

“We Need a Little More of This” Margaret Chase and Her Career at Cal Poly

History 303 Research and Writing in History: Cal Poly History Project

Presented to

Course Instructor Professor Andrew Morris

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

A Course Taken in Partial Fulfillment of My Bachelor of Arts Degree in History

By

Jake Robin

March 2019

Abstract

In 1908, a woman by the name of Margaret Chase set foot on the Cal Poly campus. She was the epitome of a strong leader in her school and community. The respectability cast upon her by her peers has shown the influence she has given to the faculty and students. Chase represents a role model, whose story has not been told; however, it should be. The school motto of Cal Poly is “Learn By Doing” and Margaret Chase lived her life on those accords. The school expects every student to live and study by that motto, but Miss Chase shows that the faculty must as well.

Keywords

Margaret Chase

Cal Poly Junior College

Female Administrators

El Rodeo yearbook

Robert E. Kennedy

Introduction

Every college has a person that most represents their school and at the California Polytechnic State University that person was Miss Margaret “Maggie” Chase who taught and served from 1908 to 1945. She created a comfort among the students and faculty that bound the school together through hard times. She was a representation of change for society, as she was a woman leader amongst men. This leadership was expressed through many accounts among the administration, faculty and community. Her actions were never forced upon her as she made the most of being at Cal Poly and dedicated every second of her time preserving the quality of the school. Her recognition of doing so gave inspiration to Cal Poly as she lived her life entirely based on the school motto “Learn By Doing”.

Historiography

Morris Eugene Smith wrote a dissertation at the University of Oregon in 1957 about the history of Cal Poly. He spoke highly of Margaret Chase stating that while as President “she, more than anyone else, encouraged the students, notwithstanding the small enrollment, to continue as much as possible the regular activities program.”¹ However, this is all he writes about her even though she makes up 37 years of Cal Poly history. Smith portrays her as a very kind woman, almost like a motherly figure, but lacks the true depth of understanding of the leadership brought upon by Miss Chase.

¹ Morris Eugene Smith, “A History of California State Polytechnic, 1901-1951”, (PhD dissertation, University of Oregon, 1957), 119.

Miss Chase was very involved in clubs, especially women's clubs. Cameron Binkly, writes in "No Better Heritage than Living Trees", about how the Women's Clubs in Humboldt County banded together in order to save the redwoods threatened by logging in 1923. She argued, "women who joined early civic clubs actively promoted this ideal of 'female' behavior even as they used the same notion to expand feminine influence beyond the home."² This is very similar to Margaret Chase's ideals as she led as a female and stood by many women who wanted change in their community.

In the first twenty years of the twentieth century, "women's colleges had been among the few institutions of higher education to offer faculty positions to women" and after 1910 conditions changed, men began to replace them to maintain a "balance". Joanne E. Passet so assuredly wrote in "Women Academic Librarians on the Western Frontier, 1900-1920", that due to the lack of faculty jobs in the Mid-west and East and the growth of land-grant colleges and normal schools in the West, many academic librarians were packing up and moving towards the frontier for a better opportunity.³ Margaret Chase, looking for this same opportunity traveled westward, however she had no intent in being just a librarian, but rather would discover a whole new aspiration in her move from Nova Scotia to California.

Dr. Leonard V. Koos, Director of Preliminary Survey of Secondary Education and writer of "Recent Growth of the Junior College", reported on the "recent growth of Junior

² Cameron Binkley, "'No Better Heritage than Living Trees': Women's Clubs and Early Conservation in Humboldt County", *The Western Historical Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2002): 179-180.

³ Joanne E. Passet, "Women Academic Librarians on the Western Frontier, 1900-1920", *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 60, no. 4 (1990): 320-36.

Colleges and the extent of the movement".⁴ Cal Poly was one of the State Schools studied and Koos directly spoke with Miss Margaret Chase on the geographical distribution of the students. This helped in discovering where most students very traveling to attend Junior Colleges and in the West, California was leading the way. Koos complimented Chase's work saying, "I appreciated very much your courtesies to me on the occasion of my visit. I am hoping that I may sometime spend at least a day or two in observing the work in progress."⁵

Unique Perspective of Leadership at Cal Poly

Miss Chase's story at Cal Poly has very little written about it, even though she was a huge part of it. She stood for women at Cal Poly when not many of them could speak out. She acted as an adhesive to keeping Cal Poly together during 40 years of change. She stayed during the many financial struggles, the banning of women students and persevered through the criticism of her superiors. However, Chase was not alone, as her friends, the faculty and students, continued to give her strength through some of the most grueling times. Cal Poly expresses their motto "Learn by Doing" towards their students, but Margaret Chase took that motto and became an example of it through her leadership and kindness.

