The gift from the gab
Adam Spencer goes in search of the perfect present

In case you haven't noticed, it's a big year for anniversaries. It was on 16 August 25 years ago that King Elvis checked out of his royal surroundings in Memphis, Tennessee; our own head of state has just celebrated her 50th year of glorious rule - it has to be asked, does she resist the temptation at rugby internationals to bang out a quick verse of "God Save Me", and everyone's favourite aunty has been setting the standards in public broadcasting, or churned out the best the BBC has to offer, for 70 years. But those pale in comparison to the celebrations going down at the University. Anyone walking past the Arena sports complex recently would have seen a sign proudly trumpeting "Happy 92nd birthday SUWSA"; it's 125 years since the formation of the little debating society now known as the University of Sydney Union; and of course Big One goes down next month as we shout from the front lawn, the lecture halls and most likely Manning bar, "Happy 150th Sydney U?".

But what do you get the old girl to celebrate the passing of a century and a half? Tradition affords some handy hints in this regard, but unfortunately falls short of requirements. Most of us probably know that etiquette dictates the first anniversary be celebrated by the exchange of paper. But what about the second? Oh how quickly we forget. Well it's cotton.

The choice of leather as an appropriate gift for the third anniversary is puzzling. My limited understanding of married life (admittedly mostly anecdotal) is that it takes a further four years for passions to subside to the point where treated animal hide should be exchanged.

They roll off the tongue: four, linen; five, wood; six, iron; seven, wool. For every anniversary gift, or should I say a guiding hand. That's the beauty of the anniversary table; it steers the purchaser gently in the right direction but leaves enough room for you to put your personal stamp on the gift. If someone dear to you is about to celebrate five years of wedded bliss, tradition demands the gift must be made of wood, no more, no less. If you choose to send a cricket bat, an elaborate 184th Cobb and Co stage coach, a box of personalised tongue depressors, even, strictly speaking, a 5 kilo bag of industrial sawdust, the gift will see you referred to by persons of note as "one who certainly knows their traditions".

But if traditions are not for you, don't fear. The anniversary table, like the University of Sydney, is not rooted in the 18th century, unable to move with the times. No, no, no! If you want to look hip to the times, all a movin' and shakin', choose your gifts from "The Alternative/Modern Gift Table". If giving a gift of paper for the first anniversary is a bit old fashioned well just send a clock. Can't find a decent wooden gift? Then trade up to silverware. A quick comparison between the traditional and modern table raises more questions than it answers. The current generation expects china after two years, when in olden times it was considered appropriate after 20. What once took 15 years - a gift of crystal - arrives in three. In fact the young these days expect gold after 14 years, as opposed to the traditional 50, and then as if a 36-year head start wasn't enough, they demand it again to celebrate the half century. Unbelievable.

But the question remains, what do you get for Australia's oldest university when it turns 150? The published lists are woefully deficient when it comes to preparing a gift for the over 100. After much consultation I consulted petered out at 60. After which only a brave few seem to follow a loose philosophy of "look, every five years or so just bang something gold or diamond in a postpack and everything should be dandy".

In an age of rapidly advancing life expectancy it is surely quite reasonable that people born today or thereabouts will meet someone at age 50 and settle down for a comfortable 100 or so years together. What's meant to happen after 60 of those years? A lonely final 40 years of diamond in the traditional anniversary gifts have dried up? No, we need a new formula: for the 61st celebration you should keep the diamond you've already earned, and get a paper bonus on top. And with this prescription, it follows that the ideal sesquicentenary gift should be a pair of diamonds and a pearl. Anyway, it's the thought that counts.

Virginia Woolf's account of being refused entry to the library at Cambridge, as told in A Room of One's Own, is an enduring reminder of the hardship women once faced in passing through university gates - not to mention securing full access to the treasures locked inside. "That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library," Woolf wrote pointedly.

