Lies about Harry

DENISON BEACH has been hanging around the front steps of Widener Library to hear what lies the student tour guides tell about Harry Elkins Widener '07, and he has reported his findings in “Everyone’s Wild about Harry” in the Harvard Library Bulletin, although he politely refers to what he has heard as “fanciful oral history.” Beach is curatorial assistant for the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Room, a sanctuary that houses Harry’s book collection, and so he has a grip on the facts.

A subset of the tour guides’ fancies concern flowers. Eleanor Widener provided the funds to build the library as a memorial to her son, who went down on the Titanic, and in her will she did request that the Widener Room always contain some kind of fresh-cut flowers. But here’s the tale as told by tour guides:

“Each and every morning a dozen red roses are delivered to the Widener Room.”

“Flowers mysteriously appear every morning outside the Widener Room.”

“Carnations were Harry’s favorite flower.”

“Harry used to have carnations dyed crimson to remind him of Harvard, and so his mother kept up the tradition.”

“A special breed of crimson-colored carnations is delivered every week to the Widener Room.”

“Every morning one carnation is delivered to the Widener Room.”

NEXT WE’LL BE TOLD that the librarians serve oysters. The top-to-bottom renovation of Widener proceeds sequentially. The Widener Room is temporarily gutted, empty of books and flowers, but the tiles of Rafael Guastavino Jr.’s Catalan vaults on the ground floor have been cleaned and restored, and they gleam. “For all the talk about the revamping of Widener,” says Thomas F. Glick ’60, Ph.D. ’68, professor of history at Boston University and of the history of science at Harvard Summer School, “the Guastavino ground floor, the architectural gem of the building, has not been mentioned in the magazine—not even once.”

The Guastavino firm has enjoyed a bit of recent attention, viz. a 1996 Columbia University exhibit celebrating its work. Rafael Sr. was a Catalan builder and architect who came to New York in 1881. He and his son were hired as subcontractors by many leading architects and built their vaults and domes in more than 1,000 structures, among them Carnegie Hall, the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, and the Boston Public Library. “If you walk into Widener and look up,” Glick notes, “you see something that looks just like the Oyster Bar at Grand Central in New York. It is astounding.”

THE COLLEGE PUMP

The month of May brought radio station WHRB’s customary Spring Orgy®. This time, listeners enjoyed 72 straight hours of Sergei Prokofiev, 77 of Paul Hindemith, 77 of Pandit Pran Nath, and so on. Orgy programming was interrupted only for Sunday morning services from Memorial Church and for that Saturday-morning standby, Hillbilly at Harvard. (The program lost its co-host with the death of Brian Sinclair ’62 last December; Ol’ Sinc had been an on-air fixture since 1966.) A fan of Hillbilly at Harvard for almost 30 years, Emily A. Carey offers this poem:

HILLBILLIES AT HARVARD

Among all these red bricks and white-painted trim, there is bluegrass, with a red clay sound: a high tenor wails his refrain over precisely flat-picked guitar licks, banjo, mandolin like the plucked teeth of a comb. Down by the banks of Chuck Creek, the scholars roll up their trousers, casting aside books for a Saturday radio hoe-down.

Carey is a writer and clawhammer banjo player living in Cambridge, where she also has a private practice as a clinical psychologist.

THE OYSTER BAR

Illustration by Lynne Foy