 1910 and was a constant throughout the MECCA Week Celebration.

Pranks

The rivalry with the law students was the source of many pranks, fun, and memories for the engineering students. The feud between the engineers and lawyers was as old as the celebration itself, since both departments claimed St. Patrick as one of their own. St. Patrick is the Patron Saint of Engineers and is said to have been a sanitary engineer. However, Law students claimed him as their Patron Saint and that he was a lawyer. St. Ives and St. Sir Thomas More are the only saints recognized Patron Saints of the Legal Profession by the Roman Catholic Church.[33] Regardless, the rivalry over St. Patrick's profession prompted many pranks and fun at the lawyers' expense.

During the celebration of MECCA Week, the pranks are too numerous to describe. From letting green mice loose in the Law Library, to "kidnapping" the MECCA Queen for an enjoyable night with law students, to the placement of a manure spreader in the Law Building's Practice Courtroom. There are four pranks that stand out for their daring, humor, legacy, or impressiveness.

In the category of daring and impressive, is a story from the early days of the MECCA Celebration. The story told is of Iowa City waking up to find the Old Capitol with a Green

Dome. At 48-feet in circumference, "the campus awoke to find the gold dome wearing a green night cap" and "rumor has it that Joe Howe, and a friend of his, had engineered the project and handled the perilous job of attaching it."[34] Joe Howe graduated from the State University of Iowa in 1924.[35] His name and portrait are now on the College of Engineering's "Honor Wall" for his time spent as a Professor of Mechanics and Hydraulics from 1929-1971.

During the 50's another group of students decided to lead a horse into the Law Building, now Gilmore Hall. The Engineering Students, fueled by green beer, collected donations to purchase a horse in Solon and have the horse dealer deliver it to the Law Building's front door. The horse was led up to the 3rd floor and left until morning for the lawyers to discover. The students and faculty "quickly demonstrated a distinct lack of skill on leading horses down stairways. University officials found it necessary to remove one of the floor-length third floor windows and erect a construction elevator outside so the blindfolded horse could be [removed]."[36] The Engineering Dean emptied the treasury of ASE to pay for the costs of the prank.

A theme that was played out across many years of pranks was the inclusion of something green on or around the Law Building. Long time Law Professor Samuel Fahr reflected on the something green taking place in 1956 at Gilmore Hall as "the engineers hoisted a bright green Mecca flag to the top of the flag pole on the roof. On the way down the pole, they thoughtfully coated it with black grease. No one could climb the pole to strike the insulting banner."[37] Because no one could climb the pole to remove the flag, "the solution was seemingly simple: shoot the green rag down. Several rounds from a .22 rifle failed the test. So, someone went home and fetched a .30/06 Springfield rifle with a four-power scope. That shattered the blocks on the pole and, to many cheers, down fluttered the disgraceful emblem."[38] No one was arrested, no one

was removed from the university, and representative of the school administration simply called it a Mecca Week Prank.

The prank that simply demands the question of "how??" was in 1963 when a one-ton concrete shamrock was placed on the Law Building's Lawn.[39] But, "there is some question as to who put it there. Law students deny its existence. And Engineering Students deny putting it there."[40] The engineers' denial was understandably difficult to believe due to the fact that when the 6-foot diameter by 6-inch-thick slab was formed it had the word "MECCA" on it. This stone would remain on the "front lawn for a number of years."[41]

These four pranks are by no means the only four that occurred, because there were pranks every year and surely are the source of many great memories for engineering alumni. During the 70's and 80's the rivalry turned from pranks to more competitions - the bar marathon. The rivalry and pranks were as large a part of MECCA Week as the Ball, Smoker, and celebration of St. Patrick as an Engineer.

