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TOWNES HALL NOTES

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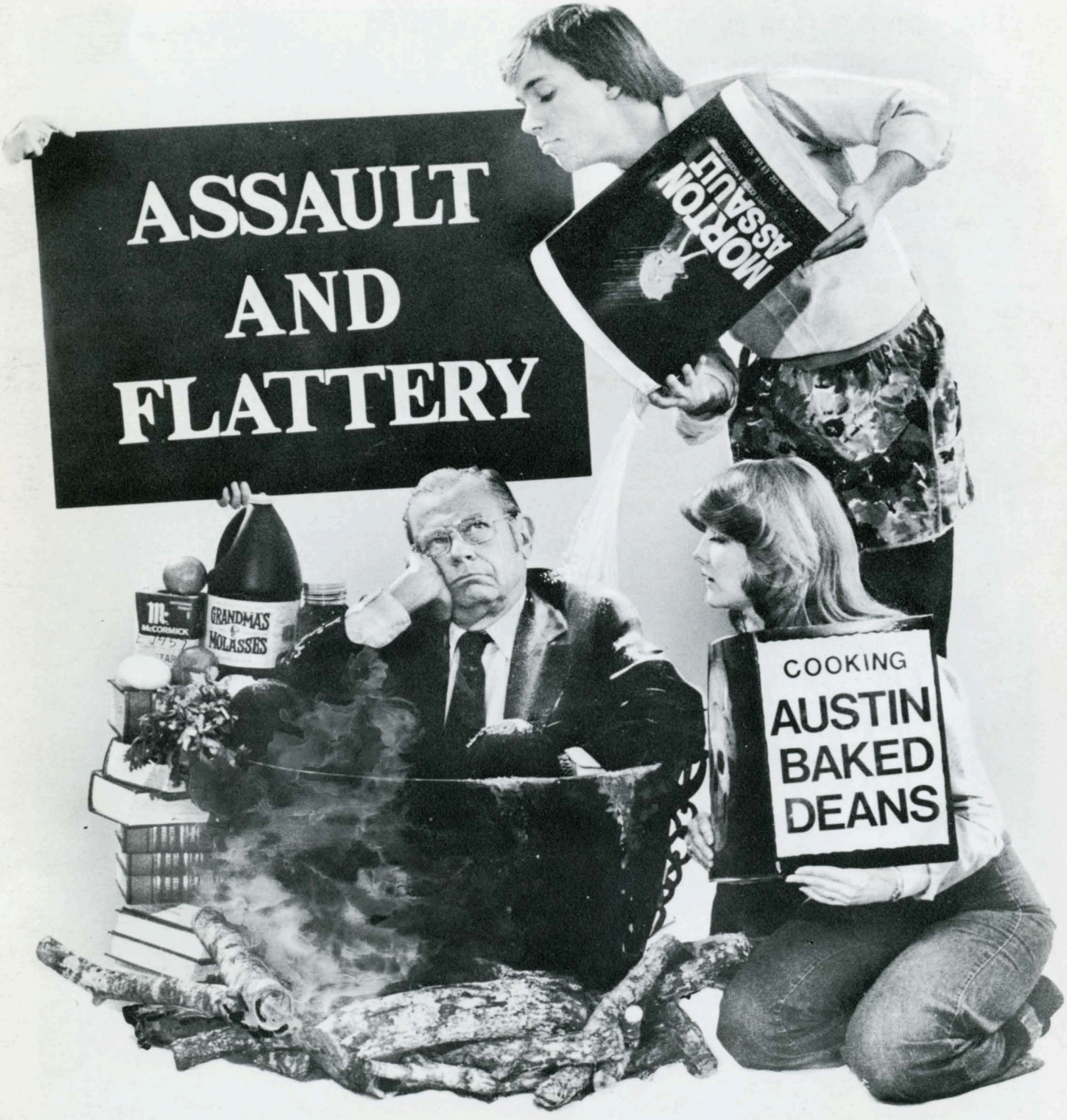


The annual faculty-student roast has become a well-seasoned tradition where profs and deans are cooked alive and sometimes live to tell about it. The spoofed-up story starts on page 11.

