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Hist. 303

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“The Heroic Role of Women at Cal Poly”

Introduction:

In its earliest years as a university, Cal Poly had significant participation from women as well as men, not only as far as enrollment is concerned but also in regard to extracurricular activities. Although the ratio of men to women was very high, women played a role at the school nonetheless. However, the tragedy that was the Great Depression forced many schools, including Poly, to cut much of their budgets. The most significant change manifested through the economic downturn was the banning of women from enrollment by Governor C.C. Young in 1930.¹ Many years later, in 1956, women were once again allowed to enroll at Cal Poly.² However, after nearly 27 years of an all-male student body dominating the university, transitioning women back into the school was a tremendous challenge in a number of ways: What were the expectations of both men and women going through this transition? How was the curriculum transformed in response to the return of women? What were the major opposing viewpoints concerning women being readmitted? These are some of the questions I will answer in my paper.

¹ 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)

² “Cues for Coeds at Cal Poly” (San Luis Obispo: California State Polytechnic College, 1957), 1, Box 670 Folder: Cues for Coeds, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

Although the reintroduction of women to the Cal Poly campus would appear to be a positive in the eyes of almost anyone who reads about it today, this was not the case at Cal Poly. New women students faced resistance in a number of ways: from Cal Poly administration, male students, opposition within the local community, as well as an overall male-centric society. Many who were opposed to the reintroduction claimed that it would totally undermine the uniqueness of Cal Poly as a polytechnic school and would make it like any other state school. Many felt that women enrollment would naturally lead to the development of Cal Poly into a more mainstream college as opposed to its original intention as a land-grant school to be a hands-on learning institution. Roy Simpson, the state superintendent, in a letter to state senator, Alan Erhart, explained why allowing women to enroll was contrary to the mission of Cal Poly, as he states, “I would not like to see Cal Poly develop into another liberal arts college.”³ Simpson says Cal Poly is better off without women on campus, and in small doses at the very maximum. Despite the very reluctant attitudes and opposition of some Cal Poly administrators as well as male students and their wives, and an overall male-centric society, women were able to contribute directly to the expansion and diversity of courses offered at Cal Poly, the emergence of new clubs and extracurricular activities, as well as the overall empowerment of women seeking higher education after World War II. The women who had to fight through a massive barrier of stereotyping and lack of opportunity were able to redefine what Cal Poly’s “Learn By Doing” motto really entails.

Historiography:

³ Roy E. Simpson to A. A. Erhart, December 28, 1954, Box 11, Co-education 1954, University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

To better contextualize what I will explore in this paper, it is first important to understand the nature of land-grant institutions like Cal Poly. The Industrial Revolution created an environment in which skilled labor was very valuable, which led to an American project to produce as many skilled workers as possible.⁴ As a result, The Morrill Act was passed in 1862, which allocated federal land to individual state governments that could then sell the land to either fund existing colleges or establish new ones with the premise that they would be dedicated to specializing in “agriculture and the mechanic arts”.⁵ This heritage stands in stark contradistinction to many of the older eastern universities, which were more known for an intellectual approach to education as opposed to the more hands-on type endorsed by this bill.

In *Bright Epoch: Women and Coeducation in the American West*, Andrea Moss points out that with the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, many of the first land-grant colleges struggled to generate a balance between courses offered in more classical areas of education as opposed to the ones initially envisioned by the Morrill Act which were to be comprised of more agricultural and engineering based courses. She notes that western, more progressive schools, that would be considered very similar to Cal Poly at their roots, were popping up all over the western United States in the decades following the Industrial Revolution. These institutions were very open to the idea of coeducation and the expansion of practical, results-based skills for employment. Moss touches on multiple examples including Iowa State, and the Universities of Nebraska, Utah, and Oregon; all of which were very similar in origin to Cal Poly. These schools all

⁴ Peter Stearns, *The industrial revolution in world history* (Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 2013), 1-14.

⁵ Roger Geiger, *History of Higher Education Annual: 1998: The Land-Grant ACT and American Higher Education: Contexts and Consequences* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1998), 11-20.

allowed the enrollment of both men and women and were dedicated to hands-on education in agriculture and mechanics, as outlined in the Morrill Act.⁶

Iowa State in particular has some interesting comparisons to Cal Poly because although it never banned women from enrollment, as Poly did, it still saw the need to incorporate more classical courses of study in order to cater to them, much like Poly did when women came back in 1956. However, in both cases you have schools expanding curriculum beyond the original missions, and consequently in both situations there is much debate over the role that women should play in Universities that are explicitly created for specializing in “agriculture and the mechanic arts.”

