Shinning up Mrs. Jennings' Wooden Leg is a physics tradition

By Judy Holmes
Staff Writer

Not for the faint of heart, it's a rite of passage for graduating doctoral candidates in experimental physics—climbing Mrs. Jennings' Wooden Leg.

The "leg," located in the machine shop in the Physics Building, is actually a 12- and 1/2-foot-tall wooden beam adorned with brass plaques engraved with the names of those who have earned their doctoral degrees in SU's physics department over the past five decades.

This unique artifact was included in a tour of laboratories and other campus sites for alumni who returned to campus for the 50th anniversary celebration of the physics doctoral program May 17.

The story goes that when the physics department was located in Steele Hall, the floor under Mrs. Jennings' desk began to sag. The reasons are unclear. Some say it was the heavy safe that was installed nearby. Others think it was the desk. At any rate, the beam was placed in a strategic location to prevent the floor from collapsing.

After the program's first doctoral candidates in experimental physics defended their dissertations in 1951, they and their colleagues gathered around the beam and celebrated as candidates Erich Harth and Robert G. Luce climbed it, placed a "greasy thumbprint" on the ceiling and then screwed to the post a brass plaque engraved with their names and dissertation titles.

Every year since, the candidates have gathered around the beam, donned official lineman's gear—safety belts and tool holders—and gone climbing. The ritual is not formal and is done as more of an impromptu party to celebrate the candidates' hard work.

Mrs. Jennings' Leg is adorned with 161 plaques, including those of this year's candidates, who tackled the beam a few weeks ago. And the tradition of placing a greasy thumbprint on the ceiling has continued since the beam was moved to the basement of the Physics Building when the building opened in 1967.

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take the challenge, says physics professor Arnold Honig, but some theorists have persevered and successfully mounted plaques, too.

The anniversary celebration featured a daylong symposium during which departmen- tal faculty and alumni traded stories about their research and professional careers. Topics ranged from “High Energy Physics at SU,” given by Giancarlo Moneti, SU professor emeritus, to “A Physician Who Thinks Like a Physicist—A Theoretical One at That,” given by William Meggs ’69 of the East Carolina University School of Medicine.

The day’s events concluded with a banquet at the Glen Loch restaurant in Jamesville. Featured speaker was Hirth, SU professor emeritus and one of the first to climb Mrs. Jennings’ Leg.