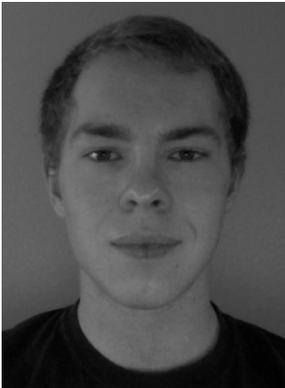


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SCHOOL OF THE PEOPLE: THE PROGRESSIVE ORIGINS OF CAL POLY

By Andrew Gorman

On January 31, 1903, Leroy Anderson took the rain-drenched podium to deliver a speech at Cal Poly's corner-stone laying ceremony. Gathered before him were the school's Board of Trustees, officials from other schools, residents of San Luis Obispo, and future students. The atmosphere was dense with the winter weather and barely-contained excitement. Anderson gazed out over the assembled crowd and said: "The education of the youth has ever been a subject near to the hearts of the progressive citizens of San Luis Obispo. ... There came a desire for a wider education—a training that would deal more particularly with the labors and activities of the every day life of man and woman."¹

Other speakers would rise to deliver speeches, including the president of the University of California, Benjamin Idle Wheeler, who said: "There is a greater force than might: it is right."² Wheeler would go on to speak about the necessity of bringing everyone up to the middle class to allow them an equal opportunity to prosper and make a good living, but not at the expense of tearing

¹ Leroy Anderson, "Address delivered Jan. 31, 1903, on the occasion of the laying of the corner stone," Presidential Papers 144.01, University Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library, 1.

² Orrin Henderson, "My First Opinions and Experiences of the Polytechnic School," *Polytechnic Journal* 1, no. 3 (San Luis Obispo: Daily Telegram Press, March 1906), 4.

others down. This was a crucial component of Progressive philosophy, which focused on re-establishing individual liberties and wealth in response to the de-individualizing and monopolistic effects of corporations. Given the events of the period and region in which it was founded, it is clear that Cal Poly was born of the Progressive movement.

In the 1890s, California experienced both a recession—in step with a national trend—and a drought, which left farmers struggling to make ends meet and made Californians worse off financially. Simultaneously, the Midland Pacific, Southern Pacific, and other corporations were approaching monopoly status and tightening their financial hold on farmers. Resistance to monopolization goes as far back as 1862 with the passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Act. Some believed it was passed to elevate the status and negotiation power of farmers, others that it was to improve the life of the common man by providing a sound education.³ This belief surged again in the 1890s as the Progressive Era began. Education was to be used to improve the lives of those less fortunate than the middle class and wealthy. Around this time, Myron Angel began advocating for a school in San Luis Obispo to bring wealth and population to the rural town.

There are understandably few documents about Cal Poly's early political affiliation. Known traditionally as a conservative and agricultural school, not much attention has been given to the admittedly brief period that Cal Poly spent associated with the Progressive Era. Histories do exist, several written by Myron Angel, Robert E. Kennedy, and Margaret Chase, but they offer a documentation of events rather than an analysis of the forces behind the school's foundation.

Other authors have given substantial attention to the Progressive Era. It is widely accepted that the movement wanted to improve the quality of life for working-class people, but historians differ on the particulars. In *A Very Different Age*, Steven J. Diner argues that agricultural and vocational schools were established to benefit corporations and cities. Robert Mann, in *The Progressive Era*, holds the Progressive movement to be one initiated by the upper-middle class to move the poor to middle-class status to avoid social unrest. Kevin Starr then asserts in *Inventing the Dream* that these schools were meant to modernize farmers so they could keep up with the rapidly industrializing world. When

³ Roger Geiger, "The Rise and Fall of Useful Knowledge: Higher Education for Science, Agriculture, and the Mechanic Arts, 1850-1875," in *The American College in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Roger Geiger (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 153.

schools are mentioned in terms of Progressive education in California, however, the only school sufficiently addressed is the University of California.⁴ Overall, there has been little attention given to Cal Poly's political origin and its place in the Progressive Era.

