

LOOKING BACK

by ROBERT E. KENNEDY
PRESIDENT EMERITUS



(Photo courtesy University Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library)

Shakespeare, contemplating the seven ages of man, once wrote: "Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (*As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7).

For 39 years I woke every morning thinking what I would do that day to somehow make Cal Poly a better place. Then suddenly came the final scene: retirement!

It's "sans" a lot, I would agree. But "oblivion" is not the right word for the new status. It is a transformation that alters, modifies, and revamps one's goals, purposes, processes. Primarily, I was no

longer responsible for the welfare of an institution and all the wonderful people who make up the student body, the faculty, the support staff.

During my first 26 years I worked for one boss, Julian A. McPhee. When he hired me in 1940 I was probably the youngest and least experienced of the 60 applicants for the advertised position of journalism teacher/publicity man at a polytechnic school that had just been approved to add a fourth year and give B.S. degrees. But McPhee, who looked over my shoulder for more than a quarter of a century, giving both advice and criticism, saw

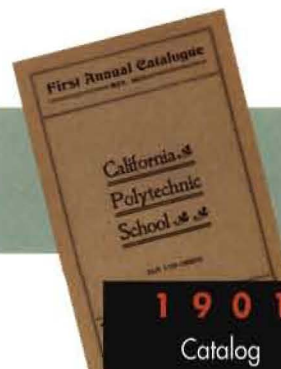


1901

Journalist Myron Angel persuades citizens of San Luis Obispo to support a state school.

1901

The California
Polytechnic School



1901

Catalog

something in a 24-year-old kid that caused him to promote me successively into seven positions.

At Homecoming 1999, I was the honored guest at the class of 1949's 50th reunion. Alumni President Wes Witten presented me with a framed reproduction of a two-page layout titled "Dedication" taken from the 1949 yearbook, *El Rodeo*, featuring a photograph of me with bow tie in front of a typewriter. I was on sabbatical, working on a master's degree in journalism at Stanford and as a reporter for the *Palo Alto Times*. I'm convinced

the 22 years since I retired, I've been tempted on occasion to give President Baker my opinion, but I succumbed only a couple of times. I had concerns when I read that the major program in home economics was to be eliminated. And I met with President Baker when a *Mustang Daily* article quoted the former academic vice president's avowed decision to eliminate the journalism major. But I honestly believe President Baker appreciated my concern, and I accepted an appointment to the College of Liberal Arts' advisory board for several years.

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now, although I did not recognize it at the time, that the editorial statement about my "talents, energy, and faith in Cal Poly's objectives" convinced President McPhee that he should start training me to be his successor, as he had done successfully with Byron McMahon for chief of the State Bureau of Agricultural Education in 1945, and Wesley P. Smith for state director of vocational education in 1949.

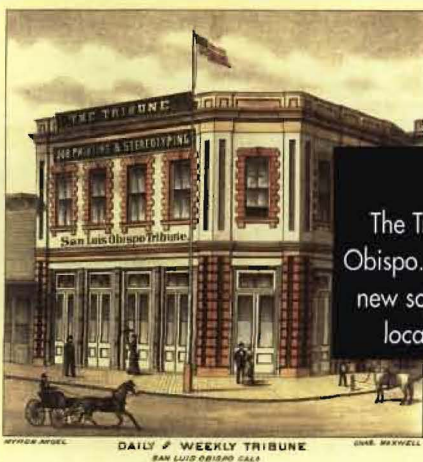
Some trustees and college presidents in the final days before my 1979 retirement asked, "Won't you be uncomfortable living in the town where Cal Poly will always be in the news and someone will always be getting credit for new ideas and improvements?" They might have added (but didn't), "Will you be able to resist picking up the phone to give President Baker your opinion on every controversial issue?"

I've never been uncomfortable when other people got credit for Cal Poly improvements because in most cases improvements are generated by many people working together—not by one individual. In

During the past two decades, my wife, Mary, and I have attended almost every Retired Faculty/Staff Club luncheon. At many of the early meetings, old-timers often expressed concerns that Cal Poly was "changing," asking, "If you were still president, you wouldn't have done that, would you?" My response was always, "I don't know what I would have done, given the changed circumstances of the present time."

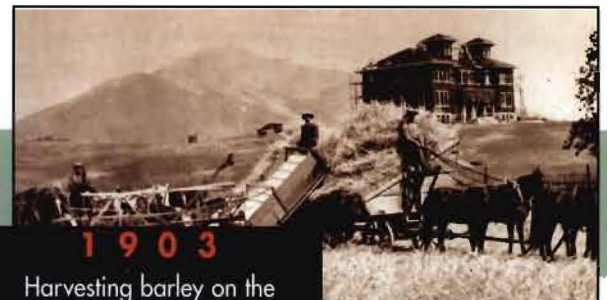
I can honestly say I am very happy with President Baker's team, which is leading Cal Poly to an ever-increasing popularity and improved reputation. It is an honor to be associated as president emeritus with a university that has achieved what I said in my inaugural speech was my most important goal: to make Cal Poly the best polytechnic college in the nation.

One of President McPhee's daughters, Carol McPhee Norton, sat beside me on a History Day panel commemorating Cal Poly's Centennial



1901

The Tribune Building in downtown San Luis Obispo. Myron Angel's articles on the proposed new school are given prominent placement in local newspapers, including the *Tribune*.