End of MECCA

Declining participation and numerous revivals over the years make it difficult to pin down the end of MECCA Week as a celebration. But, the late 1980's appears to be the end of the annual MECCA. The 1987 MECCA Smoker only had only a small footnote advertisement in the bottom corner in the Daily Iowan and no mention at all of MECCA on St. Patrick's Day. There was also no mention of MECCA Week in the 1988 Daily Iowan. Attempts were made to revive the event in 1996, 2001, 2003, and 2004. The decline of MECCA though has no exact date as over the course of time included events were left off the schedule limiting the celebration.

Following the name change to MECCA in 1913, the first eliminations of events from the schedule came in 1926. In 1926, "the parade was discontinued because of the weather hazard and

the enormous amount of work involved; the show was discontinued because of the time it took to train and rehearse and the increasing difficulty of finding a fresh theme around which to build suitable entertainment."[42] The Knights of Meccaascius would continue to hold initiations until 1926 when the organization died out.[43] The parade and show were replaced with the MECCA Ball and MECCA Smoker. So, MECCA Week continued after these early changes.

The greatest changes to MECCA Week were not in the event schedule but were changes in the Engineering College and the University of Iowa. During the 1909-1910 year, the University of Iowa had a total of 2,352 students enrolled and 218 of them were in the College of Applied Science/Engineering.[44] There were 29,133 total students at the University of Iowa and 1,283 students were in the College of Engineering for the 1987-1988 academic year.[45] With this growth it became harder to have everyone committed to the celebration and participation lagged.

The academic calendar also caused changes to MECCA Week. The traditional week for MECCA was the week before St. Patrick's Day. However, during the middle 1970's, Spring Break began to be scheduled either before or beginning on St. Patrick's Day.[46] This caused MECCA Week to be held after spring vacation, which disrupted the event and limited participation.

Legal action was taken against MECCA Week pranks and the opinion of the appropriateness of the actions of the students also shifted. In 1970, the law students had grown tired of pranks, with the president of the Student Bar Association saying, "These are really childish pranks. We go along with them up to a point, but these things should stop when they interfere with law students' studies and cause damage to property."[47] That year the law students received a court injunction against the engineering students to limit their pranks. Referring to

Law Professor Samuel Fahr's writing about MECCA and the shooting of a flag off the top of a building he laments:

> Can you even imagine such goings-on in sensitive today? The police, university and Iowa City alike would have investigated. The Division of Criminal Investigation would have been called in. Proper citizens would have deplored it. University committees would have met, with all the expedition and forthright action that implies…Worse yet, if the perpetrators had been caught, serious consequences would have followed. The offenders would have been subjected to counseling. We would all have been grieved, and so have needed counseling too.[48]

The changing environment of Iowa City and the ideas about what is appropriate for the pranks morphed into competitions. The pranks had become such an integral part of MECCA Week when they were removed or limited, it becomes difficult to say how much fun of MECCA Week was also removed.

MECCA Week began as the entire College of Applied Science skipping class to have an engineer's holiday to honor St. Patrick and it evolved into a week of formal events and pranks. The week-long celebration would evolve and change over its history but the heart was always the idea of having fun and relaxing in the middle of a rigorous school year as an engineer. MECCA Week was a week of parties, pranks, and memories that many Iowa Engineering Alumni will always remember.

Special thank you to Wendy Brentner, Director, Engineering Alumni Relations and Communications, for her insight and the materials used!