Background of the Progressive Era

Beginning in 1890, the Progressive Era started as a reaction to the rapid industrialization of the United States. Corporations had been growing from the mid-nineteenth century and, with the advent of new technologies, began to monopolize and use the expanding railroad system to ship goods across the country. Businesses grew rapidly as a result, creating an unregulated industry where corporations took advantage of farmers. Those who protested this power, such as Mary Lease of the Farmers' Alliance in rural Kansas, believed this concentration of wealth "demanded government response," as farmers were forced to pay back loans with "money dearer than that which they had borrowed."⁵

In California, the ability of farmers to influence legislation and control their own business was crucial. This was particularly important in California since agriculture had replaced mining as the chief industry of the state by the 1880s.⁶ Following the panic of 1893, California farmers struggled to gain political superiority against railroads.⁷ The Southern Pacific, for example, controlled nearly 10 million acres of land in California by 1882. Through the 1880s, Southern Pacific made leaps in political influence and was able to raise the price of land in Tulare County from "\$2.50 upward" to "from \$17 to \$40 an acre" near the King's River.⁸ Most certainly, there was a pressing need in agriculture and other industries to limit the power of monopolies to help the individual regain independence and wealth.

As argued by Mann, the desire for farmers to control their own fate was a reflection of a greater political movement begun by the upper-middle class, which sought to halt the "drift" between "capital and labor" that penetrated "to almost every level of California life."⁹ This attempt to unify classes was

⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵ Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 16-17.

⁶ Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 128.

⁷ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 16, 22.

⁸ Starr, *Inventing the Dream*, 165, 201.

⁹ Arthur Mann, *The Progressive Era* (Hinsdale, Illinois: The Dryden Press, 1975), 15.

brought on by a view that corporations were arrogant and had no concern for the well being of a man, his work, or his family. Progressives united against these looming tyrants, determined to keep their integrity and independence.

Education was a main route of unifying the public and empowering the individual. David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University, believed firmly in education's ability to lift and unite social classes.¹⁰ He was not alone in this belief, which especially gained traction in California due to the seemingly limitless potential of the state's environment, size, and resources.

It was not always easy to establish education for the benefit of the people. Many farmers did not consider agricultural education necessary. Indeed, progress would require reform in farmers' education and threatened the autonomy of rural people, who had long controlled the schools in their towns. The argument for this reform was farmers "either do not realize their own needs or the possibilities of rural education."¹¹

Despite resistance, a noticeable effort to establish agricultural education programs was present, particularly among university educators, many of whom identified as Progressive. UC President Wheeler was engaged in this endeavor.¹² In this environment of industrialization and social mobilization to develop education and combat monopolies, Cal Poly was signed into law by Governor Gage in 1901.¹³ Even before the school's foundation, Progressive influences and the economic condition of California can be seen as affecting the goals of education reformers. Through this school, they hoped to establish an institution to educate farmers and citizens who needed an alternative to traditional education to move upward in society.

Establishing Cal Poly

Years after Cal Poly's inception, Margaret Chase would look back and call the school's statement of purpose "to contribute to the...welfare of California... largely a happy accident."¹⁴ She voiced this thought because the school was

¹⁰ Starr, *Inventing the Dream*, 224.

¹¹ Diner, *A Very Different Age*, 120.

¹² Starr, *Inventing the Dream*, 227.

¹³ Morris E. Smith, "A History of the California Polytechnic State University: The First Fifty Years 1901-1951" (M.A. Thesis, University of Oregon, 1957), 13.

¹⁴ Margaret Chase, foreword to "History of Cal Poly," Presidential Papers, University Archives 144.01, Robert E. Kennedy Library.

originally intended to exclusively be a normal school to train teachers. The idea to put it in San Luis Obispo was first presented by Myron Angel in 1895 to State Senator S.C. Smith of Bakersfield.¹⁵ After visiting his hometown of Oneonta, New York, and seeing the prosperity brought by the normal school there, Angel decided that such an institution should be brought to San Luis Obispo. He wanted to bring “population and wealth” to San Luis Obispo, “but also the presence of an institution which should bring ‘learning and refinement and exert an influence...[on] the town and surrounding county.’”¹⁶ Upon his return to California, Angel began planning the school.

