In 1924 Central celebrated its first fall Homecoming. The “Normal,” as CMU was then called, had in earlier years invited alumni to spring graduation. The event was not popular with alumni, however, and in the early 1920s the school was casting about for a new approach.

Bourke “Dutch” Lodwyk, a student at the Normal, found that new approach early in 1924. In the first weeks of the fall semester, Dutch was sent on a quiet trip to Albion College to scout the school’s football team prior to its game with Central. He came back with the goods on the Albion team and also with tremendous enthusiasm to establish at the Normal what he had witnessed in Albion: a fall homecoming. Students, faculty, and the administration embraced the idea. On November 22, 1924, Central held its first Homecoming.

Saturday’s game was preceded by a Friday night pep rally and bonfire. The next morning the American Legion decorated the town with flags, and a parade of approximately one hundred cars drove down Main Street. The Normal won the game 13-0 on Saturday afternoon. The day ended with various parties and a “rush” at the Broadway Theater. This custom, frowned upon by the school’s administration, encouraged students and alumni to charge past the ticket takers and enjoy a free evening’s entertainment.

Many elements of Central’s first Homecoming have become traditions and are still celebrated today. The event created a popular way to bring alumni back to campus and help them connect with their friends from college days, current students, and the school.

Homecoming Ball, ca. 1965
itself. These goals, as well as an atmosphere of fun, football, and a gentle disrespect for authority, continue to influence the event.

The character of Homecoming has changed little over the years, but different aspects of the event have been emphasized or downplayed and the specific activities associated with Homecoming have often changed. CMU’s Homecoming celebrations can be divided into three periods: the early days before World War II; the “classic” era beginning in 1946, which ended in the late 1960s; and the modern Homecoming, which began in the mid-1970s.

In the years before World War II the Normal’s Homecoming was a relatively modest event. The school was small and at best three thousand people, more students than alumni, would turn out for the weekend.

“Floats” were introduced in the parade of 1925, but often they consisted of only a decorated car or a small trailer. Sometimes the entire student body, led by the band, marched in the parade.

“All-school dances” played an integral part in the celebration and were often held on both Friday and Saturday evenings. Specific classes took on particular duties, and inter-class rivalries sometimes led to considerable controversy. In 1938, for example, tempers flared when the “flammables” gathered by the freshmen for the pep rally bonfire on Friday night were put to the torch early – allegedly by mischief-making sophomores.

Some traditions of the pre-World War II period continue to this day. In addition to the annual parade, the important role of the band, and the game itself, one of the most revered

Queen’s Float in Homecoming Parade
traditions that remains from this period is the CMU Fight Song. The fight song was composed by Howard “Howdy” Loomis when he was a Normal student and was first played at the 1934 Homecoming.

World War II temporarily halted CMU’s Homecoming. Wartime restrictions on rail travel as well as rationing of vital products such as gasoline made it difficult, if not impossible, for alumni to return to campus. For these reasons, Homecoming was not held between 1943 and 1945.

With the coming of peace, Homecoming was reborn in 1946 and entered its “classic” period. Homecoming became one of the most important events on the student calendar. It was celebrated with ever increasing enthusiasm and extravagance.

The 1946 Homecoming celebration featured twenty-two floats. An all-school dance followed the traditional Friday night pep rally and bonfire. Capitalizing on the new team name adopted in 1941, “Chippewas,” “Indian pageantry” was added to the event. The 1946 Homecoming also marked the election of the first Homecoming queen, which has proved to be one of the events enduring traditions.

In the 1950s Homecoming grew ever larger. Floats became more elaborate. The election of a queen was an increasingly complex activity involving ads in the student newspaper, loudspeakers mounted on cars, and even aircraft “bombing” the campus with fliers. By the late 1950s the postgame formal dance became so popular that all who wanted to attend could not fit under a single roof. Thus two balls were held. One was held in Finch Fieldhouse. A second ball was held in Keeler Union and later, after Keeler was closed, in the University Center.

The longstanding tradition of leavening the weekend’s activities with a bit of humor was also upheld, most memorably by the Veterans club. Beginning in 1952 and continuing until 1981 the group offered to the Homecoming throng one of the school’s longest running gags; Elvira Scratch. A never serious candidate for Homecoming queen, Elvira changed her appearance each year, but she always bore a marked resemblance to one of the club’s more extroverted veterans wearing women’s clothes. She shaved neither her legs nor her beard, disdained showers, wore a tasteless dress, and was frequently seen with a beer in hand. She is also remembered for her annual effort to dash onto the football field at halftime and kiss the most senior member of Central’s administration unlucky enough to come within her reach.

Despite Elvira’s antics, the 1960s proved to be dark years for Homecoming. Many students viewed Homecoming as irrelevant. Some students complained that Homecoming was a “Greek event” that held little relevance for those who were not members of a fraternity or sorority.

Even for those who attended, the event began to lose much of its charm. Symbolic of the change was the fate of the Homecoming dance. By 1960 the alumni had begun to hold a separate dance. Many fraternities and sororities followed suit. As a consequence the all-school dances began to lose money and were abandoned in 1974. People began to question other traditions as well.

