

# **Cal Poly Women: Roles and Depictions during World War II**

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## Introduction

When the United States entered World War II as an Allied Power in 1941, educational institutions across the nation felt the impact of the conflict abroad. The California State Polytechnic School President Julian McPhee declared that the university was dedicated to the “all-out war effort” and pledged that all administration, instructors, and students were ready to “exert whatever extra energy is needed to bring final and complete victory to America’s cause.”<sup>1</sup> For Cal Poly, this meant the implementation (and exclusion) of several activities.

The impact of the war also included a significant decrease in full-time student enrollment at Cal Poly. In 1942-43, only 570 men enrolled for classes, compared to 762 in 1940-41.<sup>2</sup> McPhee accounted for the drop in enrollment, arguing that because the school was not co-educational, the number of men called into defense industries and armed services was “naturally a larger percentage of the total enrollment than it would be otherwise.” Additionally, McPhee said that the decrease in enrollment was due to more job availability for men in industrial fields, more work to be done in farms at home, transfers to other institutions, and men enlisting instead of waiting to be drafted.<sup>3</sup>

However, from 1939 to the end of 1942, Cal Poly continued its normal operation of the university while also cooperating with federal agencies in carrying out special war-preparedness training programs, designed to aid national defense.<sup>4</sup> Cal Poly was “admirably suited to prepare workers for special wartime jobs” due to its emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> McPhee, Julian, 1941 Annual Report, January 1, 1942, 36.

<sup>2</sup> Morris Eugene Smith, *A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years, 1901-1951* (Ed.D. Thesis, University of Oregon, 1957), 214.

<sup>3</sup> McPhee, 1941 Annual Report, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years*, 239.

technical and agricultural studies.<sup>5</sup> These preparedness programs included the Nation-wide Civil Pilot Training Program, National Youth Authority, Nation-wide Civil Pilot Training Program, National Youth Authority, Adult National Defense Training Program, United States Air Depots classes, and the Radio training program.<sup>6</sup> The United States Air Depot classes were especially significant because female students were admitted into the program, making it the first time in 12 years that women were again allowed at Cal Poly as students, since 1930. Additionally, in 1943, Cal Poly provided instruction to 120,000 California farmers when it served as state headquarters for the Food Production War Training Program.<sup>7</sup> In all, 3,490 men and women completed training in the War Production Training classes at Cal Poly.<sup>8</sup>

In February 1943, McPhee terminated all War Production Training classes when the U.S. Navy selected Cal Poly as one of 17 United States Naval Flight Preparatory Schools.<sup>9</sup> Until the end of 1945, training naval aviation cadets took precedence over all other activities.<sup>10</sup> Civilian enrollment fell to 80 students, and the Naval Flight Preparatory School trained over 3,600 cadets on the Cal Poly campus.<sup>11</sup> A monthly pictorial magazine called the *Mustang Roundup* replaced the *El Mustang* newspaper and the *El Rodeo* yearbook from October 1942 until autumn of 1945.<sup>12</sup> The school reduced the annual Poly Royal celebrations in scope; however, they still included activities such as the coronation ball and added wartime activities, like performances by the naval trainees

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, *A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years*, 240.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years*, 239-243.

<sup>7</sup> University Archives, "Highlights in the history of Cal Poly," *Robert E. Kennedy Library Home*, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://lib.calpoly.edu/search-and-find/collections-and-archives/university-archives/timeline/cp-history/>.

<sup>8</sup> McPhee, Julian, 1943 Annual Report, January 1, 1944, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years*, 245.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years*, 236.

<sup>11</sup> University Archives, "Highlights in the history of Cal Poly."