1903

Harvesting barley on the C.H. Johnson ranch west of the first Polytechnic School building, shown under construction

Celebration on March 8, 2001. She described her father's "open-door" admissions policy. Julian McPhee had years of evidence to prove that given a chance at a practical, learn-by-doing educational experience, many high school graduates with average records succeeded at Cal Poly and became successful farmers and industrialists with great loyalty to their alma mater.

If he had had a longer retirement, McPhee would have been increasingly upset with my decision to obtain approval from the trustees to create more restrictive Cal Poly admission requirements than those at other CSU campuses. And he also would have objected to my insistence that we get all of our engineering and other professional programs accredited by their respective accrediting agencies. He feared that Cal Poly's unique, sometimes unorthodox, methods would never be accepted by representatives of traditional, conservative accrediting visitation committees. He was wrong. We succeeded in getting more programs accredited than any of the other CSU campuses—even those with twice the enrollment and many more major programs.

But despite these and other differences between us, I told a packed Cal Poly Theatre audience during that March 8th program, "Julian McPhee was the savior of Cal Poly. If he had not become president in 1933, Cal Poly would no longer exist."

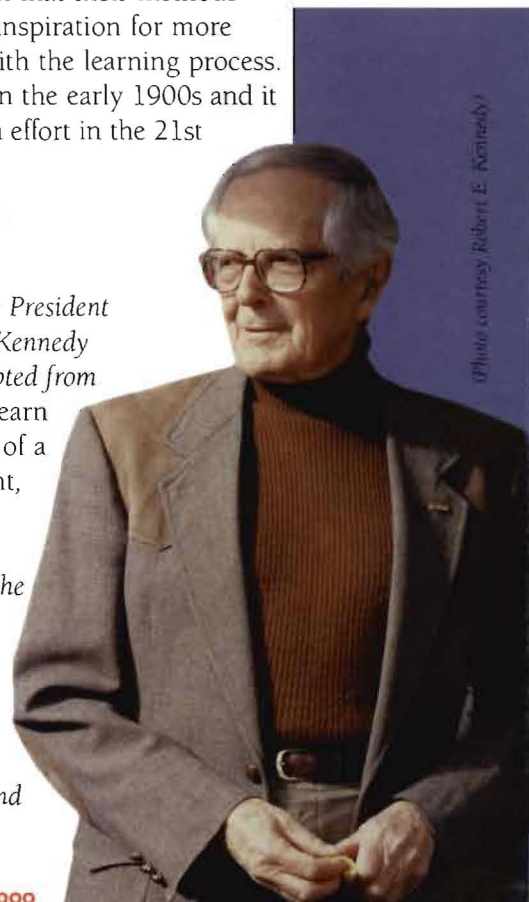
During the colloquium I said something about each of the first five chief administrative officers—Anderson, Smith, Ryder, Riccardi, and Crandall—but I failed to mention that I had met the first director, Leroy Anderson, and his wife in February 1941, when they participated in an "unlaying of the cornerstone" with the demolition of the original administration building to make room for the 1942 clock tower building. After the ceremony we toured the campus

and farm, and I interviewed Anderson about his establishment of Cal Poly's hallmark "learn-by-doing" educational philosophy.

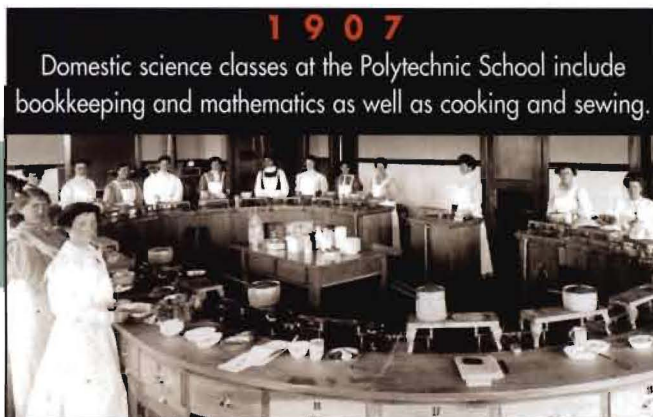
Finally, while each of those early administrators played significant roles in the development of the polytechnic school, teachers and students made great contributions too. It was the early faculty who implemented Anderson's learn-by-doing philosophy—not always a simple process. And frequently it was the work of students that provided creative and sometimes unusual applications of practical experience in laboratory and field classes. What students did gave teachers satisfaction that their methods worked, and gave inspiration for more experimentation with the learning process. It began that way in the early 1900s and it continues as a team effort in the 21st century.

Note: This article by President Emeritus Robert E. Kennedy (1967-1979) is adapted from the last chapter of Learn by Doing: Memoir of a University President, which is being published by Cal Poly as part of the Centennial Celebration and will soon be available at El Corral Bookstore, Cal Poly Downtown, and via mail, fax, and Web orders.

Robert Kennedy, 1999



1903 - 04
The first faculty and students at the Polytechnic School. Director Leroy Anderson is pictured at the far right, front row.



1907
Domestic science classes at the Polytechnic School include bookkeeping and mathematics as well as cooking and sewing.