

The Discovery of Margaret Chase and Why it Takes a Detective to Learn About Women

History 303 Research and Writing in History: Cal Poly History

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By

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Abstract

Scholarly work on the experience/erasure of Miss Margaret Chase: first and only female president of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. With the main focus being on difficulties throughout her life, and impact of the male gaze on her legacy: which resulted in an extreme lack of direct primary sources. Through analysis of gender issues during Chase's presidency and the effect of her erasure on campus it is clear that there is a disadvantage to being a woman in a position of power on Cal Poly's campus. This disadvantage is chronicled throughout Chase's life, but also to this day as there has yet to be another female president.

Key Words

Margaret Chase; Women in Higher Education; Higher Education Administration; Gender Inequality; Female Administrators; Sexism

Every little girl has the right to grow up in a world full of role models that are like her; in gender, race, sexual orientation, and most importantly in passion. Sadly—due to the way that historians have preserved higher education administration records—the picture of female leaders that has been painted is diluted and monochromatic at best. The story of Margaret Chase thankfully adds some variety to the narrative of higher education administration.

Chase was born October 27, 1878 in Nova Scotia, Canada.¹ She came to Cal Poly in 1908 and devoted herself to being a good educator and administrator until 1945. Even after the event of her retirement Chase was involved with campus affairs such as writing a manuscript titled “The History of Cal Poly.”² Chase was seen as a powerful and independent female leader, and at the time this was not something that was very common. In fact, Chase was only given her position as president due to her male predecessor, Nicholas Ricciardi, leaving his position in 1924 as he was unable, or unwilling, to handle the economic difficulties the university was facing at the time.³ While Chase only served as president for a short while, six months, her campus impact was more than noteworthy.

Unfortunately, many of her documents were either not archived or thrown out, and only a few folders carry her name in the Cal Poly Archives. This is either a matter of poor historiography on the university’s behalf, *or* a result of the sexist notion that a woman’s papers would be of less importance than a man’s. Nicholas Ricciardi also had a short-term presidency, and does have fewer boxes than Kennedy for example, but still has a much more extensive footprint overall. In Cal Poly’s later history, the administration does try and give Miss Chase

¹ “Memorial Services for Miss Chase,” *El Mustang*, February 21, 1966.

² Memo: Life Membership to Alumni Association, 1951, 0021-01 Presidents Papers, 144.01, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, CA.

³ Memo: Life Membership to Alumni Association, 1951.

some credit; a dorm hall and a loan fund were named after Chase after her passing.⁴ While the administration did not do much to honor Chase during her lifetime, her students honored her often and with conviction. Chase had the yearbook dedicated to her two different years (1917 and 1940), and was seen as “a legend of devotion to children, dedicated to education, and [the] excellence of teaching.”⁵ Chase was a woman that students then (and now) could look up to, and her story deserves to be uncovered from under the sexist bureaucracy that failed to preserve it properly. Not only does her story add historical accuracy to Cal Poly’s timeline, but it adds a layer of inclusivity and feminism to the university’s history, two things it often lacks.

Historiography

The historiographical context on Margaret Chase is extremely limited: one History 303 research paper on her by Jake Robin. Apart from this essay there are no other works about Chase. That being said there is an extremely extensive field of studying women in Higher Education. It is fair to come to the conclusion that not only have women been given an unfair systemic disadvantage in higher education, but universities are worse off because of this disadvantage.

In Robin’s essay “We Need a Little More of This” he explains how Chase was a unique type of leader not only because of her sex, but also due to her incredibly diligent methodology rooted in caring/kindness during her administrative/professional career. He also focuses on the

⁴ “Memorial Services for Miss Chase,” *El Mustang*, February 21, 1966.

⁵ Jesse M. Unruh, Assembly Resolution: Relative to Memorializing Miss Margaret H. Chase, 23 March 1966, 0021-01 Presidents Papers, 144.01, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, CA.

erasure and/or lack of her stories both in the archives, and in works on Cal Poly history.⁶

Through more contemporary scholarly journals it is clear that the issues Chase faced in her time have not dramatically changed. In a broader vein Schwartz's article "Reconceptualizing the Leadership Roles of Women in Higher Education: A Brief History on the Importance of Deans of Women" focuses on how the "misinterpretation and exclusion [of women] ha[s] affected the study of higher education in America."⁷ He acknowledges the fact that history is written with the male gaze, and it makes history glaze over the stories of women.