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years*, 249.

and war bond auctions.<sup>13</sup> After 1945, McPhee ceased all wartime training programs and activities, and returned the institution to its normal functions. Enrollments rapidly increased, to 819 in 1945-46.<sup>14</sup>

During World War II, Cal Poly administration and programs primarily focused on male students' and faculty members' activities that supported the war effort. For post-war programs, President McPhee acknowledged that many men and women demobilized from military services and from war production industries would seek occupational or vocational training.<sup>15</sup> In the *1943 Annual Report*, he stated that after the war, Cal Poly will need to "train men and women for immediate employment in agricultural and industrial work."<sup>16</sup> Curiously, women would still be barred from attending Cal Poly as permanent students at Cal Poly until 1956, 11 years after the end of World War II. Regardless, during World War II, women held professional roles at Cal Poly that were both beneficial to the war effort and contributed to the community; however, in student and faculty publications, women were still depicted as objects to admire rather than capable players in the war effort.

## **Historiography**

In order to examine women's participation in the war effort and community at Cal Poly during the World War II era, it is important to look at their roles in the U.S., at other American universities, and in San Luis Obispo during World War II.

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years*, 250.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *A History of California State Polytechnic College, the First Fifty Years*, 251.

<sup>15</sup> McPhee, 1943 Annual Report, 23.

<sup>16</sup> McPhee, 1943 Annual Report, 24.

The U.S. government stressed women's critical importance in the war effort through wartime propaganda, making women "aware of their importance, not alone as mothers, wives and homemakers, but also as workers, citizens, and even as soldiers."<sup>17</sup> Between 1940 and 1945, female employment outside the home rose from 11,970,000 to 18,610,000, significantly decreasing unemployment. Labor shortage during the war years caused employers to appeal for women to take jobs previously reserved for men, and to be more willing to consider their needs.<sup>18</sup>

World War II also offered women the first opportunity to serve as members of the armed forces.<sup>19</sup> For example, in 1942, when the United States faced a shortage of pilots, women were trained to fly military aircrafts, releasing male pilots for combat duty. The Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) consisted of more than 1,100 young female civilian volunteers. WASPs participated in flying new planes from factories to military bases and departure points, testing newly overhauled planes, and flying planes as targets for shooting training.<sup>20</sup>

The war also impacted American women negatively. The WASP program was canceled two years later, in 1944, despite the confession by the commanding general Henry "Hap" Arnold of the U.S. Army Air Forces that "women can fly as well as men."<sup>20</sup> Additionally, millions of women suffered losses of husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons, as more than 400,000 men lost their lives in the war, and 671,000 returned wounded.<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that women were given more opportunity to work in traditionally male

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<sup>17</sup> Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 20.

<sup>18</sup> Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> "Female WWII Pilots: The Original Fly Girls," narrated by Renee Montagne, Morning Edition, *NPR*, March 9, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/2010/03/09/123773525/female-wwii-pilots-the-original-fly-girls>.

<sup>21</sup> Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 22.

fields, the sexual order of women as wives and mothers was imprinted on American society, and their opportunities did not last long after the war ended.<sup>22</sup>

Similar to Cal Poly, women at other American universities played a role in the war effort and in contributing to their communities. With more men enlisted or joining the work force, social dynamics fluctuated, and women were encouraged to “fill men’s shoes”. At Cal Poly, these opportunities arose when women were admitted as students into the United States Air Depot program when Cal Poly became a Naval Flight Preparatory School, and in the opening of more positions on campus as librarians, professors, and office assistants. However, at the University of California, Berkeley, Rockford College in Illinois, and the University of Wisconsin Extension Center in Milwaukee, female students were already present on campus at the start of the war, and they were able to use their influence not simply to fill men’s shoes, but also to promote political and social ideals to better their communities.

At the University of California, Berkeley, by 1944, women comprised 63 percent of the university’s total enrollment.<sup>23</sup> During the war years, Berkeley faculty and administration encouraged women to enter male-dominated fields of study, and sponsored work forums that helped prepare women for home front employment in both traditional as well as emerging job opportunities.<sup>24</sup> At the all-girls Rockford College in Illinois, faculty and staff supported relief efforts and voiced political opinions with their students, envisioning women’s involvement in the war as a means to preserve

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<sup>22</sup> Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Dorn, “A Woman's World: The University of California, Berkeley, During the Second World War,” *History of Education Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (2008): 538.

