

Understanding the Chaos: Poly Royal Riots in 1990

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Abstract

In April of 1990, Cal Poly's President Warren J. Baker made the decision to indefinitely cancel the annual open house event, Poly Royal. The decision was made easy because of the violent and disruptive riots that broke out during the weekend of the event that year. Primarily the result of binge drinking among young students, the riots included: arson, destruction of property, and over a hundred injuries. This paper will explore all the precautionary measures taken by city officials to combat the riots and examine the measures that could have been taken to prevent the riots from happening. Using sources that study riots that occur adjacent to university campuses will help further understand the traits of these riots and how they should have been combatted. The possible enactment of the banning or limiting of sale of alcohol to remedy the uproar among riot participators is also discussed in this paper.

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Introduction:

“It turned out to be an effective recruiting tool because he never considered going to college anywhere else.”¹ So described a former student interviewing another former student of California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo about the Poly Royal riots in 1990. Poly Royal, the annual showcase and celebration held every spring, was always highly revered in the eyes of the San Luis Obispo community, and was the pride and joy of the students and faculty of the Cal Poly campus. It brought in a lot of revenue for city businesses, and provided most of the funding for campus clubs and organizations. It was also a way to display all the different aspects that Cal Poly had to offer academically, while also holding unique events such as a rodeo. Unfortunately, in 1990, the open house event was brought to an end due to riots that broke out over the weekend resulting in about 100 arrests and about 130 sent to the hospital due to injuries.² There was a large gloom over the campus community due to the instant decision of Cal Poly President Warren Baker to cancel the event permanently. Many members of the community felt that it was the only remaining course of action to take, while other members of the Cal Poly campus felt that they were not heard when the decision was made.

¹ Chris Absher, Unpublished paper for HIST 504 (California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, October 2007), 7.

² Mike McMillan, “Riots erupt at Poly Royal,” *Mustang Daily*, April 30, 1990, 1.

It is important to explore the different aspects of why the event occurred and why the community reacted the way that they did. First hand accounts will be used of a police officer present and spectator to help further advance the topic. It is also relevant to look at a different event adjacent to a university with very similar situations and how their community handled it. San Luis Obispo was not the only city during this time period to fall victim to this type of crime due to nearby college campus events. Many other cities had similar situations occur, with almost exactly the same reasons behind why they occurred and how they were handled. Chico State, for example, had one riot occur three years before Cal Poly's, and then had another one happen one week after. The events that occurred in San Luis Obispo, and other college towns, were said to have happened due to the young crowd looking for some action mixed with copious amounts of alcohol that resulted in a chaotic mass effort to pick a fight with police.

In its entirety, Poly Royal was a positive event in the community that took a turn in 1989 and 1990. The event brought in roughly \$3-5 million per year in revenue for the community and this seemed to motivate many business owner's actions towards their sale of liquor.³ Cal Poly's experience with the 1990 Poly Royal riots was unique due to its ability potentially prevent its riot, but the eventual violent disruption led to the inevitable cancellation the event indefinitely. President Warren Baker had no other option but to cancel Poly Royal after the riots, but the riots were foreseeable and therefore could have had more precautionary measures taken by the city and campus administration before the event.

Historiography

³ Absher, 1.

To further understand the Poly Royal riots, it is important to explore research done about the event prior, and how student party riots have been analyzed. An important piece done was a 2007 paper by a Cal Poly graduate student who interviewed a former student that grew up in San Luis Obispo that watched the riots happen in 1990. The paper highlights the overall theme that greed motivated local business to expedite the sale of alcohol to students leading up to the weekend of the event.⁴ I will tie in this theme to show how San Luis Obispo city officials tried to attack the issue of the promotion of alcohol and the sale of beer bottles, but it did not go far enough in its overall prevention tactic. It is proven that alcohol is the main cause of “no cause” student party riots. In the article, “Is Alcohol Related to Rioting? An Exploration of College Student Attitudes,” students are interviewed to get a better understanding of riots associated with college students from their perspective. It shares that people drink alcohol to live in the now, and when some students start causing trouble, it is easy to join the crowd.⁵ This article shows background the sociology behind how students come together to riot. Two other secondary sources show how alcohol plays the most significant role in the reason why students riot. The article “Breaking the chain: Confronting issueless college town disturbances and riots” discusses the types of riots that occur and the types of people that participate in them. Two types are beer riots, and riots that occur due to an annual event. The Poly Royal riots are a mixture of the two, and they are described as local and out of town participants that occur adjacent to campus.⁶ The article also discloses that usually the most active participants in these riots are young, white

⁴ Absher, 4.

