

The History of Poly Royal and its Relationship with the City of San Luis Obispo

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Abstract

Over the years, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly) has grown to become one of the most prestigious public universities in the western United States. Part of the reason for this continued success is the school's devotion to maintaining tradition. The city of San Luis Obispo has been an integral partner in the school's success through their willingness to accommodate the university's needs. This report aims to examine the relationship between Cal Poly and the city of San Luis Obispo in regard to the Poly Royal open house event. Since the establishment of the university in 1901, the relationship between both parties had been tested on numerous occasions, but perhaps none as severe as the Poly Royal riots in 1990. The paper will look in-depth at the evolution of Poly Royal and how it came to become an integral part of the San Luis Obispo community.

Introduction

With its beginnings in the early days of the university in 1904 to the modern-day celebrations, Poly Royal has had a dynamic history. The original event began as an open house, called the “Farmer’s Picnic,” showcased campus’ advancements and hosted a barbecue luncheon for the two-hundred attendees that had traveled from all over California to be there.¹ Over the next ten years, the event grew significantly, bringing thousands of attendees to San Luis Obispo for the weekend’s activities. In 1933, the event became formally known as “Poly Royal.” Not only was the event used as a way to recruit prospective students, but it was also a way to give agriculture students an opportunity to show their livestock as practice prior to presenting at the state competition.² While Poly Royal has always been very deeply engrained in agriculture, over the years it also made an effort to display the different departments and clubs the school had to offer. Clubs hosted many events every year, from math competitions to the famous Poly Royal rodeo, which was a major draw to the event. Concerts often enticed even more visitors to campus, featuring artists such as Van Morrison, The Temptations and Santana.³

A turning point in Poly Royal’s history were the riots of 1990. With an attendance of over 100,000 visitors, the event got out of control when drunken students from Cal Poly and other colleges in the region began tormenting the town. 130 people were arrested for offenses such as vandalism, fighting, driving under the influence, assault, battery, and underage drinking, amongst many others.⁴ The weekend left the community and campus in distress and it was

¹ California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, “Poly Royal” (n.d.) <https://lib.calpoly.edu/search-and-find/collections-and-archives/university-archives/timeline/poly-royal/>, accessed 26 February 2020.

² California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, “Poly Royal.”

³ Associated Students, Inc., 1990 Poly Royal Program- “Innovative Edge,” 27 April 1990, Baker Collection, acc. No. 20, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁴ “List of those arrested during Poly riots,” *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, 2 May 1990, Baker Collection, acc. No. 20, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

obvious that changes needed to be made. Warren Baker, who was president of Cal Poly at the time, made the ultimate decision to cancel all future Poly Royal events indefinitely.

The program was suspended until 1994, while campus administration negotiated ways to bring the event back on a smaller scale. Poly Royal made its formal return as a university activity in 2001, with President Baker's approval.⁵ The city of San Luis Obispo and Cal Poly worked closely together to create a successful and controlled Poly Royal for years to come. Poly Royal has helped create stronger community relations through the university's commitment to preserving its traditions. The event provided opportunities for students, families and faculty to interact with the community and visiting family members. Poly Royal not only promoted local traditions but encouraged broader community support through economic and social outreach.

Historiography

One aspect of what makes Poly Royal such a significant part of Cal Poly's history is the dedication to maintaining the school's agricultural cornerstone. In Myron Angel's book, *History of the California Polytechnic School at San Luis Obispo*, he analyzes the struggles of building a normal school in San Luis Obispo due to competition with other renowned universities in the state. What was really needed was a Polytechnic school, that would serve as a place for the common man and woman.⁶ A Polytechnic school would teach students about how to thrive in the agriculture industry. The values of hard work and persistence that came with an education in practical knowledge are reflected in Cal Poly's legacy. Many of the school's first students came

⁵ California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, "Poly Royal."

⁶ Myron Angel, *History of the California Polytechnic School at San Luis Obispo* (San Luis Obispo, CA: Tribune Print, 1908), 38-39.

from an agricultural background, growing up on family farms and ranches. The lifestyle these students were accustomed to at their homes was carried on into their activities at school.

Additional sources on Cal Poly's history explain the significance of the 1990 riots and how the community was affected. Halie Swanson's senior project highlights the challenges the university faced in trying to strike a compromise with the city in order to gain their trust and host future events. The aftermath of the riots left citizens in shock and neighborhoods trashed. The project addresses the efforts that were made by both parties to ensure another school sponsored event, such as Poly Royal, would not go awry. Another aspect of Poly Royal history that cannot be forgotten were the "rodeo queens." Anna Johnson's essay explores the concept of what it meant to not only be a pageant queen, but a rodeo queen. The title of "Poly Royal Rodeo Queen" held value and was an important part of the authentic rodeo experience that Cal Poly wanted to replicate. In a time where Cal Poly aimed to voice the views of women, the rodeo queens did just that, as well as demonstrate to the community how women were succeeding and an integral part of campus life.