There were three bills presented to establish the school, with the first unsuccessful two in 1897 and 1899.¹⁷ Governor Budd, a notorious penny pincher, shot down the proposal on the grounds that it would only increase taxation.¹⁸ Budd also noted what he thought to be a lack of desire for agricultural education, citing the minuscule enrollment in the University of California’s agriculture program.¹⁹ Support grew steadily among San Luis Obispo’s merchants and larger community, particularly with the wealthy Sinsheimer family,²⁰ who believed in the school’s ability to bring economic prosperity to the city. In 1899, Senator Smith presented the idea of a switch to a polytechnic school to Angel, but the State Assembly again rejected this new proposal.²¹

Another reason Angel wanted a school in San Luis Obispo was because of the rumors surrounding a new Midland Pacific track, which would be built “across the country from Port Hartford to Bakersfield” and was rumored to cost upward of \$2,000,000.²² Angel believed the city and school would benefit greatly from proximity to a railroad, and he wanted the school to provide additional incentive for the track to become reality. Indeed, it appeared that the Southern Pacific had something similar in mind. Rumor had it that one day, W.H. Mills, the land agent for the Southern Pacific, called Mr. Herrin, the chief lawyer

¹⁵ Leroy Anderson, “California Polytechnic School Pioneers,” February 25, 1941, Presidential Papers, University Archives 144.01, Robert E. Kennedy Library, 1.

¹⁶ Chase, *History of Cal Poly*, 1.

¹⁷ *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years* (San Rafael: Bolton Associates, 2001), 14-15.

¹⁸ Smith, “A History of the California Polytechnic State University,” 10.

¹⁹ Chase, *History of Cal Poly*, 2.

²⁰ *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years*, 14.

²¹ Smith, “A History of the California Polytechnic State University,” 9.

²² Chase, *History of Cal Poly*, 2.

for Southern Pacific, after a friendly argument with Benjamin Brooks about the possibility of the school actually happening. Upon the conclusion of the call, Mills said: "The governor will sign the bill." Southern Pacific had recently completed a railroad from Santa Margarita to San Luis Obispo at the rough cost of \$1,744,000 and wanted to make some money from it.²³ It would then appear that Cal Poly's origins accord with Diner's argument of schools being established to benefit corporations. But what needs to be remembered is that Cal Poly was founded near the beginning of the Progressive Era, whereas many other agricultural schools had been founded from the 1840s to the 1870s²⁴, and the school's mission statement would reflect the political fervor associated with the movement.

Now desperate to pass a bill for the school, Angel sought to expand Cal Poly's purpose and claimed in 1901 that "a number of schools in California [are] for the arts and sciences, but none of them fulfill the requirements of the progress of the age."²⁵ This reflected a budding concern that the state's rural population would fall behind technologically, rendering themselves incapable of finding work or making a good living once scientific advancement finally outpaced them. Labor, he believed, was "the source of all wealth... The future of our country depends upon its labor, therefore labor should be educated."²⁶ Thus, he wanted to ensure a sound education to the laborers and farmers of California. In this school, Angel recognized that a classical education was "not necessary nor desirable to the great mass of people," who simply wanted their "share of what the government provides."²⁷ This is when Cal Poly's message was put onto paper and pushed through the California state legislature.

To improve the school's chances of being signed into law, it was believed that the school's purpose should be "liberally construed, to the end that the school may at all times contribute to the industrial welfare of the State."²⁸ Angel admitted the phrasing was indeed "ambiguous,"²⁹ but this was done so the school could be built without feeling limited to agriculture alone, which was initially

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Geiger, "The Rise and Fall of Useful Knowledge," 155-160.

²⁵ Myron Angel, *History of the Polytechnic School at San Luis Obispo* (San Luis Obispo: Tribune Print, 1908), 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁸ Forward to Presidential Papers, University Archives 144.01, Robert E. Kennedy Library.

²⁹ Angel, *History of the Polytechnic School*, 61.

a fear held by some locals and prospective students.³⁰ So, on March 8, 1901, Cal Poly was signed into law with the purpose of training students in “the arts and sciences, including agriculture, mechanics, engineering, business methods, domestic economy and other such branches...to fit the non-professional walks of life.”³¹ It was ambiguous, yes. But only because “non-professional” can include many fields, and it would grow to include many indeed. With this liberal construction, the school was able to let its students determine the purpose and meaning of their education.