⁵ Dolores Maney, “Is Alcohol Related to Rioting? An Exploration of College Student Attitudes,” *Health Educator* 35, (Fall 2003): 19.

⁶ Rick Ruddell, “Breaking the chain: Confronting issueless college town disturbances and riots,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 33, (August 2005): 550.

males. Looking at pictures of the event in the *Mustang Daily* and the San Luis Obispo *Telegram-Tribune*, this fact also seems to be true. In the book, *Student Party Riots*, the book highlights steps the police should take in regards to such events occurring on or near a college campus. The book highlights that the community leaders should involve themselves in the sale of alcohol in the local city in order to curb the amount of alcohol consumed to avoid such large riots from breaking out.⁷ In San Luis Obispo's case, the signs that riots would break out would be high, but officials still did not act enough to prevent the chaotic riot. I will use this evidence to prove that the riots were foreseeable and therefore opted for more work on behalf of the community to prevent them. All of this research will be expanded on in the arguments of this paper to highlight where the community went wrong and why the events played out the way that they did.

City Officials

How the police acted in response to all of the drama surrounding Poly Royal is very significant in understanding why the event occurred. A big part of why there is so much information on what happened so clearly on those nights was because of the police department's accounts combating the riots. To help further the understanding of how the police reacted, I interviewed police officer, Bill Proll, who was there during the riots of 1989 and 1990 will be referenced throughout the paper to help give a more personal account. Although Saturday, April 29, was remembered to be the worst night of it all, it built up from the riot that occurred the night before. At around 10 PM on Friday night a car and bicycle were in a collision on the corner of Kentucky and Fredericks Streets. A big crowd gathered around the accident, and when police and paramedics tried to help the injured victim they were pelted with rocks, which put them in great

⁷ Tamara Madensen, *Student Party Riots* (Washington D.C: US Department of Justice, 2006), 6.

danger.⁸ The police were then called away to an incident on Foothill Boulevard and were gone for about two hours.⁹ In that time, the same crowd moved down the street to the liquor store Campus Bottle, and used street signs to break the windows while chanting “Free Beer! Free Beer!”¹⁰ This was going on for ninety minutes before the police finally arrived on the scene and got the crowd to disperse with tear gas and water hoses.¹¹ In response to the riot that erupted on Friday, the chief of police and city administrators came up with a plan to potentially prevent the outbreak of a second riot.¹² The plan included creating a “temporary and command staging area” far enough from the scene so officers from all types of departments could have a central location to meet up, having a helicopter flown in from Fresno, calling in officers to come help from Santa Barbara and San Jose counties, sealing off local freeway off- ramps, and not confronting rioters unless confronted.¹³ When asking Officer Proll if he thought this was the best course of action that night, he explained that at the time this was the best possible plan that could have been executed.¹⁴ He further says that no matter what the police do, they can be criticized for doing too little or too much, but in their defense, they had no idea what was about to happen that night. He explains that all the measures they took were just to prepare for any possible scenario.¹⁵ He goes on to talk about how the police only came to the scene when people started “flooding into

⁸ Tony Hazarlan, “Traffic accident may have drawn crowd that began night of violence,” *Telegram- Tribune*, April 30, 1990, 5.

⁹ Hazarlan, 5.

¹⁰ Brandon Engle, “Friday riot near Poly causes vandalism, injuries” *Mustang Daily*, April 30, 1990, 1.

¹¹ Hazarlan, 5.

¹² Gary Taylor, “Could the riots have been prevented?” *Telegram- Tribune*, April 30, 1990, 3.

¹³ Taylor, 3.

¹⁴ Bill Proll (personal communication, February 11, 2018).

¹⁵ Proll interview.

crowds”,¹⁶ but if nothing would have happened they would not have showed up at all because they were not looking to start anything.