Chase's Origins

⁴ Leonard V. Koos, "Recent Growth of the Junior College" [1928]. *American Journal of Education* 91, no. 4 (1983): 472.

⁵ Dr. Leonard V. Koos, letter to Margaret Chase, 12 May 1928

Margaret Chase was born October 27, 1878, in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. There she lived out her young life and graduated from Dalhousie University in Halifax.⁶ She then traveled to California with her father Reverend J.H. Chase, who was recommended by his physician in moving to Cambria because it had “a more equable climate” for his health.⁷ While he was preaching at the local Presbyterian church in Cambria and then moved down to Burbank to the local church there, Miss Chase received her M.A. from the University of California and had graduate training in Education from Stanford University, the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles. She then settled at 1355 Mill Street in San Luis Obispo where she lived with her father and received a teaching job at the local state school, California Polytechnic. Miss Chase decided to live her remaining year in the beautiful central California city of San Luis Obispo, receiving a job at the newly formed school of California State Polytechnic. Chase began her career at Cal Poly as the only professional English teacher where she was known for helpful aid. When Robert Kennedy first came to Cal Poly, Miss Chase assisted him with his journalism classes. Kennedy was so fond of her he referred to her as “a most beloved member of this faculty and community and was one of my close personal friends.”⁸ She was well respected and many saw her as a leader, which helped her grow at Cal Poly.

The Leadership of Miss Margaret Chase

⁶ “Memorial Services for Miss Chase”, *El Mustang*, February 21, 1966.

⁷ “Veteran of Pulpit is Honored”, *Crandall Scrapbooks*, Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

⁸ 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), 8.

Miss Chase was also very involved with the school's administration as well. She was so good at her teaching abilities she was promoted to the head of the Academic Department and even named Vice-President of the school.⁹ She took this job very seriously and in 1924 when President Nicholas Ricciardi resigned due to the financial struggles of the school, Miss Chase was made acting president.¹⁰ During this time, women had very little leadership roles; however, Margaret Chase was considered fit enough for the job. According to a magazine called *Her: Hot Springs*, the earliest female president of a university in the United States was a woman by the name of Emma Elizabeth Johnson. She with her husband founded Johnson University in Tennessee; when he died she became president in 1925, until her death in 1927.¹¹ Margaret Chase's time as President in 1924, a year before Emma Johnson, has not been noted in the magazine. Although, Cal Poly was not considered a University at the time, it still showed the progressive nature at the next female president would not come until the 1970s. Miss Chase was only President for a few months before Benjamin Crandall was hired, but it still paved the way for her future leadership roles.

In 1927, President Crandall added a two-year Junior College at Cal Poly, where the students primarily studied Engineering, Mechanics, and Aeronautics. Margaret Chase was named dean of the Junior College and was tasked with helping run the school. Chase felt that "the Junior College is a very misunderstood educational unit" and "has been formed to meet a real need and the very rapid growth of junior colleges throughout the United States

⁹ Kennedy, *Learn By Doing*, 8

¹⁰ Kennedy, *Learn By Doing*, 8

¹¹ The Johnson University Story. (n.d.). Retrieved March 5, 2018, from <https://www.johnsonu.edu/Tennessee/About/History.aspx>

has shown how well the junior colleges are meeting this need.”¹² This is proven as at the J.C. at Cal Poly has shown a rapid growth going from 229 students in 1928 to 403 the following year. Chase was credited with this growth due to her determination to learn from other deans from other junior colleges. She was not only a leader of the Junior College at Cal Poly but also “an outstanding leader in the development of the Junior College movement in California” as she served as the Secretary-Treasurer of the Northern California Junior College Conference, and a contributor to the Junior College Journal, the pioneer publication of the Junior College movement.¹³ Miss Chase was sent to a junior college conference, where Dr. Ricciardi, the former president of Cal Poly, gave a speech “[emphasizing] the need of freedom in junior college curricula and the advantages of strictly vocational courses.”¹⁴ Margaret Chase received help from Dr. Ricciardi, with questions about running the junior college. This is an example of the connections she has made throughout her years at Cal Poly that further helped her in the future. She also received praise by the people helping her with the Junior College. Miss Margaret Chase was honored with being 1 of 6 women to be invited to participate on a program with the American Association of University Women Conference, where they discussed a paper written by Dr. J.J. Oppenheimer called “Current Changes and Experiments in the Junior College”. This meeting consisted of the International Federation of University Women, which contained 33 countries, 35,000 from the American Association of University Women and representatives

¹² “Polytechnic Day At Kiwanis Club”, *Crandall Scrapbooks*, Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

¹³ California State Polytechnic University, *El Rodeo 1931*, Special Collections and Archives, San Luis Obispo.