The situations that Schwartz wrote about are also supported in the research study by Tzu-Jiun Yeh. "A Heuristic Study on the Leadership Practices of Female Faculty in Higher Education" focuses on seven women in Higher Education Administration, and categorizes their personal experiences.⁸ Yeh found that all women had experienced extreme stress due to people discrediting/ignoring their achievements based upon their sex alone. As a consequence of their academic achievements going unnoticed, all the women had begun to quantify their success by looking beyond academia: personal life achievements or philanthropic work.⁹ Similar to how Chase took over the Monday Club, a hugely philanthropic organization, after her position as interim President. Zooming out a bit from such specific examples in Yeh's work the article

⁶ Jake Robin, "We Need a Little More of This," *History 303: Research and Writing in History*, San Luis Obispo, March 2019.

⁷ Robert A. Schwartz, "Reconceptualizing the Leadership Roles of Women in Higher Education: A Brief History on the Importance of Deans of Women," *The Journal of Higher Education* Vol.6, No. 5 (Sep.-Oct., 1997) 502-522.

⁸ Tzu-Jiun Yeh, "A Heuristic Study on the Leadership Practices of Female Faculty in Higher Education," *The International Journal of Organizational Innovation* vol. 11, no.2 (October 2018): 245-259.

⁹ Yeh, 256.

“Gender and Leadership: Reflections of Women in Higher Education Administration”¹⁰ analyzes the female administrators as a whole. The authors explain how comparing women to their “male-centric leadership models and norms”¹¹ is both damaging, and also downplays how unique/advantageous it is to have the female perspective in Higher Education.

All of these sources support the argument that the erasure or lack of female leaders in Higher Education history is a result of prejudice against women, and the lack of information available on Margaret Chase is a direct result of this. The way Chase is written about is done through a male lens that projects patriarchal ideals upon her. Perhaps more importantly, Chase’s legacy is greatly lacking in sources. There are three copies of her work about Cal Poly history in the archives that span over fifty pages. Yet Margaret Chase has only a few other records in her ‘Presidential Papers’ that were not written by men due to her passing. The lack of primary sources directly correlated with Margaret Chase is easily explained by the abundant secondary sources that focus on underrepresentation in higher education. Through analysis of gender issues during Chase’s presidency and the effect of her erasure on campus it is clear that there is a disadvantage to being a woman in a position of power on Cal Poly’s campus.

Contemporary Margaret Chase

Miss Margaret Chase “had survived every administrative upheaval and change in the first 40 years of Cal Poly history,” making her one of the most vital members of the young

¹⁰ Dana Dunn, *et al*, "Gender and Leadership: Reactions of Women in Higher Education Administration," *International Journal of Leadership and Change*: Vol. 2, Iss. 1, Article 2 (2014), <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/ijlc/vol2/iss1/2>

¹¹ Dunn, *et al*, 9.

administration.¹² Her career on campus began as an English teacher in 1908, but in February-August of 1924 she served as acting president of the college. She was given this position due to Nicolas Ricciardi stepping down after only two and a half years. Ricciardi was uninterested in fighting for Cal Poly against Governor Richardson “who cut the budget in half.”¹³ Ricciardi was either unwilling or incapable of dealing with this massive budget cut, and the person that stepped up to the plate in Cal Poly’s time of need was vice president Chase. No documents chronicle why Miss Chase was replaced only a few months into her presidency, but it is not likely due to the fact that she was doing a poor job; she had been promoted to “vice president as well as head of the academic department” by both Ryder and Crandall.¹⁴

Chase was sadly not given the opportunity to fully flourish as an administrator, but a contemporary comparison can easily be made to Emma Johnson, president of Johnson University (Tennessee). Emma Johnson received her position due to the passing of her husband in 1925; it took the absence of a man to allow her to fill the role as president, similar to Chase. But Emma Johnson kept her position until her death making unique choices for Johnson University that set them apart from other Christian institutions: not formally aligning with popular Christian associations, and instead aligning with the Stone-Campbell movement.¹⁵ Emma Johnson’s success was most likely due to her stellar qualifications “having served the college as administrator, professor, and spiritual leader.”¹⁶ These qualifications being very similar to those

¹² 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, 2001), 14.