It is true that the officers and city officials could not have predicted what happened on Saturday night, but could they have done more knowing what happened on Friday night? After the events that happened on Friday, the chief of police considered taking emergency measures, such as enacting a curfew or potentially creating a ban on the sale of alcohol, but ultimately decided that it was not the best method.¹⁷ With that being said, it is important to look at what was done in regard to the sales of alcohol that weekend since being intoxicated was the main reason why people rioted. Looking at the events in timeline order, it starts from a couple months before Poly Royal happened when the city asked local liquor stores to “limit the sales of beer bottles,” but little or no response was made.¹⁸ Beer bottles ended up being one of the most used objects thrown at the police over the weekend. Local liquor store Cork 'N' Bottle had a sign that said “Poly Royal Special” near a beer display, and had constant sales leading up to the Poly Royal riots.¹⁹ Other liquor stores also shared that their sales were really high that weekend as well. City councilwoman Peg Pinard expressed it best when she said, “people are very disturbed about how the liquor industry really tried to make this their big bash. That does disturb me.”²⁰

This is one of the only articles of hundreds that actually highlight the problem of alcohol sales within San Luis Obispo. The fact that a local councilwoman was able to recognize a big

¹⁶ Proll interview.

¹⁷ McMillan, 1.

¹⁸ Jan Greene, “Efforts to curb drinking futile,” *Telegram-Tribune*, April 30, 1990, 10.

¹⁹ Greene, 10.

²⁰ Greene, 10.

part of the issue at hand is not quite good enough because it was the only article that actually talked about this problem, and it was not made a bigger deal to the community. In 2007, a Cal Poly student named Chris Absher interviewed a spectator in the riots and wrote a scholarly paper on how the businesses adjacent to Cal Poly used their greed to create the monster that was the Poly Riots.²¹ The interview gave insight into the opinion among a lot of people that “merchants were foolishly hyping the party aspect of Poly Royal for personal profit and were collectively culpable for the disturbances that occurred.”²² Although some form of a request was made on behalf of the city, it is hard to truly accept that was enough to be done to try and slow down the sale of alcohol adjacent to campus.

The book, *Student Party Riots*, it discusses the necessary precautions regarding the sale of alcohol law enforcement can take in regards to preventing riots. Author Tamara Madensen, explains,

“research shows that student party riots around universities can be reduced by limiting the presence of alcohol outlets and advertisements. The number of stores that sell alcoholic beverages has been correlated with heavy drinking, frequent drinking, and drinking-related problems in student populations. Some cities have placed moratoriums on new liquor establishments to control distribution of alcohol within college communities.”²³

Although in the interview with the officer Proll, he respectfully states that declaring a state of emergency in San Luis Obispo to ban the sale of alcohol for the weekend would not have made a difference, it seems that it potentially could have. We know that beer bottles ended up being one

²¹Absher, 3.

²²Absher, 3.

²³ Madensen, 12.

of the most used objects thrown at the police over the weekend²⁴, and if the sale was limited, maybe all of those injuries to police and rioters would have been limited.

The police officer's viewpoint is supported by the fact that 80% of the people arrested Saturday night were under the age of 21.²⁵ This means the people that were the most intoxicated and causing the most trouble that night had already gotten alcohol illegally through someone else who bought it for them. Considering this fact, it can be looked at two ways. One is that that even if the sale of alcohol was banned or limited that people would have legally gone to the next town over and acquired just as much alcohol anyway. Another viewpoint is that students would have taken these bans somewhat seriously and not traveled to the next town considering this is somewhat of a trek for them just to get alcohol. In the book, *Why People Obey the Law*, Tom Tyler explains why punishments help people follow the law. He argues that it is proven to be effective that once the punishment for a law is increased, the rate at which the law is committed decreases. Tyler further states that people are essentially self-motivated and respond to an immediate assessment of gains and losses.²⁶ After the horrific riot that caused serious destruction of property on Friday night, it is clear that the riots would not have ended there that weekend. City officials, police, and campus administrators could have definitely assumed more chaos was coming the next night. The chief of police should have enacted some sort of ban or control on the sale of alcohol to not only make the crimes more severe, but give them more jurisdiction over the what could have been the illegal sale of alcohol that night. If it is psychologically proven that laws associated with punishments are more effective, the city could have enacted something

²⁴ Greene, 10.