A toast to a roast

For a generation of Assault and Flattery goers, T. J. Gibson, associate dean, is synonymous with the event. Over the years students have talked him into appearing in a wardrobe of revealing costumes. Besides the leopard skins, Gibson has good-naturedly donned a Superman outfit and a tutu. In 1974, the year of the streaker, he dashed across the auditorium in thermal underwear. On rare occasions Gibson has appeared fully dressed–most notably in sequined disco clothes and an ape costume. Photo by Gil Barrera.

The faculty cancan line, billed as "A Dozen Wicked Legs," was the hit of the 1953 Assault and Flattery.

That year kindled the law school's annual faculty-student roast, a red-hot tradition which flamed for years, then flickered and died, and finally came roaring back in 1969 to singe and sing and crackle with laughter.

It's been wild. Over the years the faculty have been mimicked and flattered and sometimes battered. Professor Lino Graglia was immortalized in 1977 as his name was spelled—or rather misspelled—to the tune of "Gloria." Dean Ernest Smith mastered the soft shoe, which he performed three different years in elegant tux or tails—sometimes with leggy, net-stockinged students. Some of the best Broadway musicals have been mutilated with legalese. And the years' events have been satirized in skits (remember Earl Warren and the Supremes?) while songs such as "Surfing USA" became "Busing USA."

Assult and Flattery has become grander over the years, but never funnier than in the first 1953 production.

Kenneth Woodward, who has been on the law school faculty long enough to witness a slew of Assault and Flatteries, recalls that the first production had a newness that made every line hilarious.

The clincher, he said, was that first unbelievable faculty line-up. The cancanners took the award for the best act—the first (and last) time that faculty talents were up to the student competition.

Those infamous dancers included Page Keeton, newly named as dean, and faculty members Corwin

'It's easy to come up with a joke, but you've got to take it someplace. The ending is the toughest.'

Johnson, Gus Hodges, Gray Thoron and Joe Sneed. The sixth member was Jack Proctor, the associate dean, who has been described as the show's impresario, and who is now a partner with Fulbright & Jaworski in Houston.

Elizabeth Hodges, Gus Hodges' wife, played the piano for the Legs. She remembered, "They had their first meeting at our house. Our son had some cancan costumes his fraternity had used and pretty soon the faculty were trying them on and practicing. At first everyone just stood around saying 'I've never done anything like this' and then the next thing you knew they'd get with it. The act was really good."

Actually, Proctor said, the 1953 Assault and Flattery was the second annual, since some skits had been given the year before in an open-air theater near the Main Building on the campus. But in 1953 the planners went all-out with a performance in the Texas Union. The result was spectacular. Thoron even balanced on a teeter-board, juggled and sang at the same time—talents that were lost to UT when he became law dean at Cornell University. If the Legs brought the house down, Thoron's vaudevillian act started it rumbling.

Later that year law classes were moved from the Law Building, located where the Business-Economics Building now stands, to the new Townes Hall. For the 1954 Assault and Flattery the Townes Hall auditorium was hung with paper stage curtains, in lieu of the real ones which hadn't arrived, and the show went on.

The annual hoopla was quickly becoming a tradition. Explains Sneed, who is now a judge on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, "Assault and Flattery fits into a period after World War II when there was a great interest in reinstituting old traditions and starting new ones."

The idea for the event originated with Ed Weiss, a top student who was involved in numerous law school activities. Already 41 in 1953, Weiss had considerable business experience and was a natural when it came to planning and promoting events. He later became a fund-raiser for the law school and practiced law in Dallas prior to his death in 1970.

If Weiss ever appeared in Assault and Flattery, his part isn't remembered. Although he was an extrovert who probably would have flowered on stage, he seems primarily to have worked behind the scenes.

The Assaults and Flatteries of the 50's were good ones. Skits ran the gamut from "Gun Smoke" to the "Sixty-Four Billion Dollar Question." Student Bill Parsley (now vice president for public affairs at Texas Tech University) delivered a risqué and riotously funny monologue in 1956 that's still talked about at the law school.

Faculty participation was lively as they sang both on- and off-tune to the "Whiffenpoof" and other songs, which had new lyrics bemoaning law school life. Johnson, who was one of the most talented participants, sang regularly. With less talent, but equal enthusiasm, Hodges used the tune of "Sixteen Tons" to belt out:

I enrolled one morning when the sun didn't shine;
I picked up my book and drove to the mine;
I briefed 16 cases to show the pest;
He covered two and skipped the rest.

