A GATHERING OF GENERATIONS

More Than 100 Members of the McPhee Family Reunite at Cal Poly

By Matt Lazier

More than 100 children, grandchildren and other relatives of past Cal Poly President Julian McPhee gathered on campus in July for a reunion that included a visit to the former President’s Residence, tours through campus and University Archives displays of memorabilia from the McPhee era.

Children and grandchildren of McPhee (Cal Poly’s president from 1933 to 1966) organized the campus visit as part of a larger family reunion in San Luis Obispo County, where many of McPhee’s descendants still reside. The event allowed several generations of McPhee family members to gather, reminisce about their experiences on campus and celebrate their ancestor’s impact on the university.

“Cal Poly is as much a part of my childhood as anyone’s grandparents’ homes would be,” said Greg Beck, grandson of Julian McPhee and one of the reunion organizers. “In such a large family, all of us have memories of Christmases, Thanksgivings and other gatherings on campus.

“So the idea to bring the family back to Cal Poly for this reunion was just a natural.”

Three of Julian McPhee’s four surviving daughters were on campus July 17 (a fourth attended parts of the family reunion off campus; two other daughters have passed away). As well, Beck said, there were 28 of McPhee’s 32 grandchildren, along with many younger members of the extended family.

McPhee was chief of the state’s Bureau of Agricultural Education and a strong proponent of the learn-by-doing model when he took the reins at Cal Poly. He had a clear vision for the future of the flagging campus – 1,400 acres and 117 students strong and in danger of being closed by the state.

McPhee guided Cal Poly through the Great Depression and into the booming post-World-War-II era, when the school’s hands-on educational model was a key in efforts to offer education to returning veterans. Through McPhee’s tenure, the campus grew to nearly 5,000 students, more than doubled in acreage and evolved into a four-year college in what was then the California State College system.

Having so many members of the former president’s family gathered on campus was a familiar experience for one of his daughters, Carol McPhee Norton. She said her parents often held large gatherings of extended family on campus, in the President’s Residence.
“Summers when I was a child, whole families of my cousins would come to visit us,” she said. “During World War II, two of my older sisters married. For long periods while their husbands were in the service, they came home to live with us. Later as we all married and left home, we gathered at special times — my father’s birthday, July 4th, Thanksgiving, Christmas — usually at the house on the campus.”

Norton lives in San Luis Obispo and earned a master's degree in English from Cal Poly in 1972. She said she still visits campus frequently. Still, the reunion brought back many long-dormant childhood recollections.

“My trip through the house where I grew up brought back memories I hadn’t indulged in for years,” she said. “There was the route I used to take when I was 10-12 out my bedroom window and down a tree outside the den; the games of hopscotch my sister Claire and I used to have on the patterned living room rug; and my father waking me up early in the morning by shaking my bed and telling me it was an earthquake like the one he’d experienced in San Francisco.”

The reunion reminded Carol McPhee Norton how her father’s memory endures on the campus he so significantly shaped.

“I was pleased,” she said, “that Cal Poly seemed to remember my father with so much honor and affection that they would play host to our reunion.”