Gene L. Theodori's research on the origins of college rodeo states that it was the "preferred and/or natural sport of college students from rural America."⁷ Students that had gained horsemanship skills throughout their lives were able to put them to use at school. Schools throughout the South and West were quick to adopt rodeo as a fundraising opportunity.⁸ Cal Poly's entry into college rodeo was an opportunity to showcase the school's agricultural roots, but also provided the chance to demonstrate how the school was rapidly evolving. Not only were new buildings popping up throughout campus, but new academic programs were emerging. It was imperative that the school shared that information with the public.

⁷ Gene L. Theodori, "The Rural Roots of College Rodeo," *The Rural Sociologist* 26, no.2 (June 2006): 16.

⁸ Theodori, 16.

While remaining close to their agricultural roots, Cal Poly's open house made it a priority to attract prospective students to their other academic programs as well. While Open House programs were fairly common at the time, only California State University, Chico's "Pioneer Days," a school sponsored event involving the university and the community, rivaled Poly Royal in significance.⁹ Perhaps this has something to do with the similar rural, small towns in which the two colleges reside. California State Universities constantly had to compete to bring new students to campus.¹⁰ Universities were required to continue updating not only their campuses, but their plans for open houses to entice as many students as possible to come to their schools.

Economic Factors

Cal Poly's commitment to providing an exceptional Poly Royal experience benefitted not only the school in terms of acquiring additional prospective students, but greatly impacted the community. The city of San Luis Obispo had grown up alongside Cal Poly. What was once a small rural town quickly developed into a bustling college atmosphere. When the university was built, local businesses began to thrive.¹¹ Both the university and the city have always been dependent on each other for survival. The "Poly Royal Editions" of the local newspaper, the *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, and the school newspaper, *Mustang Daily*, were littered with advertisements from local businesses. Some promoted hotels, while others offered special pricing on keg delivery for the weekend.¹² In 1990, the event hosted over one-hundred thousand visitors, which drastically helped San Luis Obispo's economy, bringing in approximately three

⁹ Chico State University, 1965 Pioneer Week Program, 29 April 1965, Chico State Pioneer Week Collection, acc. No. 2011, Chico State University Archives, Chico, CA. <http://archives.csuchico.edu/digital/collection/coll23>.

¹⁰ Ronald Fischbach, "Assessing the Impact of University Open House Activities," *College Student Journal* 40, no.1 (March 2006): 1.

¹¹ Angel, 36.

¹² "Poly Royal advertisements," *Mustang Daily*, 26 April 1990, Mustang Daily Archives, acc. No.105. 24, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo.

million to five million dollars in that one weekend alone. Visitors and students embraced Poly Royal wholeheartedly, funneling money through the city as well as the university. Cal Poly consistently made profits throughout the years at Poly Royal, bringing in additional income through the price of admission, parking, concessions and apparel sales.¹³ Likewise, rodeos and fairs have always been centers of economic growth. In an article titled, “Consuming the American West: Animating Cultural Meaning and Memory at a Stock Show and Rodeo” by Lisa Peñalosa, she makes the argument that rodeo attendees have frequently bought-into the experience.¹⁴ Visitors typically understood how crucial agriculture is to sustaining life, and it must be supported in order to be maintained. Rodeo-goers often dress for the occasion, not missing an opportunity to don their cowboy boots or western shirts. The community of San Luis Obispo again played upon consumer’s desires, posting more advertisements for Cal Poly grown produce and dairy products, as well as several ads for western attire.¹⁵

Many on-campus clubs and organizations benefitted economically from Poly Royal as well. While many had booths to display their club’s interests, many also took on additional roles hosting events for visitors. Many of these events would charge a fee to participate, and the funds accumulated would account for most of their funding for the year. Participation in Poly Royal was taken very seriously by clubs and their members. Students recalled how most clubs spent over six months preparing for the massive income-generating event.¹⁶ In an article in the *Mustang Daily* newspaper, Jason Lebeck, vice-president of the SAM club, emphasized how important Poly Royal was to the longevity of the club; “we can’t run our 160-member club

¹³ Associated Students, Inc., 1970 Poly Royal Financial Statement, 24 April 1970, Poly Royal Collection, acc. No. 4, Special Collections and Archives, California State University, San Luis Obispo.

¹⁴ Lisa Peñalosa, “Consuming the American West: Animating Cultural Meaning and Memory at a Stock Show and Rodeo,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 28, no.3 (December 2001): 377.