²⁵ McMillan, 1.

²⁶ Tom Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 56.

more regarding the sale of alcohol. Although the interviewed police officer's opinion on the sale of alcohol is valid, his possible bias of protecting his fellow officers and community was fairly present in the interview. That aspect of his view might have been why he firmly believed that the riots would have happened no matter what city officials could have done. Even though some type of large gathering would have occurred that Saturday night, it is strongly possible that some sort of noticeable effort through the limit or ban of alcohol could have prevented the intense violence and civil disobedience that occurred.

Community Reactions

The Tuesday after the riots, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article that was very different from the local San Luis Obispo articles about the event. It discusses how business owners and students felt about the riots and gave more grim feeling to the public. The first part talks about how business owners were incredibly disappointed with Baker's hasty decision to cancel Poly Royal indefinitely because the event brought in \$3-5 million in revenue to the city.²⁷ The person speaking in support of this was the head of the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce who wanted to see Poly Royal definitely come back in a more cultural and academic form minus all the partying issues. He felt that it was a great tradition that showcased the school to potential future students.²⁸ Later in the article, it is addressed that there was a discrepancy between the student view of how the police acted and how it was portrayed in the local San Luis Obispo media. An estimated twelve students filed complaints within the university that the police used "excessive force" when dealing with the students.²⁹ In the San Luis Obispo local

²⁷ Miles Corwin, "Cal Poly Ends Annual Fest; Blames Rioting," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1990.

²⁸ Corwin.

²⁹ Corwin.

newspaper, the *Telegram- Tribune*, every single article that talks about the police shares how professional and “restrained” the police acted during the riots, which was supported by community leaders, such as councilwoman Peg Pinard.³⁰ It is an international phenomena to praise the police after a riot has occurred, even if there were accounts of misbehavior. In a scholarly article by Nicole Fasel titled, “Who Is to Blame?” she discusses that police are always viewed as, “deserving of our gratitude and our admiration,”³¹ which was the same type of tone that city councilwoman Pinard evoked in thoughts on the riots. This *Los Angeles Times* article shows how a nationalized magazine wanted to portray the riots versus on the local scale where San Luis Obispo member’s bias come into play. President Baker, in the *Telegram- Tribune*, took a more melancholy, stern approach to depicting how the community felt. Baker explained that the “decision was not difficult” to end the event. He said it was “impossible” to prevent this kind of unwanted activity once it had the reputation of a big party weekend.³² He then praised the students who put on Poly Royal that emphasized academics miraculously, but also recognized how upset they were that he had to cancel the event.³³ At the end of the article, he took a very disciplinary tone by discussing the failures of the rioters and that the students of Cal Poly have a strong obligation to their community that make their education so affordable.³⁴

Taking in President Baker’s account and opinion on the cancellation of the event, it is necessary to also look at how the general community felt about the cancellation. When asking

³⁰ Greene, 10.

³¹ Nicole Fasel, “Who Is to Blame? Official Discourse and Ethnic Diversity Attitudes During the 2011 Riots in England,” *Political Psychology* 37 (2016): 664.

³² Warren Baker “Baker explains cancellation of Poly Royal,” *Telegram- Tribune*, May 10, 1990, 1.

³³ Baker, 1.

³⁴ Baker, 1.

the police officer how he recalls it, he said the general consensus among the community was a very happy one, and that older people wanted to see it canceled for sure.³⁵ Looking at the *Telegram-Tribune*, this seemed to be reflected in most of the letters to the newspaper, with the exception of very few that were upset with the cancellation. It makes sense why students would not want to see such an event canceled. The damages of the event did reach hundreds of thousands of dollars, according to that current chief of police at the time of Poly Royal in 1990.³⁶ This steep cost of repairs is also a valid reason why older residents of the community would want to see the event canceled. In “Breaking the chain,” town and gown relationships are described as wanting to bring the two together but always result in the community having to pay for any damages brought by the students that often occur in riots.³⁷

When Baker canceled Poly Royal, he knew he would have support from the community for doing so. People were very upset and horrified at what had happened over the past weekend, and even generally frustrated with the party scene associated with Cal Poly throughout the entire school year. Baker knew that he would appease the community and further keep it safe if he canceled Poly Royal. After what happened on April 28 and 29, it is clear the Baker had no other option but to cancel Poly Royal, but that does not mean that he did his best in order to prevent it. In the interview with officer Proll, I asked how Baker’s relationship with police was during his term as president. He answered that Baker did not have any strong form of communication with the San Luis Obispo Police and he was not a very personable guy.³⁸ Baker should have been

³⁵ Proll interview.

