the caltech Gnome Club

a visual perspective
EARLY YEARS
1897-1919
“A Literary Society, The Gnome Club, is maintained by the students with the co-operation of the Faculty and is doing good work. It affords an opportunity for training in debating, essay writing, declamation, extempore speaking, parliamentary practice etc."

*Throop Polytechnic Report, 1897*
The first image of the Gnome Club. The founding members were photographed in the library, old East Hall, Throop Polytechnic Institute, in 1897.
GNOMES
FORGE AHEAD

Gnome Club House
351 South Euclid Ave.

1900
1917
Gnomes visit Redlands for the annual football game, ca 1915.
Each year Gnomes retreated to the seaside for some R&R. Among those enjoying the spring air in 1917 is Frank Capra (far right in middle photo, far left in lower photo).
Frank Capra’s letter to James A. B. Scherer of November 1917 reveals the Gnome’s doubts about a scientific career: “For the last couple years I have been deceiving myself and others into believing that I would make a good engineer or chemist. I have come to think differently now, and ... I believe the things that I’m temperamentally fit for are music, drama, or dealing with humans such as is offered by diplomatic service ...”
GNOME HEYDAY
1920-34
“At a business session, President Combs presiding, our Treasurer reported that the light bill was getting out of hand and that we should start studying more by daylight and turn the lights off earlier. Frank Wiegand responded: ‘Keep on studying at night, fellows, I’ll take care of the light bill.’ We didn’t realize, and Frank forgot, that he had reversed the wires at the light meter. Within a few weeks a city investigator discovered the trick, and arrived at the house after their records showed that the city owed the Gnome Club money.”

• Henry Gunning ’27
Cards and gaming were always popular. In the 1920s, chess was banned from Gnome House because it was affecting student grades.
“A part of the initiation was to sit on a cake of ice with a bare butt. You had to sit there until you could tell a funny story which made the members laugh. When you got up a sharp paddle didn’t hurt because you were frozen numb, but when you thawed out—holy gee, it would sting.”

• Mike O’Haver ’29
GNOMES: ATHLETIC BEAVERS

Mike O’Haver in one of his many Beaver uniforms, ca 1928.

Ray Labory eyes the hoop, ca 1928.
“Glenn was fresh from the 1924 Olympics in Paris, where he represented the United States in the pole vault. He and Lee Barnes of USC were the only ones to clear 13 feet. The bar was raised and neither of them could clear the next height, so they started to lower the bar. Finally, Lee cleared 12 feet, but Glen couldn’t make it so the Gold went to Lee and Glen had to settle for the Silver. What a thrill it was for a new frosh Gnome pledge to room with famous Glenn Graham!”

• Guy Chilberg, ’28
"During initiation we were required to crawl through a storm drain starting on San Pasqual and ending on the south side of California Street. The last section, under California Street, was very narrow, and Fat Lewis got stuck, and we had to go down and push and shove him so that he could back out. Cramer got smart and went only part way, then backed out. This was no good, as the gang was waiting for him and made him crawl through again until he reached the end at California Street."

- Mike O’Haver, ’29
“I had a Model T Ford chassis with a custom speedster body. Noticing the low profile, Bob Heilbron and Ted Combs bet that they could jump over it. Ted succeeded but Bob seemed to lose altitude in mid-flight and made a highly visible ‘sitzmark’ in the middle of the hood. I had to live with it for some time.”

• Henry Gunning ’25

Winners of the boat race at Military Camp in Monterey, 1928. The oarsmen are Mike O’Haver, Crane Berry, Guy Chilberg, Douglas Kingman, and Robert Ross.
THE OWL AS PHOENIX: GNOME REVIVAL
Gnomes from the club’s heyday, such as those from 1931, ensured that the club survived and, eventually, flourished. The Gnomes are pictured on their Madison Avenue porch in 1931 and half a century later at their 50th reunion in 1981.

In this December 1987 letter to Ted Combs, Thomas Everhart acknowledged the tremendous support that Gnomes have given the institute.
Along with Oliver H. Gardner ('51; pres. 1975-76), an ebullient Ray Bradbury (left) takes the podium at the Gnome’s 1976 Feast.

Club members witnessed some remarkable changes at Throop and Caltech during their first century, and will certainly do the same during this new millennium.
The club song, composed by Frank Wiegand in 1927.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

• The Caltech Archives is indebted to the Gnome Club for financial assistance that has made this and other projects possible.

• Photographs and other images for this presentation were drawn from the Historical Files and the Gnome Club Papers in the Institute Archives. The letter of Frank Capra is from the Papers of James A.B. Scherer. Further information about particular images can be sought by contacting the Institute Archives.

• Quoted text was extracted from Theodore C. Combs (ed.), The Gnome Club, Throop & Caltech: a History (1986).