¹⁵ “Poly Royal advertisements,” 26 April 1990.

¹⁶ Anne McMahan, “Poly Royal memories linger despite event’s cancellation,” *Mustang Daily*, 26 April 1991, 5.

without fundraisers. We grossed \$20,000.”¹⁷ When Poly Royal was cancelled in 1990, many clubs struggled to find ways to recover the funds that they were no longer receiving through Poly Royal. The Circle K club traditionally hosted a pancake breakfast during Poly Royal, which served as their primary fundraising opportunity every year. “Without Poly Royal, we have no way to fund our service projects,” stated Kevin Mitchell, former Circle K president.¹⁸ While the 1990 riots tested the relationship between the community and the school, Poly Royal was deemed a significant financial benefit to both parties.

Social Implications

Poly Royal provided visitors with many opportunities to connect with students, faculty and community members. Throughout Poly Royal’s history, it became customary for each president to host an annual luncheon with valued community members and those who had helped support Cal Poly’s success.¹⁹ Having the ability to meet with President Baker in a casual atmosphere would help create stronger bonds between the school and potential donors. In perhaps a more admirable occasion, President Baker invited the Poly Royal Board to an exclusive event after the end of the weekend to commend them on a job well done.²⁰ By building professional relationships with students, Cal Poly made an effort to continue an open dialogue in order to produce a successful event.

¹⁷ “Daily poll finds mixed response to cancellation of Poly Royal festivities,” *Mustang Daily*, 1 May 1990, Baker Collection, acc. No. 20, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

¹⁸ “Reactions to Poly Royal cancellation,” *Mustang Daily*, 1 May 1990, Baker Collection, acc. No. 20, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

¹⁹ Warren Baker, List of luncheon attendees, 1986, Baker Collection, acc. No. 20, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

²⁰ Warren Baker, invitation to Poly Royal Board luncheon, 1986, Baker Collection, acc. No. 20, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo.

Poly Royal gave visitors the opportunity to step back into a simpler time. The event had been called a “country fair on a college campus”²¹ since its genesis, and it absolutely lived up to its name. The event provided some visitors with the unique chance to speak with those in the agriculture industry in particular to become more educated in the field. Poly Royal brought together an attendance from a vast array of backgrounds. While some had grown up agriculturally, others had not been exposed to this way of life before. As the years progressed and more of Cal Poly’s students were not from an agriculture background, it became apparent that it was necessary to uphold the mission of the university through the tradition of Poly Royal.²² There is no better place to practice Cal Poly’s “Learn by Doing” motto than at Poly Royal. As a university, education is of the utmost importance, and for students to have the opportunity to share and demonstrate their knowledge with the public is something of great value to Cal Poly’s reputation.

Perhaps the most important part of the open house was to encourage prospective students to choose Cal Poly as their future school. This became a main focus of the Poly Royal Board in 1966, when they revised their code to “provide a particular opportunity when high school and junior college students may visit the campus and see the college participating in a student activity.”²³ The rodeo was one of the greatest ways to attract new students, as the agriculture department alone was successful in recruiting at least 50 new transfer students in 1986.²⁴ Student-led campus tours were another aspect of the weekend, as it provided future students with a taste of what academic life would look like at Cal Poly.²⁵ Poly Royal did a wonderful job of

²¹ California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo.

²² Tomlinson Fort, Jr., letter to President Warren J. Baker, 11 April 1986, Baker Collection, acc. No. 21, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

²³ Associated Students, Inc., Poly Royal Board Code 24e, 1966, Poly Royal Collection, acc. No. 6, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, San Luis Obispo, CA.

²⁴ T. Fort to W. Baker, 11 April 1986.

²⁵ McMahan.

demonstrating the ties between the university and the city of San Luis Obispo. It was evident that the bustling college town relied so heavily on the students in order to sustain itself.

Community Outreach

Cal Poly and the city of San Luis Obispo were required to work hand-in-hand since the founding of the school. Making sure that San Luis Obispo natives felt comfortable on campus was an important part of fostering a strong relationship with the community.²⁶ Poly Royal was a unifying experience for the campus and city, as it allowed the public to see what great strides the university had been making. This was particularly important in the early days of Cal Poly; it was such a challenge to convince the government to build a university in a remote part of the state, when the plans to begin construction on the land were finally approved, the locals took on some of the responsibility of ensuring the school's success.²⁷ The events Poly Royal put on represented a commitment to maintaining a family friendly environment. While the traditional rodeo events were one of the most popular choices to entertain families, clubs also presented shows on critical topics, such as "The Kids on the Block; A Disability Awareness Puppet Show" geared towards younger children.²⁸ For more light-hearted activities, concerts by the German Club, Percussion Ensemble, and even fraternity lip-sync contests, as well as family friendly games were available for all to watch year after year.²⁹

It had become tradition for Cal Poly to nominate a "Rodeo Queen" that would represent the values of the university. While the rodeo queens were originally nominated from all different

²⁶ Hallie Swanson, "Town and Gown: How Poly Royal and the Riots Shaped the Relationship Between Cal Poly and San Luis Obispo, 1960-1993" (Senior Project, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 2019), 1, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/histsp/45> accessed 26 February 2020.

