[I need to report that one of our alumni from the 60’s offered a friendly correction to the story that follows … it was a horse-drawn grain wagon, not a manure wagon; thanks W.M. / GWF]

BACKGROUND

Perhaps someone knows the origin of the long-standing MECCA Week tradition of pranks between engineering students and law students at the University of Iowa. The stories passed down to each engineering class included the kidnapping the MECCA Queen by the law students and the time the engineers walked a horse up the steps of the Law Building, then located at the northeast corner of Jefferson and Capitol Streets in Iowa City.

A horse will go up stairs -- but will not go down stairs. As a result, it was necessary to mount a hoist on the roof of the Law Building and extract the horse through a third-floor window and lower it to the ground. The engineers were assessed the cost of the hoist and procedure. The prank had been costly.

In the spring of 1962, the engineering students began thinking of pranks to play on the law students. They established two firm guidelines. First, and foremost, there should be no significant expense to the engineers. Second, the prank should be memorable, a definite embarrassment to the law students and worthy of public admiration.

In the weeks preceding MECCA, brainstorming meetings were held in the Engineering Building lounge. Ideas were plentiful -- but no one idea met both of the two guidelines.

THE $10 (OR $20) WAGON

On the Thursday prior to MECCA Week, Mechanical Engineering senior Gene Schuchert, who resided on a farm acreage just outside the south city limits of Iowa City, advised he had found a neighbor farmer with an old manure wagon the farmer was willing to sell. When questioned as to the condition of the wagon, Schuchert assured the others it was in good shape and, in fact, had been recently used by the farmer. Schuchert said the farmer only wanted $10 for the wagon.

I was able to secure a pickup truck from my family’s Iowa City business. On Saturday, along with a small group of others, Schuchert and I went to the farm to pick up the manure wagon. It was immediately apparent the wagon was not recently used.
One wheel was laying on the ground and the wooden frame was in major disrepair.

Schuchert has, ever since, been accused of making $20 on the deal -- the $10 from the engineers who passed the hat to purchase the wagon and $10 from the farmer to haul it away!

The manure wagon was transported, in pieces, to the basement Engineering Building lab. Over the weekend, volunteers restored it to recognizable condition as a manure wagon. They rebuilt the frame, did some painting, lettered the sides with “Here’s a lift for you loads”, and drilled slots in the wheel hubs.

The word was passed throughout the Engineering College of plans to “deliver” the wagon Tuesday night to the new College of Law Building, then located on the Riverside Drive curve, across from Westlawn, the College of Nursing Building.

One engineer secured a number of white mice and dyed them green.

THE DEED IS DONE

At midnight on Tuesday of MECCA Week, about 30 engineers met in the Engineering Building lounge. Many in the group had spent earlier evening hours celebrating MECCA Week at the Annex, the popular hangout of the engineers. By midnight, those who came from the Annex were feeling no pain.

The group of somewhat unsteady engineers proceeded to the Engineering Lab where practice sessions were held -- disassembling and reassembling the manure wagon.

After the last disassembly, the pieces of the wagon were loaded into a pickup truck. Some of the group rode in the truck with the wagon while others drove their own cars. As instructed, they all went directly to the Art Building parking lot, down the hill and across the street east of the Law Building.

One by one, the cars pulled into the parking lot and snapped off their lights. Then the pickup truck arrived. The engineers bailed out of their cars -- and, strangely, everyone was sober.

Three engineers stood in the back of the pickup and lifted each piece of the wagon. With remarkable precision, the individuals assigned to each piece stepped up, said, “that’s ours”, grabbed their piece and quickly dashed across the street.

The group, with wagon pieces in hand, huddled at the base of the hill. Someone on top of the hill gave a signal. Quietly, the
engineers and their wagon parts ascended the steps which led into the Law Building courtyard.

They waited in the darkness at the top of the stairs. Upon another signal, they dashed across the courtyard and headed to the building -- where, at the entrance door and each inside door, two engineers stood, holding the doors open.

We reached the Courtroom in the Law Building, a beautiful room, complete with mahogany paneling, located on the top floor. The reassembly of the wagon was flawless, each engineer remembering the task assigned during the practice session.

As the four wheels were inserted on the axles, assigned engineers slipped pins in the pre-drilled slots -- a trick designed to deter rapid disassembly of the wagon by the law students.

Someone brought a camera and snapped a picture of the wagon and the engineers who delivered the prize to the lawyers.

While most of the engineers were in the Courtroom with the wagon, a few others were roaming through the building, still occupied with some law students doing late-night study. These engineers distributed the now-green mice.

As quietly as they entered, the engineers departed, ran to their cars and returned to their residences for a short nap before the next day’s classes.

An important element to the success of the prank was the part-time job as a Law Building janitor held by one of the engineers. He had a key to every door in the building.

It was also an example of precision teamwork rivaling a clandestine operation of Navy SEALS.

NOW WE NEED PUBLICITY

The next morning, I arose early and called the Daily Iowan and the Iowa City Press-Citizen in an effort to assure publicity for the prank. No one answered at the DI. At the Iowa City Press-Citizen, sports reporter Al Grady answered the phone. Without identifying myself, I told Grady something happened in the Courtroom of the Law Building during the night and suggested the newspaper may want to send a photographer.

Sure enough, the Press-Citizen got and published a picture of the wagon and two Law Building janitors, both who appeared quite amused. Mission accomplished.
THE DEAN OF THE LAW SCHOOL ISN'T HAPPY

As classes convened in the morning, one engineer reported he had seen the manure wagon while walking to campus. It was on the back of a University truck, obviously disassembled with a sledge hammer.

Mary Sheedy was secretary to the Dean of the Engineering College, Arthur Melloh. An elderly lady who had been in her position for many years, she was a favorite of the engineers.

We stopped Mary in the hall and asked her if Dean Melloh had said anything about the evening's events. She said she overheard a phone call Dean Melloh received from Mason Ladd, Dean of the College of Law.

Dean Ladd was irate. She heard Dean Melloh calmly say, "I don't know anything about it. For all I know, some green mice put a manure wagon in your Courtroom!". Any question why we all admired Dean Melloh?

Tom Breese