<sup>24</sup> Dorn, “A Woman's World”, 542-543.

democracy.<sup>25</sup> The University of Wisconsin Extension Center in Milwaukee, in which women outnumbered men six to one during the war years, organized a wartime program solely for female students; women could train to be radio electronic technicians, join civil service positions, and receive private pilot certificates.<sup>26</sup>

Although women were encouraged to return to Cal Poly as students in the Air Depot program, they were not given opportunities to participate as students in any other war-preparation programs. Additionally, the male-run student publications included the women that worked on campus as librarians and office assistants in photos and articles, but tended to discuss their beauty more than their contributions to campus. On the other hand, with the encouragement from their universities, female students at the universities in Berkeley, Illinois, and Milwaukee exceeded the initial expectations to “fill men’s shoes”. During the war years, UC Berkeley women “effectively opposed gendered restrictions on extracurricular participation, filling for the first time such influential campus leadership positions as the presidency of Berkeley’s student government and editorship of the university’s student newspaper.”<sup>27</sup> With their influence, the female editor-in-chiefs used their roles to challenge racist policies against Japanese-Americans.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the University Young Women’s Christian Association dedicated their work to opposing racist real estate conventions in their community.<sup>29</sup> At Rockford College, students supported relief efforts, openly stated their political opinions, participated in war

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Weaks-Baxter, Christine Bruun, and Catherine Forslund, *We Are a College at War: Women Working for Victory in World War II* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 2-8.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Holmes, “Women at the Extension Center in Milwaukee,” In *They Came to Learn, They Came to Teach, They Came to Stay*, edited by Marian J. Swoboda and Audrey J. Roberts (Madison, WI: Office of Women, 1980), 90.

<sup>27</sup> Dorn, “A Woman's World”, 534.

<sup>28</sup> Dorn, “A Woman's World”, 548.

<sup>29</sup> Dorn, “A Woman's World”, 557.

support activities, worked in factories, and some served overseas.<sup>30</sup> Women at the Extension Center in Milwaukee took advantage of finally dominating the student population, so they organized dances, worked on the school paper, put on plays, and took non-credit courses for the sole purpose of getting a liberal or specialized education.<sup>31</sup>

In San Luis Obispo, women played a multitude of roles in the community. Stan Harth, Liz Krieger, and Daniel E. Krieger's book, *War Comes to the Middle Kingdom*, documents essays and articles about people in San Luis Obispo during the war years. The essays and articles include stories of women who worked in Camp San Luis Obispo (a military base camp), hosted fundraisers, were the girlfriends and fiancés of soldiers, played on a local girls' basketball team, worked as librarians, tested gas masks, fled from Nazi Germany, worked long hours at the telephone office, rode on the Union Oil tanker *Montebello* as a little girl, and certainly participated in ways undocumented by *War Comes to the Middle Kingdom*.

Cal Poly offered women new opportunities as students in war-preparation efforts and offered women professional positions on campus. However, their prospects were limited in comparison to other American universities, and temporary, in line with women workers across the U.S. after the war ended.

### **Official roles**

By the time the U.S. entered the war in 1941, women had not been permitted as students at Cal Poly for 11 years. However, during the war years, women were present in

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<sup>30</sup> Weaks-Baxter, Bruun, and Forslund, *We Are a College at War*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Holmes, "Women at the Extension Center in Milwaukee", 90.

an array of fields on and off campus, contributing to the war effort as well as the Cal Poly community.

The ban preventing female students was briefly lifted in March 1942, and women were trained alongside men for civilian



**Figure 1: Female welding students, who trained alongside men in the United States air depot program at Cal Poly. Source: University Archives**

employment in the United States air depot (Figure 1). The 12-week course included radio repair work, aircraft sheet metal work, aircraft maintenance work, aircraft engines, and aircraft electricians.<sup>32</sup> This was significant, because female students were not only allowed back at Cal Poly for the first time in years, but they were also active participants in a program that contributed to the war effort.