¹³ *Timeline information taken from* Kennedy, 12-14.

¹⁴ Kennedy, 16.

¹⁵ Johnson University, “History,” Johnson University, 2020, <https://johnsonu.edu/about/history>

¹⁶ Johnson University.

of Miss Chase whose experience included “instructor [of] English 1908-17 and 1932...head of Academic Department 1915-32.”¹⁷ Miss Chase had to stand out in an all-male staff—Kennedy explains that in 1940 she was the only female teacher on staff—in order to gain positions like head of the Academic Department. Even with her amazing track record of helping establish the Junior College at Cal Poly, and serving as its dean, she was pushed aside by President McPhee who had “no place in his administrative plans in 1933” for her.¹⁸

It was not uncommon for women in higher education administration to be demoted (or never promoted), and due to this fact, many women in the field chose to focus on personal life achievements instead of only professional promotions. Most women in higher education have agreed “that after years of waiting for external recognition...the academy is not necessary to validate worth, because there is life beyond the academy.”¹⁹ Margaret Chase was the embodiment of not only focusing on academia for life fulfilment, but on community engagement as well. During the 1920-1940s Chase was a member of The Monday Club which was a philanthropic woman’s organization. She served as acting “publicity chairwoman”, vice president, and president. Some of her club participation included recommending a “clean-up week”, a Red Cross Christmas fund to ensure a good holiday for everyone in the community, and bringing in liberal speakers like Dr. Berg who spoke of the “importance of socialized medical care.”²⁰ Not only was Chase an active member of the Cal Poly community, but she brought her

¹⁷ Circular of Information, 1940-41, Chase, Margaret H., CPVF-BIO, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, CA.

¹⁸ Kennedy, 16.

¹⁹ Yeh, 254.

²⁰ Meeting Minutes, Club Meetings, September 1936-May 1946, The Monday Club, MS0087, Box 1 of 31, Folder 1, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, CA.

compassion off campus and into her personal home. A 1940s census record shows Miss Chase as the head of her household with two other female teachers living in her residence.²¹ With open doors and an open heart Margaret Chase may not have been able to champion the administrative changes she may have wanted, but she did become an honored member of the San Luis Obispo/Cal Poly community during her forty years on campus.

Legacy Written by the Male Gaze

It is no mystery that history, up until very recently, was written through the *male gaze*: “a perspective of a notionally typical heterosexual man considered as embodied in the audience or intended audience” of most forms of media (books, films, etc.).²² This phenomenon was the main reason for the erasure of Miss Chase in Cal Poly’s history: both in books, doctoral theses, and the university archives. Morris Eugene Smith wrote his dissertation on “History of California State Polytechnic College” for his degree at University of Oregon. In this historical account, he mentions Miss Chase only one time, and focuses more on the school basketball team than on one of the most vital staff members of the institution in its early years. He mentions all other male administrators throughout his telling of basketball success stories, but not Miss Chase.²³ Another work, by the late President McPhee, was published on the college’s history; in this work McPhee does not mention any other educators by name, only himself and students. McPhee also only

²¹ 1940 U.S. Federal Population Census, 9-10 April 1940, NARA Publication T627, Microfilm Roll 328, San Luis Obispo, CA.

²² “Male Gaze: Meaning of Male Gaze by Lexico,” Lexico Dictionaries | English (Lexico Dictionaries), accessed March 1, 2020, https://www.lexico.com/definition/male_gaze.

²³ Morris Eugene Smith, “History of California State Polytechnic College, 1901-1951” (EdD dissertation, University of Oregon, 1957), 182.

uses male pronouns, and talks about the college's "greatness" in his short publication.²⁴ The lack of modesty in his writing is the complete inverse of how Miss Chase tells her history of Cal Poly.