The student acts were sometimes thrown together at the last minute, but more often were cleverly written and well rehearsed. Students became surprisingly masterful at imitating professors. Delta Theta Phi took the best act award in 1954 and the Law Wives in 1955. During the next 11 years three groups—Praetors, Phi Alpha Delta and Phi Delta Phi—proved their talents with multiple wins. The Praetors eventually collected five.

Despite some of the better acts, problems began to emerge. The skits often were redundant—especially the imitations of the deans. But the worst problem was that skits sometimes went too far. The roasting crossed the line from funny to insulting.

Sneed observed that shows like Assault and Flattery "are hard to pull off successfully year after year" and often are short-lived.

He explained, "Each year a group gets a little more daring. Then someone's feelings get hurt and they fall back and regroup. The problem is that someone in the show may be more raunchy than funny."

Assault and Flattery went through an obscene period in the 60's—one that was supremely funny or supremely offensive, depending on how one views that sort of thing.

Both students and faculty began losing interest. Even people like Keeton and assistant dean T. J. Gibson, who had been staunch supporters of the event because they believed it contributed to improved faculty/student relations, were disillusioned with it.

The lack of student support for Assault and Flattery also coincided with a demise in traditions on the UT campus, and nationally, as students took up environmental and social causes and began protests about the Vietnam War. The more frivolous campus activities seemed a waste of time.

Assault and Flattery was skidding, literally coming to a halt in 1968. That year the event wasn't held at all.

But in 1969 a law student named Milt Oberman, who had studied theater at Tulane University and who had been in an improvisational company, was approached by the Student Bar Association about reviving it. Oberman fanned the fire, leaving students fired up about Assault and Flattery every since.

Oberman's talents were superb—he would in the years ahead leave law practice to work as an actor in Hollywood—and Assault and Flattery took on a professional look as the skit format was abandoned and the entire program was organized under one coordinator.

One of Oberman's main concerns was the part of the audience—spouses and dates—who wouldn't get the "in" jokes. So he mixed material about law with more general material, much of it from his files.

He also interspersed one-liners between the longer routines. "'Laugh-In' was successful then," said Oberman, who

Left: Professor Corwin Johnson has been entertaining audiences at the law school since 1953. Here he sings, "Mr. Wonderful, That's Me," the song that made him famous at Assault and Flattery. Below: Dean Ernest Smith (center) and two lookalikes act out a "What's My Line" skit. Bottom: Suzanne Leslie takes to the mike in the finale of the 1977 skit, "Fonzo Goes to College." Photos courtesy of Peregrinus.

Michael Bromberg bravely announced, "People with imagination wanted. No talent necessary."

borrowed from that format. "There was even a rip in the curtain that we could use for the performers to deliver the one-liners."

Oberman notes that all kinds of people showed up to help and that they recruited other students and faculty members "who had a degree of notoriety."

"That first year we had trouble enlisting professors because some of them were angry when the show had closed down before. But by the second year they were coming to us," said Oberman.

He emphasizes that "all kinds of funny, creative people emerged."

Oberman reminisces, "Somebody had an idea about the 'Banana Boat Song.' T. J. Gibson would do anything; he was marvelous. And there was a skit about job interviews—the firm was from Waco—that had the seniors crying with laughter. The guy who played the interviewer had never been on stage before. But he started ad-libbing up there. It was like he had found his home."

That was the period of the God and state controversy, and Oberman and his cohorts had Earl Warren and the Supremes say the Pledge of Allegiance with the line, "One nation under (bleep)."

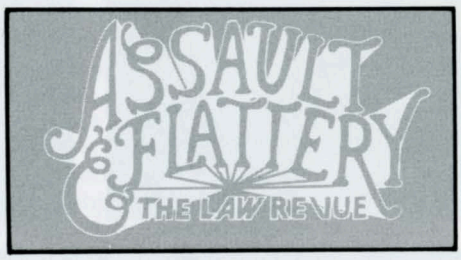
The long hours students were spending in the library were vividly relived at Assault and Flattery. Oberman recalls that earlier in the year two students had actually gotten into a fight over a chair in the crowded library—a natural for an Assault and Flattery skit. He laughs, "One of the actors said 'I'll flip you for it,' and as he reached into his pocket for a coin, the other guy gave him a judo flip."