Women also held roles on campus as office staff, as librarians, in the cafeteria, and as faculty members. In 1941, the Administrative Office staff consisted of 15 women and five men.<sup>33</sup> A woman named Alice M. Daniel worked in the Registrar, and had worked at Cal Poly since 1933.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, when Cal Poly became one of the United States Naval Flight Preparatory Schools, women held jobs as librarians, and helped cadets with their studies.<sup>35</sup> Mrs. King was the head of the Cal Poly cafeteria, which fed

<sup>32</sup> McPhee, Julian, 1943 Annual Report, January 1, 1944, 11.

<sup>33</sup> McPhee, Julian, 1941 Annual Report, January 1, 1942, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Circular of Information, 1936-1937 (California State Polytechnic). Found in a vertical file in University Archives.

<sup>35</sup> Robert E. Kennedy, *Learn By Doing: Memoirs of a University President: A Personal Journey with the Seventh President of California Polytechnic State University* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 2001), 87.

(and employed a number of) the male students.<sup>36</sup> Mrs. Julia A. Underhill was a navy instructor from 1943 to 1945, teaching classes in math and geography to flight preparatory cadets and English to men in the Naval Academic Refresher Unit.<sup>37</sup> Miss Hope A. Jordan, Mrs. C.L. Johnson, and Miss Florence R. Anderson (Figure 2), taught science and mathematics courses to the male students, “giving cadets at Cal Poly the elements of navigation for use against [the] country’s enemies.”<sup>38</sup>

Most significantly, Miss Margaret Chase, who joined Cal Poly’s faculty in 1908, was an English instructor at Cal Poly during the war years, until her retirement in



**Figure 2: The *Mustang Roundup* writers described these instructors as having “extensive university training and teaching experience.”**  
*Source: University Archives*

1945. She had also worked as the Head of the Academic Department for 17 years, was the Dean of the Junior College from 1927-1932, was Vice President from 1917-1932, and served as the Acting President for six months in 1924. Chase Hall was named in her honor.<sup>39</sup>

Off-campus, the San Luis Obispo Rotary Club, composed of the wives of Cal Poly faculty members, and the Women’s Faculty Club established student loan funds,

<sup>36</sup> “Cafeteria Crew,” *Mustang Roundup*, November – December 1942, 10.

<sup>37</sup> “Mrs. Underhill Ends Navy Assignment,” *El Mustang*, 30 November 1945.

<sup>38</sup> “Lady Navigators,” *Mustang Roundup*, October 1943, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Circular of Information, 1940-1941 (California State Polytechnic). Found in a vertical file in University Archives.

which financially assisted the boys-only college.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the Poly Royal was a popular annual event that celebrated Cal Poly's learn-by-doing philosophy, and brought together the San Luis Obispo community. Although the celebrations were scaled back during the war years, the highly anticipated crowning of the Poly Royal Queen remained a central attraction to the community, and one woman could officially hold the title for a year.

During the war years, women participated in the war effort and the Cal Poly community both on and off campus, as students, faculty, professors, office staff, in the cafeteria, fundraising, and participating in events that brought together the San Luis Obispo community.

## Depictions

Depictions of women in student and faculty publications during the World War II era show that the significance of women's contributions to the war effort and the community were generally ignored. Rhetoric and photos scattered these publications polarize the images of men and women, emphasize the sexual order, and depict women as objects to admire rather than capable workers.