The Cal Poly Archives hold three folders dedicated to Miss Chase, and in these folders, there are three copies of her "History of Cal Poly." Chase began this manuscript upon the request of President McPhee's years after she retired. The project though was never completed past the first few chapters that are saved in the archives.²⁵ The change of point of view from the *male gaze* to a "*female gaze*" is nuanced, but noticeable when looking closely. Chase signs her historical account "Miss Margaret Chase" when the Miss could have been omitted as McPhee and Smith do not sign their works Mr. or even Doctor. Knowing the independent woman Chase was this reads as a bit of a feminist hurrah; Chase claiming she belonged to no one but herself. Chase's history starts with an apology for any errors that may be made, something that neither male author included in their works, a telling sign of how her work must have been treated before.²⁶ Chase's warning was completely unnecessary for many reasons, but most importantly due to the fact that she wrote the history in a concise and factual manner. Her history accounted for the start of the universities history with no added "fluff" or acclaim for herself personally (unlike McPhee who boasted in his writing). She added very little personal opinion, and focused more on student clubs and achievements (staying away from sports unlike Smith). While the work is extremely credible due to her objectivity as an author, it was never published publically,

²⁴ Julian A. McPhee, "The California Polytechnic School", March 1939, University Archives, 100 Establishment and History of the University, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, CA.

²⁵ Memo: Life Membership to Alumni Association

²⁶ Miss Margaret Chase, "History of Cal Poly," 1954, University Archives, 100 Establishment and History of the University, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, CA.

and now only lives in the university archives. Both other works written by men were published publically, and can be found in multiple locations.

Apart from actual history writings about the university directly the manner that Chase is mentioned among other “normal” archived documents is also very telling as to how she was valued as a woman. Robert Kennedy mentions Chase more than any other author, and often it is in a very positive light. Chase was not only a friend to Kennedy, but also a valuable asset on Cal Poly history for him, serving as a “personal link to the past.”²⁷ He accounts how “she survived every administrative upheaval and change in the first 40 years” of Cal Poly’s history.²⁸ This is no small feat as a woman in higher education, but just because she survived each year of administration does not mean that she was always treated well or even liked. Kennedy also mentions that Chase had issues with President McPhee concerning the matter of women on campus: Chase once asked Kennedy “how [McPhee could] say that he [was] educating men for the real world [when] they never learned to deal with any women except [for her]?”²⁹ The issue of women on campus was not the only problem between McPhee and Chase. He also removed her from her position as head of the Junior College claiming she had “veered Cal Poly off track.” But the fact of the matter was that Chase had been one of the only administrators who had made the Junior College possible to begin with. McPhee was most likely keeping her out of administration for the same reason he kept women out of Cal Poly even after the legislature had repealed the ban on female enrollment in 1929; pure prejudice.³⁰ While Kennedy does shed light on some of the sexism that Chase faced he also added to this sexism. When mentioning the

²⁷ Kennedy, 242.

²⁸ Kennedy, 14.

²⁹ Kennedy, 17.

³⁰ Kennedy, 17.

faculty at the time of his first staff party he stated, “the total faculty and administrative staff that first year consisted of about 40 people, 39 men and Miss Margaret Chase, the spinster English teacher who had by that time served 32 years at Poly.”³¹ Not only does the ratio of men to women stick out in this statement, but the use of “spinster” is extremely disparaging; Chase is an extremely strong woman for staying at an institution for 32 years where her sex was not even allowed to attend. The fact that Kennedy labels her a “spinster” shows that she was not treated with the same respect as her male counterparts whose marital statuses went unmentioned and most likely unnoticed.