Cal Poly’s Early Years and the Influences of Progressivism

January 31, 1903. On an overcast, rainy day, the residents of San Luis Obispo, the school’s Board of Trustees, Presidents Wheeler of Berkeley and Jordan of Stanford gathered for the corner-stone laying ceremony. Anderson, the school’s first Director, had naturally prepared a speech, the first line of which encapsulated the aspirations of its future students: “The education of the youth has ever been a subject near to the hearts of the progressive citizens of San Luis Obispo.”³² And like that, the first class of students, the citizens of San Luis Obispo, and the gathered officials knew that the school would be one for the betterment of the individual and society as a whole.

The first several years were rough, as interest from prospective students remained low, invigorating critique of the school’s necessity. A *Los Angeles Times* article noted this: “There is no pressing demand for such a school in California...it only had about forty students last year, although it was designed to accommodate 400.”³³ But the school’s supporters were adamant. The purpose of the school was vague, and the school was located in a remote area, but those who trusted in the school’s ability to grow in population and influence devotedly believed “Our greatest industry must be agriculture. That our state has forethought enough to recognize this...is but another evidence of her desire to stand at the head of the workers of the world.”³⁴ Phrasing the mission of the school this way puts emphasis on its Progressive roots. By wanting to represent

³⁰ Chase, *History of Cal Poly*, 5.

³¹ Anderson, “Address delivered,” 2; *First Annual Course Catalog of the California Polytechnic School* (Sacramento: Superintendent State Printing, 1903), 7.

³² Anderson, “Address delivered,” 1.

³³ “The California Polytechnic School,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1905, 16.

³⁴ Katherine Chandler, “California’s Polytechnic: The Work Being Done By the New State School,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1904, 15.

the common laborers, the progressives who supported the school showed their desire to combat the sweeping power of monopolies. They wanted to be individual workers, united for the public good.

By 1906, the fear that the school would be limited only to agriculture was dwindling. Courses were offered in mechanics, agriculture, and domestic science. Supplementary courses included geometry, history, physics, and English.³⁵ Additionally, the school's population had leapt from just about sixty (in 1905) to a little over one hundred.³⁶ This increase correlated with the beginning of the first *Polytechnic Journal*, a student-run journal that compiled stories, news, and editorials from the student body. The *Journal* quickly adopted a Progressive ideology.

The first issue opened with a story in which a poor farmer's son, William Osborne, wants to marry Edith Carroll, the daughter of a wealthy banker. She professes her love, but they cannot marry until he has proven himself worthy—as stipulated by her father.³⁷ William knows he will never be more than a farmer, but Edith does not see this as detrimental. In fact, she's exhilarated, saying, "What a noble choice. The farmer gets more pleasure out of living than can be found in any other vocation in life."

William bitterly replies, "You little realize the position that the farmer is in at the present time. Soils often depleted, a lack of knowledge of irrigation, proper cultivation and fertilization; markets which are surrounded by tricky brokers...and thieving railroads makes the life of the producer something hard."³⁸ He believes educating farmers is all that will ever restore the common man to a place of honor. After careful thought, he decides to go to Cal Poly.

In the second issue, the story is resolved. Captain Carroll, Edith's father, goes to Washington to sit in on a debate over a piece of legislation that would establish a more extensive, state-funded postal system. After long hours of heated discussion, the representative from California steps forward. He takes the floor and the room settles down: "For one hour he spoke and during the whole time

³⁵ *Circular of the California Polytechnic School 1906-1907* (Sacramento: Superintendent State Printing, 1906), 13.

³⁶ *Circular of the California Polytechnic School 1905-1906* (Sacramento: Superintendent State Printing, 1905), 18-19; *Circular of the California Polytechnic School 1906-1907*, (Sacramento Superintendent State Printing, 1906), 19-20.

