

CONTRIBUTOR BIO



JENNA ROVENSTINE is especially interested in American History, and as a fifth generation Californian, she finds local history particularly fascinating. She has been a volunteer at the Paso Robles Historical Society and her job at Epoch Estate Wines at the historic York Mountain property allows her to share her love of local history with visitors from all over the world. Jenna is currently working on earning a Bachelor of Arts in History at Cal Poly, with plans to pursue a Masters. She would like to work in a museum and/ or teach History at the college level.

CAL POLY VETERAN VILLAGE

Jenna Rovenstine

In the late 1940's the Cal Poly newspaper the *Mustang Daily* and the annual yearbook, the *El Rodeo*, attempted to chronicle the married veterans' housing project. The Cal Poly University Archives and Special Collections have in their possession both the collection of the *Mustang Daily* from 1947 on, as well as the yearbooks from these years (minus 1945). At a glance, these collections look to be quite full of in-depth and well-balanced information about the Cal Poly Veteran Village. But as you looker closer at these collections, certain questions begin to arise. Did it really help economically to have this on-campus housing for veterans? Did it help the housing shortage? Why did it take almost two whole years for the project to be completed? How did the families adjust to on-campus living in such close quarters with their neighbors? These are all questions that both the *Mustang Daily* and the yearbooks allude to but do not answer. Why? I argue that it was because the *Mustang Daily* and the *El Rodeo* yearbooks were campus publications and being so, wanted to focus on only the positive aspects of campus life.

At the end of World War II in 1945, millions of American men and women came home from military service to find that many changes had taken place throughout the country, both culturally and economically. Yet despite all the

changes that occurred over the four and a half years of war, one thing remained the same: the value of education. American veterans came home to a country that was still offering great opportunities in continuing college education. California Polytechnic State University was no exception. In 1946-47, Cal Poly became the first college on the west coast to offer on-campus housing for married veteran students and their families.¹

The yearbooks and the newspaper of Cal Poly did a wonderful job of bringing forth numerical facts and statistics of this project, which was a very smart move. It gave assurance to students that something was being done about the housing shortage and that there would be housing for married veterans. For example, in the 1946 *El Rodeo* yearbook under the section entitled "Veterans", the basic facts of the units and house-trailers which were military surplus from Port Hueneme, were laid out quite nicely, giving the total cost of the project, which was estimated to be \$43,195.00 as well as what the rent per month would be for different types of housing. They were settled in neighborhoods, called Vetville, Poly View and Poly Crest. The larger houses in Vetville could be rented for thirty-two dollars a month, the smaller houses for twenty-eight dollars a month and trailer-houses for twenty-four dollars a month, all utilities included.² The yearbook section concluded that "ex-soldiers and former Navy men enrolled at Poly hailed the project as convenient and economical."³ While this information was certainly valuable and important, it's almost too simple and minimal. There was nothing said in great length as to how or why this project was economical and convenient. Did it ease the housing shortage? How many married veteran students were not able to live on campus? There is no answer to be found in the yearbooks and unfortunately, the *Mustang Daily* is of no help with these questions either.

In 1947 enrollment at the university was expected to triple the pre-war registration record of 900 students with almost 2,500 students enrolled for the fall quarter. The September 4th 1947 edition of the *Mustang Daily* confirmed this speculation by reporting that a new high of 1,150 new students had completed applications for admission.⁴ In that same edition in a different article

¹ *El Rodeo Yearbook: Veterans*. University Archives, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, 1946, without numbers.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Enrollment May Triple Prewar 900." *Mustang Daily*, September 4, 1947.

entitled, "More Trailers Here for Married Vets" the campus newspaper revealed that 188 additional house-trailers (which was the nice way of saying a small, cramped camping trailers) had begun arriving on campus and that they were being installed at site that had been designated and prepared for over six months. "Delayed because of difficulties which arose after the federal government called a halt to financing housing for veterans, the problems were finally ironed out, but probably not soon enough to enable all the married veterans who will arrive for the fall quarter to get on-campus housing until sometime in October."⁵ Again, this is great basic information but it is also much too vague and does not offer a view of the whole picture. When and why was the housing project for veterans halted? Was it halted statewide, nationwide, or was it an isolated event at Cal Poly? What "problems were ironed out?" This is something that readers would definitely be interested in knowing about, especially being that this was an article in a newspaper; I would think that the halting of a project and the reasons why would qualify as news. And what happened to the married students and their families who were waiting for their housing? If it was not going to be ready until October, then where were they expected to stay and at whose expense? These are all questions and critiques readers must have had, especially the married veteran students themselves.

The picture of perfect domesticity was a perception that the 1940's and 1950's idolized and encouraged. The *El Rodeo* yearbooks were no exception. They were very successful at showing the domesticity of the Veteran Village neighborhoods and families. In each veteran section of the yearbooks, pictures accompanied the texts showing husbands, their wives and their children in and around the home, working on "honey do" lists, mothers and children walking to the milk office and children playing in and around the neighborhood. Everyone had a smile and seemed content. Being that these were photo ops for a publication, it is presumable that the families in these photographs were poised for perfection as to persuade its viewers that married life at Cal Poly's Veteran Village was "hunky dory". It was meant to be a snap shot into veterans' lives and to ultimately be an advertisement to promote on-campus married living to current and future students. A good example of this can be found in the 1947 *El Rodeo* under the section "Married Veterans" where a photograph is displayed of a couple happily doing the dishes together in one of the small

⁵ "More Trailers Here For Married Vets." *Mustang Daily*, September 4, 1947.

units with the caption, "Helpful Bob Miley, he came home from school early and had to pitch in."⁶

It was a selling point that seems to have worked. By 1948 it was the goal of almost every veteran student and family to move out of the house-trailers and into one of the Vetville houses. Because the waiting list for these homes became extremely long, most veterans and their families were first given the opportunity to move into the Poly View or Poly Crest house-trailers, and then eventually into a Vetville home.⁷ And yet there was no solid information offered about this process of selection. And there was definitely not any information about married students' lives and their possible struggles with on-campus living. What was it like living in small houses and house-trailers with super close neighbors? The buildings were military surplus and were described as roomy and "simulate small cottages with green lawns and bright gardens around each..."⁸ So they were somewhat similar to real homes, but ultimately, not the real deal. What was it like not to have modern in-home conveniences? They had access to these things, but they were several minutes' walk away in the middle of the village. Was it easier or harder for students to have their family lives centered where their school lives were?

Though both the *El Rodeo* and the *Mustang Daily* were great with numerical and statistical facts, the majority of the information given was too perfect. It was all one-sided and not balanced. There was not any analysis or even a pros and cons list given. And as you can see, each positive point demonstrated raises question upon question about its credibility and the elusive negative side. Unfortunately the answers to these questions are not found in either collection. Why is that? My argument, as stated earlier, is that being campus publications, the *Mustang Daily* and the *El Rodeo* wanted only positive reflections of campus life to be published. I also believe that it is not through the fault of the writers of the newspaper and yearbook articles that one-sided information was presented. It's most likely that these authors, who most assuredly were Cal Poly students, were not given the whole truth by superiors when researching for these articles. Or perhaps, they did have the whole truth but did not have

⁶ *El Rodeo Yearbook: Married Veterans*. University Archives, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, 1947, 130-31.

⁷ *El Rodeo Yearbook: Vetville*. University Archives, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, 1948, without numbers.

⁸ *Ibid.*

the support or approval to publish it. What was approved and published was intended to be an advertisement and it is that information which we find in both collections. This is something that was indicative of the time period with the “ad men” era and the picture perfect advertising phenomenon.

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