WHEN LEE FLETCHER LEFT ARKANSAS and headed to Cal Poly with his wife and year-old daughter in 1931, it was the height of the Depression. He had no idea the university would play such a major role in his life and in the lives of three generations to come.

Fletcher arrived on campus and stayed 32 years, says his daughter, Shirley. "My dad might have had just a high school education, but he was a real jack-of-all-trades." Fletcher was farm foreman and superintendent of the Farm Shop.

The Fletcher family lived on campus, and Shirley and her brother and sister had the run of the place -- the horse barn, the swine unit, anywhere they wanted. It was like a big ranch back then, Shirley recalls. "I rode my bike all over campus, I felt safe, we never locked our doors. Growing up on campus was a wonderful life."

To be sure, the all-male campus provided plenty of diversion, especially for a young woman. There were about 2,000 students, and Shirley's future husband Joseph Sondeno (EE '49), was one of them. He enrolled after World War II, after serving in the Army Air Force as a B-17 pilot.

Joseph lived in Chase Hall and worked as a cashier in the cafeteria next to the dorms. The going wasn't always easy. "Heading straight to Cal Poly after the war almost proved too much for me," Joseph recalls. "But the instructors were very patient. They took a personal interest; they really seemed to care."

Then he met Shirley; they were married in June 1948 and spent his senior year living in "Silver City," a house-trailer complex set up on campus for returning veterans. After graduation, the couple moved to the Bay Area, where Joseph began his career with PG&E and later worked for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in Washington, D.C. Children soon followed.

Son Dudley Sondeno (ME '75), always knew he would go to Cal Poly. The campus had left its mark on the younger who often visited his grandparents in the '50s, catching tractor rides with granddad Lee Fletcher. At that time, Dudley says, the campus had the look of an army camp. "These days, it looks like a real university."

In the early '70s, Dudley especially enjoyed the labs, "doing that 'hands-on' thing that Cal Poly was so famous for." He remembers much of it.

"The old Mechanical Engineering Building had the Test Engine Lab downstairs and the classrooms upstairs. We always knew what kind of engine was being run by the sounds in the classroom," Dudley says. "Those are the sounds that mechanical engineering students live for."

He is now senior vice president for the Southwest Gas Co. in Las Vegas.

And as fate -- or family -- would have it, Dudley's daughter, Kelly, now proudly carries on the tradition. Just finishing her first year as a nutrition major, Kelly jokes that there was "no pressure to go to Cal Poly."

She is thrilled with her choice, and her father and grandparents couldn't be happier. "It's great having her at Cal Poly," her dad says, "hearing about all the great things that are part of Cal Poly and knowing she's carrying on the tradition." □

Note: Are you part of a long line of Cal Poly alumni? If so, you are invited to share your story with the Cal Poly's Alumni Association for possible online publication. Please e-mail your story to alumni@calpoly.edu.
Four generations: From left, Dudley Sondeno, Kelly Sondeno, Joseph Sondeno and Shirley Sondeno holding a photo of her parents Beatrice and Lee Fletcher. Photo by Nick Hoover.