



# The College's Greatest Pranks, Goofs and Practical Jokes

BY JAY BUSBEE '90

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROBERT DE MICHIELL

**W**ith all apologies to the hundreds of esteemed professors at the College, pranks are the real memories that students carry with them forever. You may not remember what you learned in econ or Elizabethan literature more than three days after the final exam, but you'll be telling your grandkids about the time you soaked a tennis ball in cologne, lit it on fire and hurled it down your dorm hall.

Certain college pranks have achieved legendary status, inspiring awe, admiration and legions of copycats. Perhaps the finest college prank of all time took place in 1961, when Caltech students infiltrated the Rose Bowl game between Washington and Minnesota. The students placed colored placards in the seats of the Washington fans, and then, dressed as Washington cheerleaders, exhorted the crowd to hold their placards high. The result? "CALTECH" spelled out across one entire side of the Rose Bowl.

Similarly immortal pranks have involved stealing sacred icons or mascots from a rival school, or hoisting unbelievably large objects into unlikely places. While William and Mary can't lay claim to such world-beating pranks as those, we do hold up our end of the bargain, even if we skirt the bounds of propriety and legality doing so.

The College administration tries to take an understanding view of pranks, within reason. "What for one person is a prank, for another person goes too far," says Dave Gilbert, associate dean of students

and director of student conduct. "It's a difficult line to express, but what we try to do is ensure the individual rights of every student to enjoy their College career as long as their conduct doesn't infringe on the rights of others."

College pranks have surely been around since the earliest days of William and Mary, though no records exist of, say, Thomas Jefferson 1762, LL.D. 1782 hoisting effigies to the roof of the Wren Building or turning all of his roommate's possessions upside down. Even so, College students have always proven resourceful when inspiration strikes, so we can assume that such tales have been lost to history.

Recently, the Alumni Association surveyed the College community to recall favorite pranks from undergraduate days, and we received dozens of fine (and hysterical) recollections. Many, sadly, can't be published; this is a family magazine, after all. Many more remain locked firmly in the memories of the participants, to be shared only when they're certain that statutes of limitations have run out. These are some of the best of what we received, however, with some names withheld to protect both victim and victimizer.

## Dorm Room Pranks

**D**orm rooms are ground zero for pranking activity. Woe to the poor undergrad who has a prank-minded roommate or suitemate; the possibilities for victimization are endless. At the College, pranksters have:

- ✦ Filled entire dorm rooms with balloons, crumpled newspaper (that might possibly qualify as a fire hazard, yes?), and thousands of Dixie cups full of water that must be cleaned up one at a time.

— *Courtesy of Michael P. Hennessy '80, Heidi Elizabeth Pixton Copa '68*

- ✦ Blasted rooms from afar by tilting garbage cans full of water against the door and knocking; filling paper bags full of shaving cream, inserting the open end under the door and then stomping; or piling baby powder at the crack under the door and then using a hairdryer to blow the powder into the room. (Since these involve property damage, they often end up on Gilbert's desk.)

— *Various Contributors*

- ✦ Imprisoned residents in Yates Hall by bricking them in with cinder blocks or tying their doorknob to the knob across the hall.

— *Courtesy of Emily Lowry '00*

## Fraternity Pranks

**M**ost of the pranks submitted could end up as state's evidence and thus cannot be repeated here, but some of the printable ones include the following:

- ✦ One early-1980s Sigma Phi Epsilon pledge class scavenger hunt had its pledges retrieve a Crim Dell duck. Some forward-thinking pledges raised the stakes, bringing back not a Crim Dell duck, but a swan from the Governor's Palace pond. They deposited it right in the center of a stunned Sig Ep party; the swan was returned to the pond confused but unharmed.

— *Courtesy of Rich Saunders '82*

- ✦ During pledge week 1986, Theta Delta Chi foolishly challenged its pledges to try to turn some of the hazing heat back on the brothers. The pledges retaliated for a week of harsh treatment by simulta-



neously collecting huge trash cans full of slushy ice water and coating almost all of the unit's stairwells with Vaseline. On command, the pledges dumped the ice water on sleeping brothers closest to the doors; those frat brothers who had not been drenched tried to give chase, they slipped on the Vaseline, and the pledges — who knew where to step to avoid the Vaseline — got away scot-free.