²⁷ Swanson, 2.

²⁸ 1990 Poly Royal Program- "Innovative Edge", 27 April 1990.

²⁹ 1990 Poly Royal Program- "Innovative Edge", 27 April 1990.

regions of the country, this changed in the 1950s when Cal Poly decided to integrate more feminine ideas into the framework of the school.³⁰ The queen was to be a Cal Poly student that was successful in academics and unmarried.³¹ By nominating their own female students, Cal Poly showed a newfound respect towards cultivating stronger relationships with the student body and community. While the original rodeo queens were not particularly tied to the area, the new queens had many opportunities to showcase the county and advocate for the school. For example, Governor Ronald Reagan met with Tee Carter, one of the first “homegrown” rodeo queens to help endorse Poly Royal and gain more support.³² The idea of having a “rodeo queen” demonstrates the commodification of the Poly Royal program. While rodeo queens do represent a traditional aspect of rodeos, it represents how Cal Poly have staged the contest in order to promote additional travel and commerce locally.

The Poly Royal riots of 1990 really strained the relationship between the university and town. Not unlike the alcohol-fueled riots which ended Chico State’s Pioneer Days in 1987, what was once an event that brought prestige, tourism and economic growth to the city was exploited by out of town visitors causing trouble. When thousands of intoxicated people began to vandalize local businesses and endanger police and other officials, the school was forced to take dramatic steps to guarantee that such disorderly conduct would not break out again. Some residents applauded the school’s decision to cancel the event because it was a disappointment to the community, others were frustrated with President Baker’s choice because it showed blatant disregard for those who worked so hard to put on a successful event every year.³³ Other locals

³⁰ Anna Johnson, “The Poly Royal Beauty Pageant at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo: How Queens Reigned Over their Empire” (Class paper, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 2016), 21, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cphistory/3/>, accessed 10 March 2020.

³¹ Johnson, 22.

³² Johnson, 22.

³³ “Readers’ comments about Poly Royal, *Mustang Daily*, 5 May 1990,” Baker Collection, acc. No. 20, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

had different opinions on the riots, blaming liberal students for not being parented properly,³⁴ or the idea that California's drought had led to "insufficient moisture over an extensive period [drying] the cerebral cortex. Receptor sites normally occupied by water attract hydrocarbons present in alcohol causing erratic behavior."³⁵

Poly Royal, and the university itself, had lost much of its appeal to the community after the riots and it was up to President Baker to restore the relationship. After the initial uproar at the eruption of the riots, the community and school had the opportunity to reflect and reevaluate the bond they shared. After careful thought, it became apparent to President Baker that he could not subject the beloved city of San Luis Obispo to any more chaos. After negotiations with city officials and law enforcement, the option to allow a very modified open house event was granted to the school. Although this open house did not bring nearly as much attraction to campus, it proved to the community that the school was capable of hosting events that maintained the integrity of San Luis Obispo while also respecting Cal Poly's traditions. After a decade of trying to restore its image within the community, Poly Royal was brought back in 2001 as a part of Cal Poly's centennial celebration.³⁶ The resurrection of Poly Royal demonstrated a rekindled trust between the city of San Luis Obispo and Cal Poly.

Conclusion

Poly Royal holds a special place in the hearts of many Cal Poly students and alumni, as well as San Luis Obispo residents. In analyzing the event as a whole, it is important to understand the deep love for the program and the city. The love for Poly Royal by students

³⁴ E.S. Mattocks, "Liberals behind riot," *San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune*, 10 May 1990, Baker Collection, acc. No. 20, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

³⁵ "Readers' comments about Poly Royal," *Mustang News*, 5 May 1990.

³⁶ California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, "Poly Royal."

brought so many visitors to the area for one weekend every year, which in turn helped local businesses thrive. For the most part, locals were willing to put up with one crazy weekend of college partying for the benefits it would bring to their neighbors and Cal Poly. Poly Royal was and continues to be successful due to the tremendous amount of hard work put in entirely by students. Their intention to preserve tradition by hosting this massive event annually stands above all else in their dedication to Cal Poly. While Poly Royal faced a brief stint of challenges, it proved to be a far greater asset to the community as it strengthened the relationship between students and residents socially and economically.

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