³⁷ "Manufactured Opportunities," *Polytechnic Journal* 1, no. 1 (San Luis Obispo: Daily Telegram Press, January 1906), 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

hardly a person moved. At the close of his speech the applause was terrific.”³⁹ Captain Carroll is astonished to find the speaker is William Osborne. He took advantage of his education at Cal Poly and was then able to go on and make a serious difference nationally for middle-class and working Americans. And he got the girl.

In these documents, the students’ clear focus on Progressive advancement is made evident. The fourth issue contained an article praising Joseph Folk, the governor of Missouri known for trust-busting and convicting corrupt politicians. He was a man of the people who “[had] started out in his campaign for governor with money, machine, and everything against him.” But Folk didn’t give up. By “going directly to the heart of the Missouri farmers...he was elected.”⁴⁰ Trust-busting played a significant role in Progressive philosophy, as breaking up tyrannical corporations gave smaller businesses owned by individuals a chance to thrive.

Attention was always given to the plight of farmers, such as one issue that sought to further improve the farmer’s condition by expanding Cal Poly’s offered courses. Farm quality suffered even though production was up, which weakened the bargaining power of farmers. The solution was to offer more updated courses, along with classes in American history and government, since “the study of industrial development holds an important place with political development.”⁴¹ The beneficial effects of these courses when applied were also praised, particularly in conjunction with the “Reclamation Act,” which had the enthusiastic support of President Theodore Roosevelt and was passed in 1902 to improve water circulation in western states like Nevada.⁴² These new scientific practices helped Nevada produce a wide variety of crops, leading to a population boom and a dramatic increase in wealth.

Cal Poly students, as a result, adored Roosevelt. Known for being tough on monopolies, he was a hero of the people and a Progressive leader. He visited Cal Poly in May of 1903 to comment of the valiant cause of the school, saying

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁰ “Joseph Folk,” *Polytechnic Journal* 1, no. 4 (San Luis Obispo: Daily Telegram Press, April 1906), 17-18.

⁴¹ “Department of English and History,” *Polytechnic Journal* 2, no. 4 (San Luis Obispo: Daily Telegram Press, February 1907), 8.

⁴² “What Irrigation Can Do,” *Polytechnic Journal* 3, no. 4 (San Luis Obispo: Daily Telegram Press, January 1908), 3.

“there should be the same chance for the tiller of the soil to make his a learned profession.”⁴³ His efforts at conservation were followed by the students as well, as one article brought attention to the “ruthless mining practices” destroying California’s natural beauty and resources. The article went on to say that “the government must shoulder the responsibility for this great enterprise,” but that we must also “each, as individual units in organized society, throw all of our power and influence into this movement.”⁴⁴ Students at Cal Poly were reminded of the beauty of their state by their toil in the fields and the plentiful produce that grew throughout the state. The protection of this natural wealth was in the interest of the students, the state, and the nation. As Progressives saw it, this issue was one of “public interest,” as opposed to “selfish interest,” which characterized the conduct of corporations.⁴⁵

Myron Angel’s influence became noticeable again when he returned to the school to deliver an address on Founder’s Day—an annual school holiday that celebrated the tireless efforts of those who made the school possible. In his speech, he compared Cal Poly to Rome, saying that in Rome, “he who had done a great work was held in higher honor than one born of noble blood.” Angel spoke about the necessity of a morally just and educated population, and how Cal Poly was established to fulfill this need in society. After all, “this school at San Luis Obispo is the school of the people.”⁴⁶

The early population of Cal Poly knew what they were capable of and what they were trying to prevent: the monopolization of the state’s agriculture and other industries. They were to rise from poor farmers and townspeople to be middle-class, educated Americans capable of making a difference for the benefit of the national welfare—and all with the preparation provided by a Cal Poly education.

The Fall of Progressivism

The Progressive surge would not last. It was evident that by 1912, reformers were losing steam in California. The “oligarchy had had enough” by 1909, and

⁴³ *Cal Poly: The First Hundred Years*, 13.

⁴⁴ “Conservation of Natural Resources,” *Polytechnic Journal* 5, no. 1 (San Luis Obispo: Daily Telegram Press, October 1909), 1-3.

⁴⁵ Mann, *The Progressive Era*, 44.