— *Courtesy of Jas Short '90*

✦ One night in the early 1950s, Kappa Alpha (KA) recognized that its supply of alcohol was running low, and hatched an ingenious scheme. Several brothers visited nearby Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) and informed them that a party was afoot with more available women than KA could handle. SAE eagerly agreed to help out with the problem, and left their lodge to join in the party. While they were gone, brothers from KA snuck into their lodge and stole their entire beer-filled fridge. And SAE showed up to the “party” only to find a few guys playing poker.

— *Courtesy of Jim Dillard '59*

## Property Pranks

College students usually don't have many possessions, which makes those possessions all the more valuable — and all the more vulnerable to pranks.

✦ One unfortunate soul who owned a small two-door Honda Civic awoke one morning in 1983 to find it wedged tightly between two trees near the Yates parking lot. Students had lifted the economically friendly but relatively light car right out of its parking space.

— *Courtesy of Jim Pratt '86*

✦ Students in the Botetourt Complex came back to their dorms one afternoon around 1980 to find a bed suspended three stories high above the courtyard. Students had hoisted the bed into the air via long, long ropes run through the exterior staircases at each dorm. Everyone got a good laugh out of it, even the victim — until he realized whose bed it was.

— *Courtesy of Reed Hopkins '81*

✦ In the fall of 1972, a few residents of Old Dominion Hall decided their residence needed a little freshening up. They swiped a Jolly Green Giant figure from a Delta Delta Delta Homecoming float and hoisted it up to the roof of the building. The giant overlooked the campus for several days afterward.

— *Courtesy of Bob Wilson '75*

## Quick Hits

Sometimes the simplest pranks are best: quick hits are often the most effective ... and the most memorable.

✦ Many students in animal physiology lab were participating in a test to evaluate kidney function by testing their own urine at intervals throughout one day. For the final samples, one group of partners — Ana Kuhn '84, David Brand '84, Kenneth Manning '83 and Laurie Thornton '84 — appeared confused by their results, wondering why they were so out of line with previous readings. “Maybe we'll get better results if we run it through again,” one partner said, and the team drank its “urine” cups empty. The cups were full of apple juice, but the other students in lab that day did not know that.

— *Courtesy of Laurie Thornton '84*

✦ In the fall of 1986, one student accompanied his family to a Parents' Weekend dinner at Berret's Seafood. When his father ordered a whole lobster, the student recognized an opportunity. He asked for the lobster's cleaned-out carapace, and the shell started making its way around Dupont Hall, showing up everywhere from beds to closets to toilet seats.

— *Courtesy of Jay Busbee '90*

✦ The exit doors from many dorms resemble those that lead into individual rooms. A couple of Stith Hall students took advantage of this similarity by decorating the exit door with fake nametags and a message board. More than a few students wandered around lost at





the far end of the hall, not wanting to barge into “Debbie’s” and “Lisa’s” room by accident.

— *Courtesy of Patty Anderson '85*

✿ In the fall of 1971, one procrastinating student annoyed his fellow roommate by staying up all night writing a paper. The student finished his paper, paper clipped it, and left it on the center of his desk while he went to breakfast. The roommate safely stashed the paper, then burned several blank pages and left the paper clip sitting in the midst of the ashes. One can only imagine the horror in the writer’s heart at seeing his work burnt to a crisp.

— *Courtesy of Bob Wilson '75*

That list only scratches the surface; every student who’s ever attended the College can certainly think of a few more to add. The vast majority of pranks are one-and-done, quick hits that leave (hopefully) everybody laughing ... and the victim plotting retribution.

The College receives relatively few reports where pranks have gone awry, and in almost all of those instances, Gilbert says, the prankster mends his or her ways as soon as the College steps in.

“Most people don’t even think about pranks being a potential safety hazard,” he says, “and once they do, they’re quick to apologize. When it comes to punishment, intention counts, as does the outcome.” He points to the classic “penny in the door” trick — jamming a penny into a door to wedge it shut — as a prank that could have serious consequences if, say, a fire broke out. Fortunately, however, pranks at the College generally don’t hurt much more than the ego ... and perhaps some dorm room furniture now and then.

The best thing about pranks is that the possibilities are literally endless; as long as there are incoming freshmen, there are new prank targets and new pranks to be created. Odds are that as you’re reading this, some enterprising College students are planning, preparing or executing a prank.

And when that prank hits, make sure to let us know at [alumni.magazine@wm.edu](mailto:alumni.magazine@wm.edu). We’d love to run a sequel to this article, and that’s no joke. ■

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