The traditions that were established in the new Institute of Applied Optics were not all of the academic sort. One of the earliest social traditions was the optics picnic. Initially, the Institute was rather small and closely tied to the Department of Physics, so annual picnics were held jointly. These early picnics looked like something out of an old English movie with the ladies in long dresses and the gentlemen in coats and ties. The meals were set with silver and china. A picnic tradition was started that still is eagerly celebrated today, albeit in a somewhat changed form. By the 1970s the picnics had lost their formality, but were attended by everyone even remotely connected with the Institute. The setting was the campground on George Fraley’s place in Mendon. In that period the newest faculty member in the department was responsible for organizing the fall picnic each year, and each did his best to out-do his predecessor. There were faculty-student touch football games, volleyball, softball, horse shoes, Frisbees, and even a demonstration cricket match. The food gradually became more elaborate, graduating from hamburgers, to chicken, to elaborate barbecues with pork and beef turning on spits above in-ground pits.

A number of memorable events occurred at these picnics. There was a famous tortoise-hare race between graduate students Mary Citron and Eric Krisl that is described in a separate essay in this volume. Another occurred in September 1976 when the Rochester winter got an unusually early start. A canvas screened tent was set up to protect the food from the weather and insects, but it proved an inadequate shelter against the sudden gust of wind and rain that descended just as dinner was served. The tent was crowded with people filling their plates from the contributed dishes when a violent gust pulled loose the guy ropes and the tent began to collapse. Brian Thompson, newly promoted to dean of the
Bonfire at the Optics Picnic at Fraley’s campground.

Duncan Moore serves up corn at the Optics Picnic.

College of Engineering and Applied Science, proved equal to the occasion, grabbing the falling central support pole and holding up the tent until the ropes could be reattached. It was not the first or the last problem that dropped from the sky demanding his urgent attention during the period he served as director, dean, and provost.

Perhaps the premiere social events in the history of the city of Rochester were George Eastman’s Sunday afternoon parties at his mansion on East Avenue. Soon after Rudolf and Hilda Kingslake arrived in Rochester, they received an invitation to attend one of these gatherings. Rudolf described to me how they arrived at the grand side entry and were ushered in to meet Mr. Eastman standing at the bottom of the grand staircase greeting his
Dean Brian Thompson saves the picnic by holding up the tent pole.

Volleyball at the Optics Picnic 1974.

couple hundred guests. Soon after the party began, Eastman, with a few of his closest male friends, vanished upstairs to partake in a poker game while the other assembled guests enjoyed a musical performance in the living room below.

Another interesting social institution active at the University in the 1930s was the X Club. Frederick Seitz, then a young assistant professor in the physics department, and
later serving in many roles including president of Rockefeller University, describes in his autobiography the function of this club. He points out that at that time, the University was rapidly changing its character from a local undergraduate teaching school to a national research university. Most of the senior faculty had been hired as teachers with heavy course loads and little opportunity to carry out original research. The new younger faculty were given lighter teaching loads and expected to carry out top-level research. The senior faculty continued to have heavy teaching loads. Not surprisingly, there was some tension in social situations. Several of the younger faculty from many different disciplines joined together to form a club which met regularly with their wives for an evening lecture and social gathering. Brian O’Brien and Seitz were both members of this group.