⁴⁶ “Address By Hon. Myron Angel,” *Polytechnic Journal* 3, no. 6 (San Luis Obispo: Daily Telegram Press, March 1908), 4-5.

actions were taken by powerful conservative forces to push Progressives out of office. The chief reformist in California, George Alexander, lost a municipal mayoral election in San Francisco in 1906. Another loss followed his second term as mayor in Los Angeles to a Socialist-Democratic coalition in 1913. The city prosecutor and Progressive successor to Alexander, Guy Eddie, was arrested and left California Progressives without a viable alternative.⁴⁷

Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party, established in 1912, had separated from the main Republican Party and weakened the political influence of Progressives, who now had to contend against Democrats, Republicans, and Socialists. When World War I broke out in 1914, Roosevelt made a sharp turn to the right. Many Progressives followed his lead, as they "[sensed a] conservative drift for the nation at large [and] were quietly drifting back to the regular Republican Party." By 1916, Progressives had lost most of their political influence.⁴⁸

A similar trend can be seen at Cal Poly, where conservative influence was taking hold in 1913 with Director Smith's trip to eastern schools to examine how they were run and how he could apply those practices to Cal Poly.⁴⁹ Military classes were introduced in 1915 to prepare students for military service. Following this, the school became noticeably stricter. The 1915 school catalog was the first to completely remove the wording of the original mission, instead saying the school was "designed for young men and women...more closely identified with the farm, shop and home life." Discipline became a larger focus as well. Whereas it had required only a single paragraph in earlier catalogs, the 1915 *Bulletin* spent a solid page warning students about the consequences of misconduct.⁵⁰

This shift in focus to a more conservative national picture also correlated with a decline in student participation on campus and a drift away from individual Progressive values. The *Polytechnic Journal* shortened to delivering a single issue a year and spent most of it focusing on the accomplishments and dreams of the seniors. Even before then, however, the lack of interest in

⁴⁷ Starr, *Inventing the Dream*, 268-270.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 270-272.

⁴⁹ Leroy Burns Smith, "To the Board of Trustees," December 13, 1913, University Archives 144.01, Robert E. Kennedy Library, 1-10.

⁵⁰ *Bulletin of the California Polytechnic School: A State School of Agriculture, Mechanical Arts, Domestic Science* (San Luis Obispo: California State Printing Office, 1915), 7-21.

communal Progressive matters was apparent. Beginning around the time the *Journal* decided to produce fewer issues, the editorial section was being used to berate students for not contributing enough to the *Journal* or participating in other school activities.⁵¹

Cal Poly, the “school of the people,” was falling in line with other schools of the time by conforming to a more standardized curriculum. As Progressives fell in California, so too did the enthusiasm that followed them. This decline is reflected in the *Polytechnic Journal* and in documents that suggest officials of the school were contemplating a conservative shift.

Cal Poly did, however, begin as a Progressive school. As evinced by the *Journal*, Angel’s speeches, and those involved in founding the school, Cal Poly was an institution in which the “happy accident” of its “ambiguous” statement of purpose allowed the students to apply their own concrete ideas to their education. For a brief period in the school’s early years, this manifested itself as Progressive dreams and goals. Because of its location in rural California between two hubs of Progressive politics in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and its formation just as Progressive politics obtained increasing national momentum, Cal Poly was unique in *beginning* as a child of the Progressive movement, as opposed to later adopting its values.

It must be noted, however, that this argument does not account for a conservative presence or influence at Cal Poly. The student body was likely not uniform in its political views, and neither were the faculty. Documents from students are limited, with the bulk of material coming from issues of the *Polytechnic Journal*. It would be a mistake to say this journal, which likely selectively published to enhance its own political views, contained the full spectrum of political thought at the school.

Cal Poly students were not apparent activists, further limiting the source material that could potentially identify the extent of Progressive activity on campus. However, the lack of material does not necessarily reflect negatively on the progressive nature of the school. What is available shows a distinct identification with Progressivism, even if no fanatical participation was present. Given the period and the people associated with the school, Cal Poly was indeed a child of the Progressive Era.

⁵¹ “School Spirit,” *Polytechnic Journal* 6, no. 5 (San Luis Obispo: Daily Telegram Press, February 1911), 16-17.

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