³⁶ Corwin.

³⁷ Ruddell, 552.

³⁸ Proll interview.

more involved with the police and their plans regarding the riots to stay more proactive and potentially prevent the riots beforehand. There is no evidence that shows that Baker had any intentions of trying to prevent the riots in any way. He was merely a facilitator of the cancellation that everyone wanted. As a very significant community leader he should have been more involved in the prevention stages regarding the riots that happened associated with Poly Royal due to its foreseeability.

A comparison with Chico State

Exactly one week after the Poly Royal riots in 1990, a very similar occurrence happened adjacent to the campus of California State University, Chico's, known as the biggest party school in America.³⁹ There was a riot that erupted with the same violence towards police and arson during their open house weekend.⁴⁰ The article was depicted in the *Telegram- Tribune* almost exactly how Cal Poly's was. The police were also accused of not acting enough, coming in too late, and fueling the disturbances. The reason behind the riot was also too much alcohol consumption among young adults who found a common enemy among the police. The community, including students were outraged by the event. The difference with this event is that it was a remade version of the original student- run open house that ended in 1987 called Pioneer Days due to similar, intense riots.⁴¹ Due to lost community revenue, the city decided to put on a new event in 1988 called Rancho Chico Days so the celebration could still live on.⁴² Not only did

³⁹ Marianne Biosotti, "Poly royal was a riot," *Mustang News*, April 30, 1990, 2.

⁴⁰ "Youthful drinkers turn Chico festival into riot," *Telegram Tribune*, May 7, 1990, 3.

⁴¹ "Youthful drinkers turn Chico festival into riot."

⁴² "Youthful drinkers turn Chico festival into riot."

the mayor express his embarrassment, the county supervisor, who was once student body president said the event should have been canceled in 1972 when a woman was raped and killed during Pioneer Days.⁴³

These articles can be found in a folder in the Cal Poly archives that were kept together with the Poly Royal articles by President Baker. It seems that he kept these articles to compare the two campuses riots and support his own decision to indefinitely cancel Poly Royal. When Chico tried recreating their open house weekend one year later under a new name with a new group putting it on they “lost” according to Chico Mayor Enochs. It is clear that President Baker took deep notice into this event, which helped make him come to his decision to never have such an event come close to his campus again. The day his editorial came out was about three days after Chico’s riot. It is clear from reading the articles about Chico that they should not have had tried to recreate the event because it resulted in extreme community upheaval. President Baker needed to cancel the event because he sees such failure of the Chico community to try and uphold their own form of an open house weekend. President Baker needed to ensure the San Luis Obispo community would not have a repeat of what happened to them like Chico did.

Conclusion

All in all, it is important to understand that Cal Poly went through a tremendous event that caused the community a lot of grief. Whether or not people supported the police, or the cancellation of Poly Royal, the riots were an overall unacceptable event. The celebration of the open house event Poly Royal was inevitably canceled due to the riots the broke out during that weekend. They could have been prevented if the community pushed more for the strong limiting

⁴³ “Youthful drinkers turn Chico festival into riot.”

or complete ban of the sale of alcohol leading up to and during the event. Looking at a school in the same state with almost an exact same occurrence, Chico State proves that Baker needed to cancel the event if he wanted to make sure such chaos could never come close to his campus again. It is understood that these riots came from a mixture of alcohol and young people seeking some fun after a big event in the adjacent university. All of these factors resulted in a huge riot that ended at 58 year beloved tradition in San Luis Obispo that brought the city a lot of revenue. It is sad that the community today does not know the same Poly Royal that was once celebrated, but the community is safer for it.

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