Cal Poly’s reintegration of women also came at an interesting time in history considering the major events in our nation at the time. Many American troops had returned from the Second World War in the decade leading up to the reintroduction of women to Cal Poly. Many of these veterans were taking advantage of the G.I. Bill that had provided them with a plethora of benefits including: paid tuition to colleges and trade schools, paid housing to attend school, low mortgage rates, and veterans were even afforded one year’s worth of unemployment compensation.⁷ As Barbara Solomon points out in her book, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America*, the G.I Bill contributed to a strong increase in male enrollment as well as a push by many universities toward more technically-oriented courses being implemented.⁸ So while there were universities across the nation that either were already co-

⁷ Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin, *The GI Bill: The New Deal for Veterans* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2009), 85-117.

⁸ Barbara M. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 270-300.

educational or soon to be, there was still a nationwide inclination to favor courses that were more tailored to men, in particular the returning soldiers. This stood in stark contrast with the idea of expanding university courses to include women.

However, women did not sit quietly and allow their opportunities for education to slip away, quite the opposite actually. The urgent demands of the Second World War had caused women to become involved in more technical jobs that would produce war materials. With this necessary shift came about a generation of young American women who were very much interested in what were traditionally seen as male-oriented subjects like engineering and manufacturing.⁹ This is exactly what Amy Bix describes as the mentality of many young women living in the postwar era. In response to multiple factors working against them, Bix explains that women who sought education in engineering were banning together to promote their rights to equal education as men. In fact, she mentions the Society of Women Engineers, which incorporated in 1952, just four years before women came back to Cal Poly. According to Bix, “Overall, campus Society of Women Engineers groups fulfilled vital intellectual, social, and psychological support roles for female engineering majors.” The Society of Women Engineers’ chapters were expanding rapidly in correlation with an expanding feminist movement. The society had chapters on campuses such as: USC, UCLA, Loyola Marimont, Cal State Long Beach, Pomona, and yes, at Cal Poly as well.¹⁰ The inception and expansion of programs like the Society of Women Engineers shows that women were actively seeking more opportunities within higher education in the 1950s and also that they banded together in order to combat the opposition they faced.

⁹ Kathryn Dobie, *Her War: American Women in WW2* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc., 2003), 15-33.

¹⁰ Amy Sue Bix, *Girls Coming to Tech! A History of American Engineering Education for Women* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013), 1-20; 250-265. <http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/servlet/opac?bknumber=6731152>.

Former History 303 student Kaylin Embrey has written on the reintroduction of women at Cal Poly as well. In many ways my argument is similar to hers because she discusses how women at Cal Poly overcame a lot of opposition from administration and male students, and yet were able to contribute profoundly to Cal Poly as a whole. However, I intend to expand upon the areas she has already explored, such as the opposition of male students and administration, as well as explore challenges presented by a male-centric American society and their ability to move women's education forward.

Challenges from Administration:

During the Tenure of President McPhee at Cal Poly, he was involved in a lot of communication with other administration concerning women attending Cal Poly. It's imperative to examine his writings and recorded conversations because they show an obvious inclination to discriminate against women and furthermore they prove that the resistance against women coming back to Cal Poly extended beyond the University itself.

In a 1954 letter to Dr. J. Burton Vasche, the Associate Superintendent, McPhee very plainly expressed his reluctance to allow women to attend Cal Poly, a reluctance that resulted in him rejecting women applicants even though he knew it was illegal at the time. In the letter, McPhee writes multiple times that the prospect of Cal Poly once again taking on a female student body is an "obligation" of the school. I don't find it unintentional that McPhee chose this word because later on in the same letter he wrote, "The ironical part of the present situation is the fact that I have since 1937 been bluffing a whole regiment of girls who have applied for admission. Our Admissions Officer has a tremendous file of correspondence with girls who have wanted to

enroll in existing courses... We have for years been telling them that ‘enrollment of girls was not permitted.’”¹¹