¹⁴ “Central California Junior College Conference Meets”, Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives, Box 13 Folder 39, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

from various colleges and universities from around the country. This is very important in that this American Association praised Miss Chase so much that they felt her opinion on the topic was relevant. This was “one of the highest honors bestowed on women educators in the country” and Cal Poly President B.R. Crandall hoped “that Miss Chase may be able to take advantage of this exceptional opportunity, which will not only be beneficial to herself, but add great prestige to the state school.”¹⁵ The representation of Miss Chase reflected the representation of Cal Poly. How people viewed her shows the respect given to Cal Poly, which is why she held so many leadership jobs in a world dominated by men. Once Julian McPhee became president in 1933, immediately, he was very critical of the Junior college and Miss Chase saying that her advice and leadership had “veered Cal Poly off the track” and removed her as dean of the Junior College and returned her to full time teaching.¹⁶ He felt she was trying too hard to “change from a vocational-occupational orientation to an academic program which would be transferable to four-year colleges, specifically the University of California.”¹⁷ This did not deter her as with more free time she could focus more time to helping the community, something she had always been doing while at Cal Poly.

Chase was involved in women’s clubs including the Faculty Ladies’ Club (FLC) and the Monday Club, both of which she was a charter member. Many of the meetings were held at Miss Chase’s house at 1355 Mill Street, where she lived with another member of the club

¹⁵ “High Honors Bestowed on Vice President of the Cal Poly”, *Crandall Scrapbooks*, Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

¹⁶ Kennedy, *Learn By Doing*, 16

¹⁷ Kennedy, *Learn By Doing*, 16

and teacher named Miss Hope Jordan, as her father had passed away sometime before.¹⁸ In the FLC, Miss Chase was tasked with many jobs including throwing parties, like the “Hard-times” party and creating a sociable environment on campus. While being affiliated with the FLC, she was also very much involved with the Monday club. According to the Monday Club of San Luis Obispo’s webpage, their “mission is to enhance the educational, civic, social and cultural quality of the San Luis Obispo community.” Miss Chase’s first job in the club was as publicity chairman, where she was tasked with recruiting more women into joining the club and was also on the nominating committee.¹⁹ She was very active in establishing the bylaws of the club by not allowing any member to “hold more than one elective office at one time, nor serve more than two successive years in the office.”²⁰ People all around respected Miss Chase for everything she does for the school and the community.

Although she had great leadership experience, she still allowed others to lead the group as well. It was not until 1946, that Miss Chase was elected president of the club. During the holidays her and the Monday Club very graciously, aided a family of a father, mother and nine children in experiencing the joys of Christmas. The club filled a basket with a beef roast, vegetables, fruits, candy, cookies and toys that were donated by the fire department.²¹ It was this type of selflessness that Miss Chase and the Monday Club brought

¹⁸ Faculty Ladies Club. (1924, November 20). Special Collection and Archive, California State Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo.

¹⁹ *Monday Club*, (1925, February 9), Special Collection and Archive, California State Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo

²⁰ *Monday Club*, (1946, January 4), Special Collection and Archive, California State Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo.

²¹ *Monday Club*, (1947, January 3), Special Collection and Archive, California State Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo.

to the community. She was always looking for ways to improve the club and her leadership skills. She even sent invitations to the presidents of other women clubs for the purpose of becoming better informed on the activities of the clubs and the needs of the city, which “might be met by the various clubs working in harmony with each other.”²² Through her countless experience in leadership she always stayed on track and her leadership was well received by her fellow faculty members and students.