Oberman also recalls the days of the mini-skirt. "There was this very good-looking woman student at the law school who wore short skirts. In the skit she was studying in the library and—you have to remember law students are crazy anyway—the male students were trying to peek up her dress. It was so funny because everyone had really tried that at one time or another. She was really a good sport to be in the skit."

For the director the most difficult thing, besides the coordinating, is the material, Oberman observed. "It's easy to come up with a joke, but you've got to take it someplace. The ending is the toughest," he said.

Assault and Flattery was attracting the most talented students, and many of them had musical interests that would give the show a lilting direction.

Among the acts that would grace Assault and Flattery in the coming years were "Love Story"; "Charlie Wright, Super Star"; a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta which took the liberty of re-



writing Gilbert's words; a tribute to Keeton titled "Page," and set to the tune of "Mame"; and finally major productions revolving on themes like "West Site Story" and "My Fair Lawyer."

The very talented students involved in those 70's shows included Michael Brounoff, now working with the Dallas firm of Mullinax, Wells, Baab, Cloutman & Chapman. The son of Zelman Brounoff, associate concert master emeritus for the Dallas Symphony, Brounoff had studied piano since he was 6. He was musical director for the 1973 and 1974 shows—he did orchestration and scoring as well as lyric writing—and was co-producer in 1974.

That year Assault and Flattery even had an 18-piece orchestra. Said Brounoff, "In Assault and Flattery there's a tradition that every year has to be better. We had to top the 16 pieces we'd had the year before."

Brounoff observed that Assault and Flattery has to be put together in a very disciplined way. There's no sitting and waiting for inspiration.

He elaborated, "You write a skit because you need it for a certain part of the show and you need it by next Thursday. You grind it out. It works."

What Brounoff loves is lyric writing. "You get a group of people and a keg of beer in a room together," he said. "It just comes out line by line and usually you're rolling on the floor before it's written."

The 1974 show was filled with Johnny Carson take-offs, prof Stanley Johanson's rendition of "If I ever I would leave you, it wouldn't be intestate," and a Superdean sketch with a student playing the role of the new dean, Ernest Smith.

But for all the humor and parody, the show finally gave way to unabashed sentiment. The 1974 show was built on the previous year's "Mame" tribute to Keeton, which student Richard Schmidt had successfully pulled together with a spectacle of props, beautiful lighting and flowers, which were tossed into the audience.

In 1974, the year Keeton retired from the deanship, the show closed with a student, playing Keeton's part, as he packed the things in his office. The casebook on torts which Keeton had authored went into the suitcase while other torts books were thown in the trash can. Piano music softly filled the auditorium with the Keeton theme from "Mame." Then the Keeton actor, along with the cast, joined in "Lord, I'm on My Way," from *Porgy and Bess.* By the end of the show there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

The 1970's also brought take-offs on newscasts and soap operas, routines based on "Saturday Night Live," student Walter Thorman as Jack Benny, ballads composed by faculty member David Robertson, barber shop quartets, and the famous "Fonzo Goes to College," featuring Fonzo Graglia, the character with an unmistakable likeness to law prof Lino Graglia.

Some years spoof awards have also been a part of Assault and Flattery. El Paso attorney Bart Cox accepted the first Bart Cox award as a student in 1970 and literally beamed in the limelight as his legendary loudmouth was loudly praised.

The highlight of almost any Assault and Flattery is Gibson, now associate dean, who has become as traditional,

Students Nancy Lynch (right) and Nancy Rice were among the "Not Ready for Prime Time Players" in Assault and Flattery. Their newscast sketch was based on "Saturday Night Live."

and as funny, as the event itself. Whatever inhibitions he possesses (and they are probably numerous), he has been willing to put them aside for the cause.

Faculty member David Epstein, who graduated from the law school in 1966, states that Gibson "reflects the spirit of Assault and Flattery. He's willing to laugh at himself."

Indeed, there was plenty to laugh at as Gibson took on parts ranging from a cave man to "Disco Stud," which students emblazoned on his sparkling disco outfit in 1978.