Furthermore, McPhee explains his impermissible behavior by writing that he was only hoping to stall the reintroduction of women long enough to establish the “bare necessities” for women enrollment, which he summarized into only three things: A separate Physical Education program, women’s dormitories, and a Home Economics program. He also writes to Vasche concerning a few women who had claimed they would go as far as taking legal action against the school to gain admission, writing that the administration “have kept our fingers crossed, expecting at anytime to have one of them carry out her threat.”¹² Here, McPhee explains that the administration was very anxious in the anticipation of legal action being brought against the school by these outraged female applicants. There is an obvious apprehensive attitude in McPhee’s words because the only reason the prospect of legal actions would really concern anyone is if they are guilty of something. McPhee’s “crossed fingers” show that he knew the ban on women was illegal and that it would only be a matter of time before they would have to be accepted. As outlandish as these ideas seem to us as today, there was obviously somewhat of a consensus among other administration, including Everett Chandler, who was the Dean of Students during the reintroduction of women.

In another letter, this time in a letter from Chandler to McPhee, Chandler expresses his concern for the complications that would naturally follow the incorporation of female dormitories on campus. His argument is essentially that the parents of female students are much more

¹¹ Julian A. McPhee to Burton Vasche, September 4, 1954, University Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, 1.

¹² McPhee to Vasche, 1.

likely to be invasive and want to know exactly when and by what means their child is being monitored. He writes, “Today’s society expects college women to be closely supervised.”¹³ Which he claimed stood in contrast to the parents of male students who apparently just are not as concerned with the well being of their children. Chandler shows an obvious bias toward women coming to Cal Poly because before they are even afforded the opportunity to live on campus, he described what a burden they would be as opposed to men. His attitude is reflective of the male-centric society that existed when this letter was written; one that asserted women could not fend for themselves and that they needed strong men in order to be successful in society. This letter serves as a great example of the attitudes of the administration toward the prospect of women applicants to Cal Poly. The two administrative letters I’ve referenced show an obvious reluctance to accept women to Cal Poly, so much so, that the Dean of Students as well as the President of the school were willing to ignore the law in order to keep Cal Poly from becoming coeducational.

Opposition From Male Students (and their wives):

When women initially returned and even beforehand, many male students, either responding to interview questions, or writing opinion pieces in the *EL Mustang* newspaper, expressed their disdain for the possibility of women attending Cal Poly. In a 1947 issue of *El Mustang* entitled, “Dear John”, one student who was vehemently opposed to the idea of women attending Cal Poly expressed his displeasure with the idea writing, “Cal Poly has worked a long time to build up a reputation as a practical and technical college. The curriculum does not in-

¹³ Everett M. Chandler to Julian A. McPhee, June 8, 1955, Women’s Dormitory Supervision, UA-200, Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 2.

clude courses in which co-eds, would be interested.”¹⁴ In another edition of the school newspaper from 1948, in a section entitled “Our Crucial Decision”, the ramifications of women enrollment are discussed from a “pro” standpoint, and also from a “con” standpoint. In the “Con” section, one male student wrote, “We are against co-education. We are convinced that co education would be the ruination of Poly’s all male campus.”¹⁵ I find it very interesting that these debates were being held even some ten years before women would be allowed to attend the school. This supports my claim that the opposition to women was a very strong one, and one that had a long time to develop as well.

The opposition to women students was not only coming from other male students, but even the wives of those students who were married already. In another issue of *El Mustang*, from May 18, 1956 there is a section that is dedicated to the opinions of the wives of male students. Many of the wives are in agreement that Cal Poly should not allow women’s enrollment. A variety of reasons are provided to support their positions; some more intense than others. Some women, like Phyllis Crandall, wife of then student, Jim Crandall, told the interviewer that most coeds would primarily come to Cal Poly simply “to get a ‘Mrs.’ degree.”¹⁶ In other words, she felt they wanted admission to the school in order to find a husband, even married men. The *El Mustang* newspaper was publishing articles of this nature quite often, showing that this debate was a contentious one, with implications reaching far beyond the university itself.

Another student-wife named Barbara Crews took a similar stance as she stated that Cal

¹⁴ “Dear John”, *El Mustang*, January 30, 1947, 2, accessed March 1, 2017.

¹⁵ “Our Crucial Decision”, *El Mustang*, July 16, 1948, 2, accessed March 1, 2017.

¹⁶ “Student Wives Offer New Thoughts on Poly Coeducation Movement”, *El Mustang*, May 18, 1956, 3, accessed March 1, 2017.

