

## THE JULIAN MCPHEE I KNEW

The family of Julian McPhee recently held a reunion. It touched my heart. I recall how important his family was to him. But, I do not need events to remind me of the man. He was unforgettable, complex, could be maddening but never at the expense of loyalty to him and to Cal Poly; and one never had ambivalent feelings about him. The years of his presidency were exciting with never a dull moment.

While I pause to reflect on those years, it seems this is the time and place in the life of Cal Poly to record my reminiscences, unimportant in comparison to the scholarly articles that have been written about President McPhee, but of interest, perhaps, as the observations of a fly on the wall where I was privy to many of the views he held which were not always clearly understood by his critics.

He was a man with great vision who generated great enthusiasm in the people he recruited to carry forward that vision. He hand picked the people to work directly with him. Administrative positions were filled by promotion from within the ranks of current personnel and by recruiting the best and brightest men he worked with in Sacramento.

In 1951 the need arose to fill the position of stenographer in his office. He selected me. I had come to his attention when, by

circumstance, I took his dictation although I held a lower classification than the position required. He was firmly committed to his choice and dismissed a dissenting opinion with the simple observation, "I want her to work for me; she is more than capable and *she is not afraid of me.*" I laughed when I heard this. I was confident of my skills and I thought *any man with six daughters couldn't be as formidable as he was reputed to be.* He subsequently promoted me to the position of secretary to the Executive Dean, Harold O. Wilson, when his former stenographer returned six months later.

The Executive Dean was President McPhee's chief administrative officer with responsibility for the three campuses of the college – San Luis Obispo, Kellogg in Pomona, and Voorhis in San Dimas. Dean Wilson had acquired the southern campuses for the college through skillful negotiations with Charles Voorhis and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and was located at the Voorhis campus before transferring back to San Luis Obispo to fill the position of Executive Dean.

President McPhee's administrative style was unique. With some frustration laced with humor, the administrators faced reorganization in March of each year. His staff privately called these periods the "ides of March," and a chill ran through all as they contemplated what their next jobs would be. The odd years saw a relatively modest shifting of responsibilities; the even years saw a major change. It was an intense game of musical chairs as people were moved to areas previously the responsibility of

someone else and saw their familiar responsibilities placed under the control of a different head. No one could become complacent. A spirit of cooperation was engendered in the staff as they helped each other comprehend unfamiliar roles. The genius of Julian McPhee's plan only became evident as his retirement drew near. He had created a tight team of administrators who knew first hand all functions of the college. Any one could, depending on individual ability, presume to the leadership role of president of Cal Poly and one did so, Robert E. Kennedy.

The students always came first with President McPhee. He encouraged athletics and saw them as sports to be enjoyed by the participants but not to be an end in themselves.

In the beginning he saw Cal Poly serving the students in the Great Depression, usually sons of farmers whose financial status might not afford them the luxury of four years of higher education. He developed the "upside down" "learn-by-doing" concept; the former presenting the curriculum in a way that entering students could delay selection of a major until their third year. They took courses during the first two years which prepared them to work in their chosen field if it was necessary to end their formal training at the end of two years. This was an inspiring idea rooted in an insightful mind. Sadly, the concept is rarely, if ever, remembered now, but it should be, even though the structure of higher education in California was fundamentally altered in the 1960's.

During this period, President McPhee also created and developed the Foundation, an entity separate from the State controlled budget. Its purpose was to provide an outlet for funding student projects and marketing the products. Other colleges eventually followed his lead but for other purposes.

Some of his ideas were at odds with the academic side of the college. Friction arose when he opposed the introduction of doctoral programs in the disciplines. He believed there needed to be, as he put it, a moat created around the college to protect its uniqueness. *Let the moat be crossed and the challengers will soon be within the gates.* He saw Cal Poly as aspiring to the status of Texas A&M, serving as a counter point to the University of California where faculty focused on research and teaching assistants taught. Cal Poly was a hands-on institution with its primary function teaching the practical aspects of agriculture and engineering. Cal Poly was already recognized world wide for its excellence.

Some thought his view of doctorates was peevish. It was not. He respected the degree. It just didn't fit his view of Cal Poly. He was awarded the LL.D. by Armstrong College in 1952 and accepted it graciously. But he let us know he preferred we continue to address him as Mr. McPhee.

During the last year of his presidency he was stricken with cancer and was a very sick man. When the graduation ceremonies were held at the Kellogg-Voorhis Campus the pain he was suffering, although he tried to conceal it, was obvious to his

close associates who urged him to step down from the podium and let someone else take over. He declined because “the graduates deserve the honor of receiving their degrees in the normal fashion and I will not disappoint them,” he said.

Of all Mr. McPhee’s qualities, the most endearing to me was his gallantry. An episode that took place in the 1950’s has always made me smile. Few people knew about it at the time. I wonder how many corporate CEOs today would meet this challenge in the same way he did.

Julian McPhee was an early riser and walked to his office from his home on campus, arriving by 6 o’clock in the morning. As he neared the Administration Building one day he saw that someone had scrawled in big letters across the side of the building the offensive “f” word. This was before the heady sixties when the expression lost some of its shock value.

Mindful of the fact that the woman custodian would be coming to work soon, he used his master key to open the custodial closet; took out soap, a brush, and a bucket which he filled with water; and went outside. He removed his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to scrub the wall clean.

He didn’t want the woman custodian to see what had been written there.

But, the most touching memory for me happened after he retired. He had an office in the old Administration Building (now called the Bell Tower Building) which was down the hill from the

new one where my office was then located. I had been clearing out old files and found an amusing exchange of memos between him and Harold Wilson from way back. I attached a note remembering the good times and sent the packet to him in the campus mail.

It was a long uphill trek from the old Administration Building to the new one, laborious for those of us younger and healthier than he was at that time. The cancer was taking its toll. But he had set out on this walk for a purpose. I was surprised to see him standing in the doorway to my office. I supposed he had come to see my boss. He had not. He had come to see me. He came over to my desk, reached out to take my hand in his and bowed as he kissed it. He said he wanted to thank me personally for sending the note and thinking of him. It was the last time I saw him.

The moment was incredibly moving for me. I was transported back to an earlier age of courtly manners, when women were ladies and men were gentlemen.

Julian McPhee did not hesitate to pay respect to a lady.  
He always called me *Miss Norma*.

Norma W. Henderson  
Years at Cal Poly, 1949 – 1983