Student and faculty publications reinforce the idea that women do not work hard, and instead need men to do the hard work, polarizing the images of men and women. In the 1941 and 1943 Annual Reports, females are referred to only as "girls" or "co-eds", whereas males are referred to as "boys", "students", and "young men". In the *El Rodeo*, Alice M. Daniel, photographed with her typewriter, was described as a "little woman

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<sup>40</sup> 1941 *El Rodeo* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1941) <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/elrodeo/17/>, 29.

with a big job”.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, in the *1942 El Rodeo*, the caption of a photo of a girl simply smiling at the camera reads, “Where is he?”<sup>42</sup> In a photo of guys running into water at the beach holds a caption that says, “A girl yelled – Help!”<sup>43</sup>, despite the fact that no girls are shown in the photo. In the *Mustang Roundup*, the sexual order is emphasized further by jokes, littered throughout every issue. For example, “When a man has a hangover he needs an aspirin; when a woman has a hangover she needs a corset.”<sup>44</sup> Also, “Mary had a little skirt; She stood against the light; Who gives a damn for Mary’s lamb; With Mary’s calves in sight?”<sup>45</sup>

Publications also tended to omit descriptions of the work that women did, and instead focus on their physical appearances. In Robert E. Kennedy’s *Learn By Doing* memoir, he discusses the several “attractive”, “young” library assistants, “whose presence tended to increase traffic in the library, if not scholarly study” when Cal Poly was a Naval Preparatory School. The female assistant librarians were “pleased” because cadets frequently filled all of the seats in the library.<sup>46</sup> In the *1942 El Rodeo*, the National Defense page celebrated the addition of women to campus with the description, “In February, something new was added! Girls! Yes, girls were admitted...” and went on to describe how “the girls were ladies and the boys were gentlemen and everything worked out fine.”<sup>47</sup> Omitting any description of the work of the female librarians and students (other than the general courses the students were allowed to take) Kennedy and the *El Rodeo* writers emphasized their sex rather than their contributions to the war effort.

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<sup>41</sup> *1941 El Rodeo*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> *1942 El Rodeo* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1942) <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/elrodeo/19/>, 150.

<sup>43</sup> *1942 El Rodeo*, 78.

<sup>44</sup> *Mustang Roundup*, October 1944, 18.

<sup>45</sup> *Mustang Roundup*, March 1944, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Robert E. Kennedy, *Learn By Doing*, 87.

In *The Home Front and Beyond*, Susan M. Hartmann argues that public discourse on American women's wartime roles set limits on social change, and explains how the photographs of women war workers emphasized glamour (ensuring that women would retain their femininity even as they performed masculine duties).<sup>48</sup> In Cal Poly student and faculty publications, polarized images, emphasis of the sexual order, and omission of women's contributions to the war effort and community indicates that women were valued more for their physical appearances than for their capabilities as workers.

In each issue of the *Mustang Roundup*, a section called "Gal with a Picture Personality" or "Picture Gal of the Month" (Figure 3) featured a photo and a brief description of a woman who worked at Cal Poly. The



**Figure 3: The *Mustang Roundup*'s "Picture Gal of the Month" focused more on women's physical appearance than on their contributions to the war effort. Source: University Archives**

descriptions, however, tended to focus on the women's appearance and relationship status instead of on their contributions to Cal Poly and the war effort. For example, the description of the January 1943 pick, Amelia Gianolin, says, "Her smile brightens the office of the 'Chief.' She's full of pep, likes to dance, goes out with Poly boys, and rumor

<sup>47</sup> 1942 *El Rodeo*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 23.

has it she's still 'unattached.'"<sup>49</sup> Margaret Blaine, the pick of July 1943, was "in charge of the navy bindery, makes it hard for the cadets to keep eyes front."<sup>50</sup> Betty Feliciano, November 1943 pick, was "another pretty, young Cal Poly stenographer who seems to attract more than her share of attention from the cadets."<sup>51</sup> Miss Jean McFarland, January 1944, was "the new cashier in the Poly business office. She is single, not even engaged, and she lives in San Luis Obispo with her parents."<sup>52</sup>