By the late 1960s Homecoming, as it had been celebrated since the end of World War II, was no longer viable. Various efforts were made to revitalize the tradition. In the late 1960s a rock concert was added to the weekend’s activities. In 1971 the event was radically recast to make it more appealing to
students. It was renamed the “Homecoming Carnival.” There was no parade. The Homecoming queen was renamed “Miss CMU.” Although the 1971 experiment and other efforts of the period proved unsuccessful, a new consensus slowly emerged that reenergized Homecoming.

In its modern form, Homecoming has become oriented toward alumni. Without denying the importance of student participation and “spirit,” Homecoming became more about coming back to campus.

Modern Homecomings were celebrated in ways that changed the traditions of the classic period. The parade was resurrected in 1972, but it was usually less elaborate. Friday pep rallies reappeared, sometimes punctuated by fireworks. The bonfire, however, was gone. It was the victim of a city ordinance banning outdoor burning. Gone too was the “Indian pageantry” of the classic period.

New traditions replaced the old. The tailgate parties of today were first held in the late 1970s. In 1982 the Homecoming queen was joined by a king. In 1997 the entire concept of a queen and king was revamped. Two students, chosen largely on the basis of their service to the University and the community, were named “Gold Ambassadors.” In 1998 the University reached out to those who could not visit Mount Pleasant and held its first “virtual Homecoming” on the World Wide Web, complete with a virtual tailgate party. You may view this year’s virtual Homecoming at www.cel.cmich.edu/gochips.

Homecoming has gone through many changes in the past seventy-six years but as it enters the twenty-first century the core reasons that led to the first Homecoming in 1924 persist. Homecoming is still an opportunity for old college friends to come together, for alumni to meet with today’s students, and for the University to put its best face forward. Homecoming binds together the University community as no other event can.

Children’s Library Adds New Dimension

The Library’s Board of Governors has added a new dimension to the Library’s children’s collection. Recognizing the importance of the ongoing gift of original art drawn for children’s books, which was made by Mary Lois and Francis Molson, the Board has directed the staff to collect children’s books that complement this gift.

Two categories of books have been selected to accomplish this goal. First, the Library will obtain books that have won the Caldecott medal. Since 1938 the Caldecott medal has been awarded by the American Library Association to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children published in the United States during the preceding year. The Caldecott winner represents the best published children’s illustrations in America. These books create an important resource to which art in the Molson collection can be compared.

A second international collection of children’s illustrative books will be added to the Library. Every other year the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) presents two Hans Christian Anderson awards; one to an author and one to a children’s illustrator. The Library will begin to purchase IBBY book nominee sets.

IBBY’s selection committee considers applications from around the world. In 2000, for example, thirty IBBY “national sections” nominated authors and illustrators. Sometimes referred to as the “little Nobel prize” because the queen of Denmark traditionally serves as patron of the awards, IBBY nominee books create a global reference point by which the artworks donated by the Molsons and the Caldecott books can be placed in context.

We are excited that the children’s collection can be supplemented and amplified by these important, visually oriented works.
A Final Word

Publishing the Clarke's newsletter in conjunction with CMU's annual Homecoming celebration creates the opportunity to discuss an aspect of the Clarke that is frequently overlooked, its role as the University's archive.

When people think of the Clarke they usually remember us primarily for either the Library's wonderful collection of historical materials about Michigan and the Old Northwest Territory or the equally wonderful collection of children's volumes. And these are, of course, important aspects of the Library.

The history collection is one of the finest in the state. Our holdings about Michigan local history, listed on our web site, run to over three hundred typed pages. Our Civil War manuscript collection, also found on the web, is also quite large. In addition our Michigan collection holds significant works published by influential small presses in the state, such as the African-American poetry published by Detroit's Broads / Press beginning in the 1960s.

Similarly, our children's collection features delightful holdings. The collection includes both works of fiction and textbooks. Most notable among the schoolbooks is a wonderful collection of primers. These books, which are still used today to teach young children their "ABCs" and offer them their first experiences in reading, speak with considerable authority not only about how young children learn to read but also about what society has considered important to impress upon these young minds.

The Library's collection of children's fiction is also of national significance. Symbolizing the collection's value is the current joint project that we are undertaking with Michigan State University. Funded through a Library of Congress Ameritech grant, it will bring to the World Wide Web a very important body of early-nineteenth-century children's books.

The Clarke Library is indeed an impressive resource, and among its riches are the archives of Central Michigan University. CMU has an honorable and interesting history. It has served the people of our state for over one hundred years, evolving from a small school educating teachers to a multifaceted university serving the needs of a diverse student community. Documenting the institution and its students, faculty, and staff is an important aspect of the Clarke's work.

The Clarke documents Central through a variety of resources. A complete run of the student newspaper and the annual yearbooks offers a good idea of how students have viewed the school. The papers of many of CMU's presidents, which are found in the Clarke, look at the same issues as discussed by the students but from a very different perspective. The Library also holds a substantial collection of material about various departments and colleges, as well as student groups.

All these, taken together, tell the story of CMU. Each resource supplements and amplifies its neighbor. They help round out the picture and make it possible to develop a richer understanding of what CMU is and how it has served it students.

The picture, however, is never complete. The Clarke is proud to serve as CMU's memory, but the staff is well aware that some aspects of the past are better documented than others. We welcome contacts from those who might have a piece of CMU's history hidden away in their office or their attic. Give us a call. If you find something, even if you think it is trivial, please let us know. Call us at 517.774.3352 or drop us an email at clarke@cmich.edu. What you find just might fill in a missing part of our collective memory.

Frank Boles