

2018

Ghosts of the Past

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Recommended Citation

Schmidt, Rich (2018) "Ghosts of the Past," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 14 : No. 2 , Article 15.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol14/iss2/15

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Ghosts of the past

Every institution has its skeletons.

We're looking for ours.

Institutions across the nation are examining their histories and grappling with controversial elements – Confederate statues, founding leaders, building names and more. Archivist Rich Schmidt is digging into Linfield's history.

When I was asked to look at the names we see at Linfield and learn more about the people behind them, I was excited but apprehensive. Every name promised an interesting story; but what if one of them brought more than that? Something more troubling?

Every institution has its skeletons. If an organization is fortunate enough to survive and grow, there will be missteps along the way. An inexplicable hire, a confounding decision, a broken promise.

Part of the risk of associating yourself with an institution, then, is accepting this reality. Much like a marriage, you're opening yourself up to the bad along with the good, with the faith that the latter will always outweigh the former.

I am not the preeminent expert on the history of Linfield College, having worked here since only 2011. There are people who have been associated with the school for much longer, who have been in positions to see the unofficial truths behind the official stories. Part of my job is to learn about the school's history and about the many people – heralded and unknown – who have played a part in shaping the school as it exists today.

So I dug in, learning about Michelbook and Murdock, about Cook and Miller, about Elkinton and Campbell. Mac Hall is named in honor of McMinnville College's nickname "Old Mac," a tribute to both Linfield's former name and the town that has supported the college from its infancy. Larsell is named after a 1910 alumnus who

was the chairman of the Linfield board while teaching at the University of Oregon Medical School (now OHSU). Whitman is named not for the missionaries and namesakes of the college in Walla Walla, but for a long-time English professor and registrar. Taylor is named for a 1915 alumnus who taught chemistry at the school for 30 years. And so on, account after account of people who left their mark on Linfield in some way.

Institutions are a product of a time and place, and by their nature slow to evolve. Change often comes gradually, a result of a society's fluctuating needs, beliefs, values, ethos. Occasionally, though, a seismic shift can change a culture seemingly overnight, shaking institutional foundations and toppling long-held assumptions.

Our culture is in the midst of such a shift now. Powerful people are being held accountable for transgressions silently accepted in the past. Actions or beliefs that weren't considered transgressions are being analyzed in a new light. As part of this evolution, we're looking to history with disillusioned eyes, questioning people and symbols our institutions have long held as paragons.

Colleges and universities across the country – from Yale and Princeton in the Ivy League, to Clemson and Mississippi in the South, to the University of Oregon and Oregon State in our backyard – have faced pressure to re-name buildings honoring people whose beliefs and behaviors no longer fit the image these institutions wish to project.

People are complicated. We all – this article included – tend to sum up people’s lives in a sentence, or a paragraph, or a page, all the while knowing it doesn’t capture the whole story. It’s simply an outline, the curated highlights of a life full of innumerable events and moments.

Now we’re looking again with fresh eyes, hoping to more deeply examine the people after whom we’ve chosen to name our

institutions and buildings. Are we likely to find stories at Linfield that mirror ones that have caused trouble for other institutions? It’s possible. Every institution has its skeletons, and we’re in the process of looking for ours.

– *Rich Schmidt, Linfield College archivist*

Stories from the archives

- *Linfield is named after George Fisher Linfield, a Baptist minister born on the East Coast who spent the bulk of his life in the Midwest. George and his wife, Frances (Ross) Linfield, pledged to spend their life savings on the advancement of Christian education, and invested in real estate. After George’s death in 1890 at age 44, Frances moved to the Northwest and befriended college president Leonard Riley. She donated \$250,000 worth of real estate in 1922 (a \$3.5 million value today) and asked that the school be renamed in honor of her late husband.*

- *Kenneth Scott Latourette was one of the foremost historians on Christianity and China. After graduating from McMinnville College in 1904, he eventually was ordained as a Baptist minister and taught at Yale Divinity School, publishing more than 80 books. Other Latourettes also played a significant role in Linfield’s history, among them D.C. Latourette and Lyman E. Latourette, who were each on the board of trustees.*

- *Potter Hall, originally purchased by the college as the president’s house, is named for Carrie Casler Potter, known to her students as “Mother Potter.” She served as the dean of music from 1904 until her retirement in 1921. Potter was known for “adopting” students as well as for her patience, humor and wide-ranging musical ability. When a new home for the president was built in 1938, the old building was converted into a residence hall.*

- *Williams Frerichs served a number of roles during his time at Linfield. He taught German, served as head librarian, edited Linfield publications and served as interim president for a year after Leonard Riley’s retirement in 1931. Frerichs’ role as a jack-of-all-trades is repeated throughout Linfield’s history, as talented people have often been asked to change roles or fill multiple positions at the same time.*



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