Starting in June 1943, the *Mustang Roundup* started the "Battalion Queen Contest", which Kennedy described as a "monthly 'beauty contest'".<sup>53</sup> Cadets could submit photos of their girlfriends, and *Mustang Roundup* staff would determine a winning girl, who would then get an expense-paid trip to the graduation dance and the title of that month's Battalion Queen.<sup>54</sup> The reason behind the contest, the staff said, was to "give the boys something to think about besides that 0.00 in code and the 2.49 in navigation."<sup>55</sup> During the selection of the winner, the staff would "pick the three prettiest girls in the order of preference" and then debate on the winner.<sup>56</sup> The *Mustang Roundup* printed the photos of the winners and runners-up, who were identified by which cadet "entered" their photos, in each issue. In the November 1943 issue, a full-page portrait of regimental queen, Miss Ardis Jeppson, was printed on the back cover. The January 1944 issue featured a collage of the 56 photos that were entered into the contest, including the winner, 18-year-old Dorris Frese.<sup>57</sup> The following issue contained a collage of 60 photo

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<sup>49</sup> *Mustang Roundup*, January – February 1943, 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Mustang Roundup*, July 1943, 16.

<sup>51</sup> *Mustang Roundup*, November 1943, 19.

<sup>52</sup> *Mustang Roundup*, January 1944, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Robert E. Kennedy, *Learn By Doing*, 90.

<sup>54</sup> "Battalion Queen Contest," *Mustang Roundup*, June 1943, 2.

<sup>55</sup> "Hail the Queen," *Mustang Roundup*, July 1943, 4.

<sup>56</sup> "Hail the Queen," *Mustang Roundup*, July 1943, 5.

<sup>57</sup> *Mustang Roundup*, January 1944, 4.

submissions, taking up two of the 23 pages in the entire issue.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, in the August 1943 issue, no queen is selected, but the entire back cover is devoted to the *Mustang Roundup*'s pin-up girl, and the description given reads, "...just imagine how nice it would be if you could 'pin-up' beautiful Ava Gardner's shapely shape on the bulkhead next to your bunk."<sup>59</sup>

The emphasis of women's physical appearances over their contributions to the war effort was used in publications in San Luis Obispo as well. *War Comes to the Middle Kingdom* includes "Wartime Humor" sections, which give insight on depictions of women in San Luis Obispo during the war years. For instance, a quote from a column in the February 24, 1942 San Luis Obispo *Telegram-Tribune* addresses women facing rationing, "It won't be so bad, after all. If you eat less sugar then you won't need the rubber girdles you won't be able to get. Hips, hips, hooray!"<sup>60</sup> A photo published in the *Camp San Luis Obispo Shot 'N Shell* on June 10, 1942 of a female phone operator working at the Camp San Luis Obispo is captioned: "It's 15 to 1 that voice is hers!" and describes her as "one of the many attractive and efficient girls" with a "sweet and charming voice".<sup>61</sup> However, the description fails to address any details of her actual contributions to the war effort.

Additionally, the *Mustang Roundup* and Poly Royal used the appearances of women at Cal Poly as a means of publicity. The *Mustang Roundup* "Gal with a Picture Personality" section was always in the advertisement box for the Angelus Engraving Company in Los Angeles. Furthermore, the idea behind the Poly Royal feature queens

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<sup>58</sup> *Mustang Roundup*, February 1944, 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> "Pin-up Girl," *Mustang Roundup*, August 1943, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Stan Harth, Liz Krieger, and Daniel E. Krieger, *War Comes to the Middle Kingdom*, vol. 1, 1939-1942 (San Luis Obispo, CA: EZ Nature Books, 1991), 62.

<sup>61</sup> Harth, Krieger, and Krieger, *War Comes to the Middle Kingdom*, 114.s

from other schools was “originated only to gain more widespread publicity and to better our regulations with other colleges...”<sup>62</sup> Lastly, on the cover of the October 1944 *Mustang Roundup* issue, one of President McPhee’s daughters, Clare, is photographed being escorted down a campus path by a G.I. freshman and a Naval Aviation student, “to depict the spirit of mutual appreciation and consideration which exists between naval personnel and civilian students at Cal Poly.”<sup>63</sup> Descriptions of the students are given, but not the daughter.