Poly was more than likely a “happy hunting ground for female wolves.”¹⁷ Again, the intention of this kind of statement is obvious: these wives directly accused women seeking an education at Cal Poly as having ulterior motives, namely, trying to steal their husbands. The first women to come back to Cal Poly were faced with opposition not only from the existing all-male student body, but also from many of their wives! I believe the most significant reason these women were outraged by Cal Poly’s coeducational policy was because the school had been all male for over a quarter century. With women suddenly coming back to campus, an environment in which these student’s wives could be complacent and let their guards down no longer existed. Instead, many now felt like there was a battle going on. In an interview by the school newspaper, three girls gave a consensus opinion about coeds on campus, “wives have been number one on the campus as far as women are concerned and with the coming coeds they will find themselves in the back seat.”¹⁸ It is very clear that many women wanted no part of coeducation at Cal Poly.

On the other hand, in an article of *El Mustang*, some male students interviewed concerning women coming to the school said they were very excited about the prospect. According to them there were not enough female students around and the thought of coeducation meant being around women that were not already married.¹⁹

Opposition from a postwar male-centric society:

A decade after the Second World War, women were disadvantaged in education. The

¹⁷ “Student Wives Offer New Thoughts on Poly Coeducation Movement”, 3.

¹⁸ “Student Wives Offer New Thoughts on Poly Coeducation Movement”, 3.

¹⁹ “‘Too Few Females’ Lament Many Men,” *El Mustang*, October 5, 1956, 1, accessed March 1, 2017 <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2687&context=studentnewspaper>

“Baby Boomer” generation of children presented a huge problem for women who were seeking a higher education in the 1950s. Rather than being able to attend college and pursue a career, many women were instead left with the massive responsibility of caring for their newborn babies while their husbands attended college instead.

Further incentivizing women to stay at home and men to get an education was the G.I. Bill, which made going to college extremely affordable for returning soldiers from the war. By incentivizing these millions of young men to go to college. Naturally there were massive spikes in male enrollment, which further downplayed the importance of coeducation and reinforced the 1950s male-centric attitude that women were simply best fit to be homemakers who supported their husbands and raised their children respectably. On top of the already paternalistic society in which they had to live, student wives were also treated as second-class citizens by administration at Cal Poly. Although I’m sure the sentiment was originally intended to be a positive one, the “Pushing Hubbie Through” certificates created by Robert Kennedy and Dr. Young are a perfect example of how the role of women was downplayed so much so that they were rewarded not based on their own merits, but rather were celebrated based on the success of their “hubbies”. These were literal certificates created by these administrators in order to incentivize women to basically make sure she is fully supportive of her husband well he earns his degree. The certificates were very formal looking, but the “achievement” they represented made them a very demeaning award. The last lines of the main text of the P.H.T. certificates is, “It is the wish and hope of the undersigned that although the spouse of the aforesaid P.H.T. may henceforth wear the academic cap and gown throughout the happy years to come, the aforesaid P.H.T. will con-

tinue to wear the academic pants.”²⁰

Contributions to Cal Poly:

Even with many factors acting in opposition to them, the newly admitted Cal Poly women were able to contribute immensely to the expansion of the curriculum as well as extracurricular activities. Women made a fast and lasting impact on the school from the moment they arrived. Within only the first year of their presence on campus, women had already been involved in: running for office within the student body²¹, joining a number of committees like Homecoming and election committees²², and even creating their own clubs from scratch.²³ From joining a multitude of clubs to organizing new ones, to writing for *El Mustang* or *El Rodeo*, to directly contributing to the addition of classes designed for female students, The 1956 Cal Poly class of women denounced with a trumpet sound that they will not be treated as second-class citizens because they themselves embodied what “Learn by doing” actually means.²⁴

²⁰ Pushing Hubby Through, 1954-1965, University Archives, Photograph Collection, Cal Poly

²¹ “Women Elect,” *El Mustang*, October 26, 1956, 6, accessed March 2, 2017 <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2690&context=studentnewspaper>.

²² Jim Luther, ed., *El Rodeo: 1957* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic, 1957), 110-173, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=elrodeo>.

²³ “All-Girl Club Meets in Try to Organize,” *El Mustang*, January 15, 1957, 1, accessed March 1, 2017 <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1965&context=studentnewspaper>.

²⁴ Luther, *El Rodeo*, 110-150

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