The Impact on the Faculty and Students from Chase’s Leadership

She was admired by a lot of the faculty for her “above and beyond” ways of bringing them all together. She referred to her colleagues as a “faculty family” and often hooked a harness to the school horse named “Old Rowdy” and would go for long rides, sometimes all the way to Pismo beach.²³ She was very invested with the well being of her work partners. Chase understood that being one of the few female faculty members at the school made her the minority so she put a lot of effort into maintaining a strong relationship with the faculty. Through the Ladies’ Faculty Club, which was a club for female faculty and the wives of the faculty, she threw parties to increase morale on campus. Although she was not married, Miss Chase “suggested that ‘our husbands’ had been socially neglected of late.”²⁴ This was due to the hard times that had been brought upon Cal Poly. The school had fallen on hard times with the financial struggles of keeping the school afloat in 1928. She decided

²² *Monday Club*, (1947, February 28), Special Collection and Archive, California State Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo.

²³ Margaret Chase, “Vice President Tells of Changes in Polytechnic During Past 16 years”, Special Collection and Archive, California State Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo.

²⁴ *Faculty Ladies Club*, (March 6, 1928), Special Collection and Archive, California State Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo.

to throw a “hard times” party where the faculty and their wives would dress up in fun costumes. The costumes were very fun and even somewhat progressive. The favorites of the party were the costumes of the Athletic Director and head football coach, Al Agosti and his colleague, Mr. Funk, who dressed up as women. The Polygram reported that they “brought out their ‘it’ qualities for there was quite a heavy flirtation going on between them.”²⁵ This was the kind of thing Miss Chase wanted from the faculty. She was very good at getting them out of their comfort zone and creating lasting relationships with her faculty family. According to everyone at the party it was a success and “[kept] the faculty in good spirits”.²⁶ She also spent much time on her relationship with the students as well.

Students

As an English teacher she was very loved by her students. She always had a goal of her students not only excelling in school, but in life as well. As Margaret Chase wrote about Cal Poly,

“The graduate always went out with the feeling that the school had meant much in his life and had fitted him for his life work as no other institution could have done. This indeed has always been the crowning glory of Polytechnic. It is a thing, which adverse weather, hostile epidemics, and even an unfavorable budget cannot overthrow. It is a thing which still gives us confidence in the future.”²⁷

²⁵ “Hard-Time Faculty Party was Held April 10, 1929”, Special Collection and Archive, California State Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo.

²⁶ “Hard-Time Faculty Party was Held April 10, 1929”, Special Collection and Archive, California State Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo.

²⁷ Margaret Chase, “Vice President Tells of Changes in Polytechnic During Past 16 years”, Special Collection and Archive, California State Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo.

Chase felt that the success of the school relied entirely on the success of the students and in many ways she was correct. Her perseverance to the school symbolizes how her character was viewed around her. Kennedy wrote about her relationship with the students saying, "To give you an idea of the kind of person she was, in several occasions rode with students on horse back outings all the way up the coast to Big Sur."²⁸ She was very much interested in student activities. Not many teachers, to my account, have been noted for doing things like traveling about 90 miles up the coast to Big Sur. She loved to do activities with her students by going above and beyond their expectations and received praise for doing so. During the 1951 homecoming, student alumni praised her strongly:

Miss Chase has passed through periods when the school literally waited for the educational philosophy of California to catch up with the advanced ideas that led to the establishment of Cal Poly. She has noted the ups and downs of the school, but through her long years of service she remained faithful to her work of instructing youth. Her charm and graciousness have brightened the days for many hundreds of Cal Poly students during the years she has served as a faculty member.²⁹

This praise from her students shows the level she was at with her pupils. Her job was not only her career, but also her passion. Due to the "Learn By Doing" attitude of Miss Chase, her students took stands when once again change was brought on to Cal Poly.

In 1929, the California legislation passed a law, denying women from being admitted to Cal Poly due to the lack of funding and interest of girls attending.³⁰ Since then

²⁸ "Miss Margaret Chase dies; funeral today" *El Mustang*, February 18, 1966

²⁹ California State Polytechnic University, *El Rodeo 1940*, Special Collections and Archives, pg. 3, San Luis Obispo

³⁰ Kennedy, *Learn By Doing*, 16

the past students of Cal Poly have shared their views on the banishment of women from Cal Poly. During the 1931 Homecoming celebration, Miss Margaret Chase, was “greeted with a burst of applause.”³¹ Miss Helen Shipsey, who was apart of the class of 1919, gave a speech saying, “the girls of yesterday...were always most loyal [and] put their heartiest efforts back in every project that would help to bring their school to the front.”³² This progressive effort caught the eye of assemblyman, Chris N. Jepsen, as he was determined “to assist [Cal Poly] in reestablishing Poly, as a coeducational institution.”³³ The alumni of Cal Poly were going in the correct direction and the state even repealed the 1929 banishment of women in 1937; however, when President McPhee became president and received the chance to overturn this law he denied it. With a school primarily for boys Miss Chase was the representative for the female account on campus. Chase referred to President McPhee as a “man of power” and criticized him saying, “How can Mr. McPhee say that he is educating men for the ‘real world’ if they never learn to deal with any women except me?”³⁴ She was very much upset with the fact that women were still not allowed to attend Cal Poly even though it was legal in the state.

