



Ring in 100 years of tradition

by Laura Wedin

Following the creation of four class ring designs—in one school year—the ring tradition at Virginia Tech commenced with a bang.

Like many Virginia Tech traditions, a bit of legend, lore, and mystery surrounds the first class ring at Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College and Polytechnic Institute (popularly called VPI, now Virginia Tech). Although the Class of 1911 has typically been credited with introducing the VPI ring, recent research indicates a more complicated series of events.

In *The Bugle's Echo*, a comprehensive history of the early Corps of Cadets, Col. Harry D. Temple '34 notes that the Class of 1911 ring arrived well after the class had graduated, citing a 1966 *Techgram* article based on an interview with Fred Kell Prosser '11. As class president, Prosser had promoted the idea of a class ring, but fellow class members remained undecided and so graduated without any

class-designated jewelry, not even a pin as earlier classes had selected.

When Prosser returned to Tech the following year for graduate work, he wrote letters to fellow Class of 1911 members asking for their approval to create a designated ring, no doubt influenced by the established ring traditions at such schools as Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and West Point. Prosser located a jewelry manufacturer that agreed to produce the rings if he provided the design, which he did in 1912—on his student drawing board. Months later, Prosser received the rings and faced the challenge of mailing them to his 1911 classmates who were already alumni.

Interestingly, the Dec. 6, 1911, edition of the student newspaper, *The Virginia Tech*—the precursor to the *Col-*

legiate Times—includes its first advertisement for Dieges and Clust, a jewelry manufacturer in Washington, D.C. The bottom portion of this ad reads, “We made pins and rings for V.P.I. classes of 1913-1914,” suggesting that the 1913 ring was on its way by late 1911.

Moreover, an earlier edition of the newspaper reports that the senior Class of 1912 met on Nov. 4, 1911, and selected Spies Brothers in Chicago to manufacture the 1912 class ring. In light of the ad and news brief, it seems likely that the push for a class ring had become contagious within the Corps of Cadets' historically competitive classes.

No known 1911 or 1913 ring now exists, and Prosser, who lost his own ring, was unable to recall the ring's manufacturer in the 1966 interview. Further

confounding history, a 1966 article and the 1967 ring booklet both include a photograph of the 1917 ring misidentified as the 1911 ring—an image in which the “7” almost passes as a “1”. Most descriptions of the 1911 ring, the first to feature an oval stone, have thus been based on the wrong model.

The concept of a unique ring design for each class is very clearly illustrated, however, in photographs from the ring tradition’s inaugural years. The 1913 ring, for instance, was a metal-top signet style bearing no stone. On its shanks were the class numerals, crossed sabres, and letters “VPI” with a pair of eagles, a design reminiscent of early rings at both VMI and West Point.

The 1912 ring featured a square top with a flat stone and, on only one side, a design that incorporated an eagle, sabres, and shield bearing the class numerals. Probably worn on the pinky finger, as was the custom among military school graduates, both rings reflect class logo designs that appear prominently in the 1912 Bugle, VPI’s yearbook.

In those early years, the ring design and selection process was entirely student-driven, and the Class of 1914 is credited as the first to appoint a ring design committee during sophomore year. The resulting 1914 ring—with its classic oval-shaped bezel and twin eagles, sabres, rifles, and cannon barrel behind a shield bearing class numerals—has served as the

basis for all subsequent ring designs in this cherished Virginia Tech tradition.

Despite its share of mystery and the speculation surrounding which class designed the initial ring or who had the original idea, the ring program at Virginia Tech experienced a banner “first” year in 1911-1912 and will celebrate its 100th anniversary with the design of the 2011 ring.

And the Class of 2011 Ring Design Committee is, in fact, already hard at work.

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