Interestingly, elements of Cal Poly as well as rhetoric used in student publications during the war years suggest that men often defined themselves by women. The theme of the 1940 *El Rodeo* was “30 years of progress”, so there are many older photos scattered throughout the book. Ironically, there are several photos of female students from when they were admitted as students before the ban in 1930, meaning female students were considered a defining factor in the progress Cal Poly, in the presence of an all-boys college, had made. Some of these include photos of the women’s basketball team from 1906,<sup>64</sup> girls in home economics courses,<sup>65</sup> and publications staff (of which about half are women).<sup>66</sup> Under the Athletics section of the 1941 *El Rodeo*, quotes a song that says, “Yuh gotta be a football hero, to get along with the beautiful girls”<sup>67</sup>, attributing the attention of attractive women as a mark of success in athletics. In the 1942 *El Rodeo*, a photograph of President McPhee with his wife and six daughters (Figure 4) is captioned, “With such a family of beautiful daughters, President McPhee couldn’t help being

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<sup>62</sup> “Campuses & Queens,” *Mustang Roundup*, April 1943, 3.

<sup>63</sup> “Our Cover,” *Mustang Roundup*, October 1944, 2.

<sup>64</sup> *1940 El Rodeo*, 113

<sup>65</sup> *1940 El Rodeo*, 186.

<sup>66</sup> *1940 El Rodeo*, 27.

<sup>67</sup> *1941 El Rodeo*, 106

popular as the head of a boy's college."<sup>68</sup> The writers, looking for an entertaining caption, defined the college's president by his family of women.

Throughout the *Mustang Roundup*, sections titled "Cadet Personalities" and "Graduating Battalion" offer humorous one-line descriptions of the male students at Cal Poly during the war years. Oftentimes, these descriptions include mentions of specific women, or women in general. Calvin Cowley, platoon leader, is "still trying to figure out whether or not he still loves Martha"<sup>69</sup>; F. Rice is "God's gift to the women of S.L.O."<sup>70</sup>; commander of Battalion IV Bob Havins's hobby is "somewhere deep in the heart of Texas, mainly one of those Southern Gals"<sup>71</sup>; Jack Read was seen "dining and dancing with the girl whom 'all cadets either take out or dream about taking out'"<sup>72</sup>; Ralph Valentine is "our wrestling champion who fears only women"<sup>73</sup>; Nolan Lewis is "the most envied man, for he

has the only girl who has remained true to him while he has been at Poly."<sup>74</sup> Using the images of women, the publications boosted the esteem of Cal Poly and were able to relate to



HE'S THE CHIEF TO US  
 . . . but he's "Papa" to Carol, Helen, Bernadette, Mrs. McPhee, Clare, Jean & Judy

**Figure 4: The *El Rodeo* attributed President McPhee's popularity to his "beautiful daughters". Source: University Archives**

<sup>68</sup> 1942 *El Rodeo*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Wally Davis and Al Bonney, "Fighting Fifth," *Mustang Roundup*, June 1943, 13.

<sup>70</sup> M.P. Gruenhagen and E. Kirby, "The Salty Sixth," *Mustang Roundup*, June 1943, 13.

<sup>71</sup> Cadet H. Berry, "Once An Ensign," *Mustang Roundup*, June 1943, 16.

<sup>72</sup> Don Selby, "Wildcat Ramblings," *Mustang Roundup*, July 1943, 13.

<sup>73</sup> "Out of this World," *Mustang Roundup*, August 1943, 15.

<sup>74</sup> Charles A. Wood Jr., "The Third," *Mustang Roundup*, December 1943, 18.

their male readers.