[1] Lindon J. Murphy, "Saint Patrick Patron of Engineers," in *The Iowa Transit* (State University of Iowa College of Engineering: March 1965)
[2] "MECCA Madness Has Long History," *The Daily Iowan,* March 3, 1965.
[3] F.G. Higbee, "A Reminiscence of MECCA," (University of Iowa, 1967).
[4] "MECCA Madness"
[5] Richard Rummelhart, "MECCA History" in *Hawkeye Engineer* (University of Iowa College of Engineering: March 1984).
[6] Rummelhart, "MECCA History".
[7] "St. Patrick to Be Honored," *The Daily Iowan*, March 17, 1910.
[8] Rummelhart, "MECCA History".
[9] "Monster Parade a Feature of St. Patrick's Program," *The Daily Iowan,* March 14, 1910.
[10] Rummelhart, "MECCA History".
[11] "MECCASACIUS!," *The Daily Iowan,* March 20, 1920.
[12] Rummelhart, "MECCA History".
[13] Rummelhart, "MECCA History".
[14] Rummelhart, "MECCA History".
[15] "Candidates for Mecca Queen," *The Daily Iowan,* March 1, 1939.
[16] "Engineers Name Mecca Week Committees," *The Daily Iowan,* November 24, 1939.
[17] Jim Huff (BSEE 1962), e-mail message, MECCA Memories and Comments, March 19, 2001.
[18] C.W. Lazenby (BSME 1950), e-mail message, MECCA Memories and Comments, March 19, 2001.
[19] "Engineers' 'King of Beards' Elected," *The Daily Iowan,* March 17, 1944.
[20] Donald B. Boldt, "'Purple Shaft' Letters to the Editor," *The Daily Iowan,* March 13, 1957.
[21] Karen Herzog, "Mecca Jubilee a week of 'mad insanity'," *The Daily Iowan,* March 12, 1982.
[22] "St. Patrick's day means MECCA's here again," *The Daily Iowan,* March 10, 1972.
[23] Stewart A. Zuber to Fred W. Streicher, 24 October 2001, Letter, MECCA Week Binder 1, Wendy Brenter's Office, Iowa City.
[24] "MECCA 1980" in *Hawkeye Engineer* (University of Iowa College of Engineering: March 1980).
[25] Rummelhart, "MECCA History".
[26] Rummelhart, "MECCA History".
[27] "Found After 28 Years: Blarney Stone Found in Basement of Engineering Building," *The Daily Iowan,* March 3, 1939.
[28] "Add Blarney: Engineers Fail to Find Stone; Law Students Deny Theft," *The Daily Iowan,* March 22, 1947.
[29] Russell Zeleniak, "Blarney Stone," *The Daily Iowan,* March 16,1948.
[30] "Blast It!: Engineers use Dynamite in 'Blarney' Hunt," *The Daily Iowan,* March 3, 1950.
[31] "Blarney Stone Found: Senior Engineers Blast, Bulldoze City Dump in Search for Original 1912 Rock," *The Daily Iowan,* March 16, 1950.
[32] "MECCA Stonehunt," in *Hawkeye Engineer* (University of Iowa College of Engineering: March 1980).
[33] Ann Lousin, "The patron saints of lawyers," *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin* 156, no. 98 (May 2010): 1.
[34] Irving Weber, "College of Engineering a part of Iowa for 125 years," *Iowa City Press-Citizen,* October 11, 1982.
[35] Betty L. Lamberto, ed., *Iowa Official Register 1967-1968*, vol. 52, 232.
[36] Howard G. Judd, "Letters: Horseplay on the Third Floor," *Iowa Alumni Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (May 1995), 4.
[37] Samuel M. Fahr, "Hooligans and Shenanigans," *Iowa Alumni Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (February 1995), 36.
[38] Fahr, "Hooligans," 36.
[39] Rummelhart, "MECCA History".
[40] "Sham Shamrock Rock," *The Daily Iowan,* March 15, 1963.
[41] Vernon Reding (BSCE 1969), e-mail message, MECCA Memories and Comments, March 19, 2001.
[42] Higbee, "A Reminiscence of MECCA".

[43] Rummelhart, "MECCA History".
[44] Office of the Registrar, "University of Iowa Enrollment Chart, 1856-1942," University of Iowa Special Collections University Enrollment and Student Body Demography, Iowa City.
[45] Office of the Registrar, "A profile of students enrolled at the University of Iowa, first semester 1987-1988," Iowa Research Online, 10.
[46] Office of the Registrar, "Catalog of The University of Iowa, 1972-1974 ," Iowa Research Online, 4.
[47] "Injunction Sought To Curb MECCA Week Pranks at UI," *Iowa City Press-Citizen,* March 18, 1970.
[48] Fahr, "Hooligans and Shenanigans," 36.