The one thing everyone agrees on is that when it comes to disco, Gibson, who can't even waltz, is "absolutely terrible."

"That," chuckled Epstein, "is what made it so great."

Epstein, who is funny enough to be a stand-up comic, also has been one of the favorite performers in recent years. In 1978 he did a "monkey business" skit on cut-rate attorneys' services, which poked fun at lawyers who advertise.

Says Epstein, "I went for the cheap, sure laughs. I went on stage in a gorilla suit and used a lot of atrocious puns."

Generally the plots for Assault and Flattery have thickened over the years as the actors sank deeper and deeper in sticky situations. The 1978 production of "Bar Wars" found the cast caught in the law library where they would be forced to take Finkelstein's bar review course. The spirit of Obi-wan Kocurek, played splendidly by 68-year-old law student Willie Kocurek, brings them to a rousing escape.

In the 1979 "Wizard of Laws" Dorothy (Debra Houston) leaves the Texas state courts for the federal courts, only to discover that she really wants to go home. The plot is a good vehicle for all kinds of jabs and jokes and jingles. Donn Miller, the mellow-voiced tenor who played the lion, sang about the courage of lawyers, law profs and deans. In the role of the scarecrow, David Kroll is asked, "What would you do if you had a brain?" He sings,

> *Well, I could wile away the hours*
> *Discussing torts with Powers*
> *Or even tax with Cain.*
> *I could match wits with Sampson,*
> *Carry on like Stan Johanson,*
> *If only I had a brain.*

But Kroll's greatest, brainiest contribution to Assault and Flattery won't be his acting talents (he also played Luke Sleepwalker in the "Bar Wars" show), but rather his introduction of film to Assault and Flattery. Kroll, who worked at Austin's Channel 7 while he was in law school, produced a film introduction to "Bar Wars" that rivaled the one Twentieth Century Fox did for the space movie. In 1979 he filmed skits—using a fall previews of law school theme—that were shown at Assault and Flattery, to add the dazzle of the silver screen.

There's no question that Assault and Flattery has gotten bigger and better over the years. Some 1400 law students and friends saw the show during the three nights it was staged in the Townes Hall Auditorium this past April as part of Law Week activities. More than 75 students and faculty members work on the production annually.

A few people still aren't wild about the show. Charles Alan Wright, Charles T. McCormick professor of law, hasn't been back since he attended an early Assault and Flattery which had skits he considered in poor taste. He's missed a number of songs dedicated to him, including "I Write the Laws," and the 1972 production of "Charlie Wright, Super Star."

Wright's lack of enthusiasm for the event is shared by the student newspaper, *The Daily Texan*, which doesn't review the law school's revue or run pictures of it, thus diminishing the chances that its stars will be discovered by Broadway.

More than a few students have very vocally asserted that the show's one great fault is its length—that some performers just don't know when to quit.

And at least one Assault and Flattery participant thinks the show has its share of disadvantages. Michael Bromberg, who works as a lawyer for Texaco in Miami, was producer of the 1978 show and earlier played the parts of the Texas hick who metamorphosed in "My Fair Lawyer" and of Fonzo Graglia. He lightheartedly points out one risk involved—that once professors see a student hamming it up on stage, they label him as an extrovert. He groaned that professors started to expect him to talk in class.

Bromberg said the rewards more than compensate, though. The native New Yorker, who once hung up an Assault and Flattery sign saying "People with imagination wanted. No talent necessary," relates that he met a lot of great people working on the show—people who didn't study all the time and who had great parties.

The students and faculty who work on the show and who enjoy it from the audience often give their support because they feel it's a good way to put law school in perspective.

Epstein believes that Assault and Flattery is important because it gives students and faculty "a chance to look at the lighter side of what they do throughout the year."

"The show builds camaraderie," said Epstein. "Morale is never as high at the law school as it is the morning after Assault and Flattery."

Summarized Kocurek, "The satire of Assault and Flattery takes the stiffness out of law school. Once you've seen the show, you feel at home here."

Bromberg notes that Assault and Flattery is one of the two biggest events at the law school each year—the other being the Fall Drunk.

That may have hit on the really remarkable thing about Assault and Flattery. What other event could get a law school audience—stone sober—rolling in the aisles?—*Jan Smith*