Depictions of women during the World War II era in student and faculty publications polarized the images of men and women, emphasized the sexual order, and generally omitted women's contributions to the war effort and to the community, indicate that the value of women at Cal Poly during the war years was based on their physical appearance. Additionally, student and faculty publications benefited from the emphasis women's physical appearance, by gaining publicity, highlighting Cal Poly's progress, and making their articles humorous and relatable to male readers.

### **Exceptions**

Two women in particular were exceptions to the emphasis of sexual order in the student and faculty publications: Miss Margaret Chase and Mrs. Julia A. Underhill. *El Rodeo* writers often attributed Chase's significance to her being the only female faculty member for a number of years, and they dedicated the 1940 edition to her. She was described as being "faithful to her work of instructing youth", as "charming and gracious", and as having the longest service at Cal Poly.<sup>75</sup> They added that Chase Hall has the honor of being named after "Miss Margaret Chase, the only woman member of the faculty."<sup>76</sup> She is described as a challenging, pleasant professor,<sup>77</sup> enlightened on world affairs<sup>78</sup> and encouraging to her students.<sup>79</sup> President McPhee praised her writing a history of Cal Poly on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, because there is "no better qualified person to

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<sup>75</sup> 1940 *El Rodeo*, 13.

<sup>76</sup> 1940 *El Rodeo*, 63.

<sup>77</sup> 1941 *El Rodeo*, 18.

<sup>78</sup> 1942 *El Rodeo*, 122.

<sup>79</sup> 1942 *El Rodeo*, 119.

do the job than Miss Chase.” After her death in 1966, Kennedy praised her as instrumental to the foundation of student activities at Cal Poly.<sup>80</sup>

The *Mustang Roundup* mentions Underhill twice, in the January and September 1944 editions, to give her the title of “all-time Regimental Sweetheart, according to cadets who have had the pleasure of knowing her.” She is described having a “willingness to help any cadet with a problem, academic or otherwise”, and being “widely traveled” with a “wealth of interesting information to impart to interested students”. The writers also note that her gun collection on display is an example of her varied interests.<sup>81</sup>

The exception of Chase could be attributed to the fact that she was a well-educated, present figure at Cal Poly well before any other students or faculty during the war years. Underhill and Chase were also both older than the young, attractive librarians and the cadets’ girlfriends in the *Mustang Roundup* Battalion Queen contests, and had much more extensive university and work experience.

## Conclusion

During World War II, women held roles at Cal Poly that were both beneficial to the war effort and that contributed to the community. Similar to UC Berkeley, Rockford College, and the Extension Center in Milwaukee, Cal Poly encouraged women to join the war effort by allowing them into the United States Air Depot program. However, women were not present at Cal Poly as students at the start of the war, and their time as students was limited to a few months in one war preparatory program. So female students at Cal

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<sup>80</sup> “Miss Margaret Chase dies; funeral today,” *El Mustang*, 18 February 1966.

<sup>81</sup> “Mrs. Underhill”, *Mustang Roundup*, September 1944, 11.

Poly were not able to exceed initial expectations to “fill men’s shoes”, and they wouldn’t be allowed back as students for another 11 years.

Besides being students in the Air Depot program, women at Cal Poly did contribute to the war effort and the community. On campus, they worked behind-the-scenes for the cadets at the Naval Preparatory School, as professors, librarians, office staff, and in the cafeteria. Off-campus, they helped fund male students at Cal Poly and participated in the Poly Royal, which brought together the San Luis Obispo community.

However, with the exceptions of Chase and Underhill, depictions in student and faculty publications emphasized the sexual order, polarized images of men and women, omitted descriptions of women’s work during the war years, and based women’s importance on their physical appearance. By doing so, publications benefited from emphasizing women’s physical appearance, because they used it to gain publicity, to highlight Cal Poly’s progress, and to make their articles more relatable to male readership. These depictions downplayed women’s capabilities, and misrepresented their contributions to the war effort and the community during World War II.

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