On the other side of the world, however, Woolf's Antipodean sisters were faring considerably better. The passing of the University Amendment Act in 1884 secured the legal rights of women at Sydney University and on 2 May 1885, Mary Elizabeth Brown and Isola Florence Thompson became the first female graduates when they were awarded the Bachelor of Arts. Two years later, Isola was the first woman to complete an MA at Sydney. At Oxford and Cambridge, women were not to receive degrees for another generation, until the 1920s.

By 1990 - just over a century after the first Australian woman graduated - women students outnumbered men for the first time in the history of Sydney University, with 15,000 women enrolled in a student body of 24,000. Assembly photographs dramatise this
remarkable journey: from the steely gazes of Victorian maidens with frilled collars peering above their academic gowns, to mini skirted protesters demanding equal pay. In just 100 years, women stormed one of the most exclusive of gentlemen’s clubs: university life.

In 1881, Chancellor William Manning told the University Senate rather grudgingly that the “tendency of modern opinions” and “the example set by other universities both at home and in some British colonies, appear to render it almost imperative that we should open our University to women equally with men.”

If full rights were enjoyed in principle, life was nevertheless somewhat cloistered for the female academic pioneers. When the Women’s College opened in March 1892, members were permitted to receive male visitors with a chaperone. Activities included bible study and social study weekends; with most excitement outside of lectures provided by the odd game of mixed doubles tennis.

The college had a strong start with the arrival of Louisa MacDonald in 1894. Louisa—who took up the post of principal aged 33—was a Fellow of University College, London, and a formidable scholar of classics and archaeology. A contemporary newspaper report breathed a sigh of relief that “Miss MacDonald, despite her great attainments, has nothing of the typical bluestocking in dress or in manner…She by no means shares the belief that blue spectacles and disregard of the conventions of society are necessary to support academic honours.” (Sydney Mail, 2 April 1894)

The Sydney Mail would no doubt have been dismayed to learn about her eloquent private correspondence that Louisa had little idea of housekeeping, could not compile a grocery list; and believed marriage was a disaster for Australian women due to the hardships of colonial life.

In 1926, Sancta Sophia also opened with 28 students, under the guidance of Mother Margaret MacRory. About the same time, the Women’s College received another important addition, this time homegrown, in the form of Phyllis Nicol. Phyllis entered women’s college in 1921 on a bursary. In 1925, she graduated with a first in both physics and mathematics. She was the second woman to graduate in these subjects and her results are all the more remarkable given the then head of physics, Professor Polock, was “implacably opposed” to female science students.

Phyllis went on to devote her energy into pushing two generations of Women’s College members through science. Far from being a prudish spinster, her protégées remember ‘Philly Nic’ with cigarettes and strong black coffee always on tap, and her cheeks enlivened by “misplaced splodges of rouge”.

Phyllis recognised a grave problem in that few girls’ schools of the time taught chemistry or physics. Enrolment trends reflected the dilemma. By 1920, 325 women were studying in the Arts Faculty, compared with only 160 women science graduates. The first woman did not appear in veterinary science until 1930.

In 1884, Dagmar Bernheide broke the ice in medicine only a year after the faculty opened. However, despite her contemporaries’ pleasure in finding a “kindly, modest, unassuming girl with plenty of intelligence” — or perhaps because of it — she fled to Britain. Dagmar later returned to establish a private practice in Macquarie Street, but died tragically young of tuberculosis, aged 34. Sydney University awards an annual prize in her memory.

Yet by far the toughest battle for women was fought in the Law School. Reports suggest that early female students were subjected to foot stomping and catcalls in class. When Ada Evans entered the law school in 1895, acting dean Jethro Brown sympathised: “I would work hard in spite of discouragement … the greater glory will be yours of sowing that others may reap — the glory of the pioneer.”

Even after graduation, the situation was not much better for women lawyers. In Pioneer Women Graduates, Ursula Bygott and K.J. Cable write that “in no other instance was there a longer gap between graduation and the right to practise.” After strenuous lobbying, Ada Evans was finally admitted to the NSW Bar in 1921, by which time poor health prevented her from practising.