The way that Chase was written about during her life remained for the most part unchanged in the event of her death: on February 15th 1966. Her epic adventures are only mentioned once and in an extremely feminine and maternal way: “in several occasions [she] rode with students on horseback outings all the way up the coast to Big Sur. She was very much interested in student activities.”³² The “activity” mentioned is something quite masculine, and she was going along with only male students on this trip (due to the policies of the university at the time). Riding a horse all the way to Big Sur is extremely physically draining, yet she is not called a *cowgirl* or a *rough and tough* woman. The magnitude of her amazing adventure was brushed under the rug due to her gender. This document was simply one of the 10-12 documents that have been archived for Miss Chase that tell us about her, but only after her passing. Margaret has very few contemporary documents tied directly to her name unlike her predecessors and successors. Instead of primary documents by her hand Margaret has documents like the Resolution memorializing her that describes her as “a gracious and charming woman”

³¹ Kennedy, 69.

³² “Miss Margaret Chase Dies: Funeral Today,” *El Mustang*, February 18, 1966, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/studentnewspaper/1137/>)

that was devoted to Cal Poly.³³ But it does not honor the fact that she was the only female on campus for a long period of time thus erasing her struggles.³⁴ Another document is her memorial speech which mentions the three main Chase facts (teacher, president, and devoted for forty years) while tying in her religious commitment.³⁵ Thankfully that document does shed a small amount of light on the great love that students had for Miss Chase. While Chase was a vital part of Cal Poly for a very substantial amount of time the impact that the male gaze has had on record keeping and historical writing has impacted her legacy in a negative way. Her only legacy now is Chase Hall (a building rarely seen by students), and Chase the mascot that was named after her in 2014. Even the mascot was not fully given in Chase's honor for President Armstrong wanted the word *chase* to be a new "watchword" that could motivate students. Instead of explaining the inspirational story of Chase, Armstrong erased her yet again.³⁶ Chase has been erased so much that only extensive archival research, and dedication can piece together her story; which is an authentic tragedy.

Impact

While it was no easy feat discovering Miss Margaret Chase, it was extremely rewarding to find out who exactly this amazing woman was. The underrepresentation on our campus at the time was staggering, but sadly it has not gone away. Chase is to this date the only female president Cal Poly has ever had. Johnson, in her article "Pipelines, Pathways, and Institutional

³³ Jesse M. Unruh, Assembly Resolution: Relative to Memorializing Miss Margaret H. Chase, 23 March 1966, 0021-01 Presidents Papers, 144.01. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic, San Luis Obispo, CA.

³⁴ Jesse M Unruh.

³⁵ "Memorial Services for Miss Chase," *El Mustang*, February 21, 1966.

³⁶ "Cal Poly Mustang Mascot Name Honors Past President Margaret Chase," Cal Poly Mustangs, November 19, 2014, <https://www.gopoly.com/sports/fball/2014-15/releases/20141119o78yv0>.

Leadership,” explains how the pipeline myth (not enough woman are qualified for leadership positions) is not only untrue, but becoming ridiculous. Johnson has found that, “since 2006 woman have earned more than 50% of all doctoral degrees.”³⁷ If woman are proven to be equally, or more qualified than men, then why is it that Cal Poly nominated only men (Robert E. Palazzo, Thomas C. Skalak and Jeffery D. Armstrong) in the 2010 search for president?³⁸ This is even more puzzling since the most recent search for provost was narrowed down to three female candidates (Cheryl Schrader, Brenda Case Scheer, and Kathleen Finken) and one male (Andrew Grosovsky).³⁹ A position that is “lesser” in title was able to have female representation, but not something more “prestigious” like President. Most likely this is telling of deep rooted sexism, and more importantly is proof that being a woman in higher education is no easy task. Chase faced discrimination not only in her life, but in the re-telling of her story after death. For this to change on Cal Poly’s campus there is a great need for more female administrators. Additionally, more diligent record keeping is necessary for the women on campus currently and in the past.

³⁷ Heather L. Johnson, “Pipelines, Pathways, and Institutional Leadership,” American Council on Education, 2017, pp. C1-26.

³⁸ Alicia Freeman, “Second Time’s (Hopefully) the Charm for Presidential Search,” *Mustang Daily*, November 29, 2010, <https://mustangnews.net/presidential-search/>.

³⁹ Kevin List, “Final provost candidate makes Cal Poly debut,” *Mustang Daily*, October 10, 2011, <https://mustangnews.net/provost-decision-now-in-armstrongs-hands/>.

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