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Old school ties

By Ron Meister '67, '70JD | 1:55pm April 24 2013



Berkeley College dining hall in 1964. Photo: Manuscripts and Archives.

One cold winter day long ago, in the middle of freshman year, I was almost kicked off campus for wearing someone else's tie.

It was 1963, and neckwear had a greater importance at Yale in those days. Part of the college's mission to, as university president Kingman Brewster put it, "educate a thousand male leaders a year," was to teach the importance of the four-in-hand. Under the college-wide "coat-and-tie rule," admission to all dining halls required undergraduates to wear a jacket and tie. Nothing was said about shirts—or pants, for that matter—though it was generally considered gauche to arrive bare-chested or in Jockey shorts. Beyond those requirements, however, any attire could be, and was, worn: undershirts, sweatshirts, zipper jackets, turtlenecks—so long as there was a tie around them. Because almost no one wore a tie to class, most undergraduates left their "meal ties" on hooks in a coatroom near the dining hall throughout their academic careers, by the end of which they were all indistinguishable shades of gray brown.

Like all freshmen, I took my meals in University Commons, which, unlike the residential colleges, had no coat room for the storage of a meal jacket and tie. That was generally no problem, so long as you remembered to wear your jacket to meals and have your trusty brown rep tie in its pocket. On the morning in question, however, I ran afoul of the system. I had (as only a freshman would allow himself to have) an 8:00 A.M. French class, in Harkness Hall. That morning, our instructor, M. Ignoto, failed to appear. Because he was an assistant professor, protocol required us to wait ten minutes before bolting out the door. Our group of relieved *étudiants* thus emerged onto the Cross Campus at 8:10, where I faced a dilemma. Not anticipating the opportunity for *petit déjeuner*, I hadn't brought my tie, and if I returned to my room on the Old Campus to

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retrieve it, I wouldn't be able to make it back to Commons before the breakfast doors closed.

Because it was cold, I was already wearing a jacket, so I was in partial compliance. I decided to hoof it directly to breakfast and see what turned up. Upon entering Commons, I was rewarded with the sight of my classmate "Chip," who, property attired, was about to get up from his meal. I asked for his tie, confident that Chip would have no qualms about joining the cravat conspiracy, because he was a known flouter of the rules. In his dorm room, he harbored an illegal electric teapot, cleverly concealed inside a stuffed rabbit, which his father had sent when Chip had written home to complain that, contrary to his understanding of Yale as a gentleman's school, there was no provision in McClellan Hall for boiling water. Chip eagerly entered into my scheme, handed over his tie, and went off to pursue his further life of crime. (This was, in fact, not Chip's last involvement with the criminal justice system. Years later, I learned, he was indicted, along with a United States congressman, for bribery and extortion. The charges were ultimately dismissed. I do not know if the authorities responsible for the dismissal were aware of Chip's role as an accessory in the coat-and-tie caper at Yale.)

I thought no more about my use of Chip's tie for several days, not knowing that we had been spotted by the matron who checked off names as we went through the cafeteria line, and that she (well knowing who we were) had ratted us out. I was therefore unpleasantly surprised to receive a summons from the freshman class dean, whose jurisdiction evidently extended to the sartorial as well as the academic. Dean Whiteman was his name, he had a forbidding aspect, and he scared the daylights out of me. "Don't you know you could be RUSTICATED for this?" he thundered. This was particularly frightening, because I had no idea what that meant. Would I be turned over to DKE to be paddled? Would I be fed to a cow? Would I be led blindfolded into the fortress of some secret society where unspeakable things would happen? Manfully, I offered to take whatever punishment Dean Whiteman felt was appropriate for my offense, but I pleaded for clemency for Chip, who I argued was an innocent bystander to my criminal enterprise. The dean mulled this over, presumably like the Mikado thinking to devise a punishment that fit the crime, but finding none, let me go with a warning. As I arose to walk out and breathe the air of free Yale, I imagined he remarked that I was neatly dressed. "Nice tie," he would have said.

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