The issue of employment was another brick wall facing women. The majority of arts and science graduates entered into teaching — indeed the first two women graduates, Isola and Mary, both took up teaching positions in girls’ schools. The Second World War helped break down barriers to other careers — but jump to the 1950s and 1960s, and the expected career path had not changed dramatically. In the early 1980s, Diana Ryall (BSc 1966) was appointed managing director of Apple Computer Australia, a post she held for almost 20 years. Yet her first year out of university saw her teaching in a country high school. “Women were expected to go into teaching,” says Diana. “I’d studied maths and stats, which was a bit unusual, but in those days no-one ever asked, ‘Would you like to do anything else?’”

It’s a point Emeritus Professor of Medicine, Ann Seffon (MBBS 1960), picks up: “No-one ever gave me any career advice! Boys seem to know all that stuff.”
Boys seem to get all the hot advice and best references. I have the feeling there are some lingering differences there — and that the girls really need that mentoring, especially on juggling family and career."

Women’s struggles to fully explore and fulfil their career ambitions were echoed inside the University walls. In 1982, Gretchen Poiner was appointed as a research fellow (on women in academic positions and postgraduate studies) in the Vice-Chancellor’s office. She wrote widely on the topic before her position was eventually abolished. "You must situate women at Sydney in the context of women in society in general," Gretchen says today. "The University was no particular haven or hell: it simply reflected society."

In 1892, Jane Foss Russell had become the first Sydney woman graduate appointed to the University staff — as "tutor to the women students". The second candidate for a university staff position did not fare so well. When Marion Charlotte White was recommended for the post of junior demonstrator in biology, the Senate declined. Legend has it they feared Marion was "too pretty".

Despite this shaky start, science and medicine went on to lead the way in appointing women staff. However, it was not until 1968 that Sydney appointed its first woman professor. In a fanfare of press coverage, Dame Leonie Kramer took up the post as professor of Australian literature. Dame Leonie describes how the press hounded her for a domestic photograph: "I still prize a picture of me in the kitchen holding a pot on the stove with nothing in it." Dame Leonie went on to become the University’s first woman chancellor between 1991 and 2001.

One of the most fascinating stories of women at Sydney is to be found in the Faculty of Engineering. In the early 1960s, the then head of the department, T.G. Hunter, literally chased away the first few women who tried to enrol. By 1970, two women had graduated. Today women comprise 40 per cent of the faculty, albeit mostly in chemical engineering. Five years ago Judy Raper became the first female dean of engineering at Sydney.

"At the time I was appointed it was forward-looking to appoint a woman, and I guess we’ve moved on a bit since then. Having a critical mass of women as students and particularly on staff brings a culture change with huge benefits. I don’t think we’re quite there yet."

"Men can be pretty tough to deal with — but luckily they can’t do more than one thing at a time," she added mischievously. In 2001, Marie Bashir (Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University since 1993) chose Women’s College to announce her appointment as NSW Governor. She attended the college from 1950 to 1955 and was inspired by its then principal Miss H.E. Archdale and vice-principal Phyllis Nicol.

Professor Bashir said she was "absolutely spellbound and speechless" to be offered the governor’s job. "Thinking about it, it seemed to me to be symbolic about the way our country is advancing in a sophisticated manner, that it could consider asking not only a woman, but a woman whose work is in a field, mental health, that is not always popular. It is also unpopular to be counted among women who have children and work, women from non-English speaking backgrounds, women who have an opinion. It seemed to me that to reject such a high challenge would be an insult to the history of our State."

Further information can be found in *Pioneer Women Graduates of the University of Sydney 1881–1921* by Ursula Bygott and KJ Cable (University of Sydney, 1985). Many of the anecdotes are drawn from this wonderful little book. Also see *Letters from Louisa* by Jeanette Beaumont and W. Vere Hole (Allen & Unwin, 1996) and *Australia’s First: A History of the University of Sydney*, Vol. 1 & 2 by Clifford Turney, Ursula Bygott and Peter Chippendale (Hale & Iremonger, 1991).