The students at Cal Poly backed up Miss Chase’s view with a dedication of the 1940 *El Rodeo* yearbook. This yearbook was a fight against the decision to not allow women to attend Cal Poly. At the introduction of each section of the yearbook there was some sort of remembrance to when women were at Cal Poly. For example, at the beginning of the athletic section a picture of the 1906 women’s basketball team, which was established

³¹ “Polytechnic Homecoming, Great Event”, *Crandall Scrapbooks*, Cal Poly Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

³² “Polytechnic Homecoming, Great Event”

³³ “Polytechnic Homecoming, Great Event”

³⁴ Kennedy, *Learn By Doing*, 11

before the men's basketball team, was shown bigger than any other.³⁵ This shows that there was an interest in women, even though none attended Cal Poly in 1940. Later on in the yearbook there is a picture of men and women standing next to each other with their arms around one another. The caption for it read "We need a little more of this"³⁶, suggesting that the students of Cal Poly wanted to once again have women return and establish a co-educational school once again. They used Miss Chase as a model to this fight to bring women back to Cal Poly; however, it was not until 1956 that Cal Poly would readmit women back as students in Cal Poly.

Remembrance of Chase at Cal Poly

Margaret Chase worked as hard as anyone in establishing Cal Poly as a notable school, all the way up to her retirement in 1945. After that she traveled the world until she settled in a retirement home in San Jose.³⁷ On February 15, 1966, Margaret Chase passed away, leaving behind a legacy admired by many, yet told by few. However, if you walk around Cal Poly there are still many reminiscences of her presence. In 1930, Chase Hall was named in her honor, where students lived in hospitality much like the warmth she had given to the students and faculty. President Robert Kennedy kindly stated about Miss Chase after her death saying "she was the kind of person admired by the students as well as the

³⁵ California State Polytechnic University, *El Rodeo 1940*, Special Collections and Archives, pg. 54, San Luis Obispo

³⁶ *El Rodeo*, 97

³⁷ "Miss Margaret Chase dies; funeral today" *El Mustang*, February 18, 1966

faculty.”³⁸ In totality, Margaret Chase was the greatest representation of what Cal Poly is all about. In 2014, Cal Poly did her justice by naming the live mustang mascot: Chase. This was a representation of her and a message to always “chase after their dreams.” “Current Cal Poly President Jeffery D. Armstrong chose this name out of many different entries saying ‘this name represents both our university’s distinguished past and the ambition that guides our students into a bright future.’”³⁹ I could not think of any better way to represent the school than being the name of the mascot of the school. Also, The Margaret Chase Memorial Loan Fund was established to honor her and benefit Cal Poly students.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Throughout her time at Cal Poly she was known well by her peers, but her story seems to be overshadowed by the many important figures in Cal Poly history. She had made her way to San Luis Obispo far away from where she grew up in Nova Scotia. Although this must have been fearful she endured and established herself intellectually capable of teaching at the California Polytechnic. From there she worked hard and began receiving praise, earning many honors not often bestowed on women during that time. Through her leadership skills, she inspired others to work hard for what they wanted and proved to be a model figure for most whom met her. Whether it was her time as Dean of the

³⁸ “Miss Margaret Chase dies; funeral today” *El Mustang*, February 18, 1966

³⁹ “Cal Poly Mustang Mascot Name Honors Past President Margaret Chase.” November 19, 2014. Accessed March 5, 2018. <http://www.gopoly.com/sports/fball/2014-15/releases/20141119o78yv0>.

⁴⁰ “Memorial Services for Miss Chase” *El Mustang*, February 21, 1966

Junior College or President of the Monday Club, she took her time and care into each aspect to ensure things ran smoothly. She persevered though many changes at Cal Poly and faced much ridicule and failure, but always seemed to find other ways to help grow Cal Poly and the San Luis Obispo community. That is why we honor her today as representation of Cal Poly and a pioneer in our philosophy of “Learn By Doing”.

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