

July 2023

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Recommended Citation

Schmidt, Rich (2023) "The Roaring Twenties at Linfield," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 17: No. 2, Article 8.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol17/iss2/8

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The Roaring Twenties at Linfield

Archivist explores parallels between life at Linfield in the 1920s and 2020s

By Rich Schmidt, director of archives and resource sharing

BLAST FROM THE PAST: Scrapbooks and photos from the archives show a glimpse into student life in the 1920s.

America in the 1920s conjures images of jazz houses and flappers, of speakeasys and celebrity gangsters. The Roaring Twenties was a decade of excess brought on by a strong economy and an explosion of culture and consumerism in the wake of the 1918 influenza pandemic and Prohibition. Technology grew at breakneck speed, leading to mass-produced automobiles, telephones and major appliances. Everything about American life was changing.

Sociologists and economists have started to speculate whether the world is preparing for a “new Roaring Twenties.” Will the “new normal” of post-pandemic life of the 2020s resemble that of the 1920s? At Linfield specifically, will 21st century student life start to parallel life in the 20th century Roaring Twenties?

The more things change

For students and faculty in McMinnville, the 1920s were just as eventful as life on the national stage. As the decade opened, the college was in an optimistic place. The presidency of Leonard Riley, which began in 1906, had brought about expansion of the student body, the addition of new faculty members, programs and buildings, and the modernization of the curriculum to meet accreditation standards of the time. These gains were modest in number but impressive in percentage; the freshman class of 1913-14 was 33, which had grown to 89 in 1920-21 after dipping during World War I.

The college had always functioned, since its birth, as a place striving for higher education but also serving as a lower-level preparatory school. This finally ended in the middle of the 1920s, as Linfield matured into a true college.

This timing is not a coincidence, as one of the key events of the 1920s was a significant donation from Frances Ross Linfield in 1922, resulting in the renaming of the school from McMinnville College. While Riley had a successful track record as a fundraiser before Mrs. Linfield's donation, her gift was the largest in the school's history and gave the newly named Linfield College a somewhat strong financial position for perhaps the first time in its history.

On the heels of the Linfield donation, Riley also secured a gift from M.C. Treat – given anonymously at the time – that led to Melrose Hall opening in 1929. The decade that had seen the school change names now saw the campus expand and modernize. It was beginning to grow into the promise made 70 years earlier, when a school opening in the wilderness had ambitiously called itself a college.

Not quite so ‘roaring’

One of the most difficult challenges is for archivists to answer “but what was it like?” We have materials, photographs, memorabilia, oral histories, yearbooks, newspapers, pamphlets, handbooks, catalogs, posters and playbills. We have enrollment data and know presidential terms and the names of trustees and student-body presidents. We know who buildings are named for and which famous people visited campus.

But what was it like?

Perhaps the most valuable archival items we have for answering that is our collection of scrapbooks. While the manifestation of scrapbooking has for many evolved into a digital, social media-aided pursuit, the principles are largely the same. Most students at the time kept scrapbooks as a way to keep track of friends, photographs, tickets, keepsakes and memories of events.

This likely may not surprise you: Linfield in the 1920s displayed very little of the Roaring Twenties' benchmarks. The school was a small, strict, isolated Christian college in rural Oregon. Dress remained mostly formal; entertainment mostly chaste. The YMCA and YWCA organizations dominated the social calendar – most students belonged to one of these groups, which involved social activities, Bible study and “service for Christ.”

Most students also belonged to sororities and fraternities. In the 1920s, these were local chapters devoted to Christian service. In addition, several student literary societies existed on campus, as did dramatic clubs, glee clubs, oratory and debate clubs, and the student ministerial organization. The Linfield Review had a staff, as did the yearbook (called Oak Leaves).

May Day was the most anticipated day of the year. The first Saturday in May was filled with activities, including the crowning of the May Queen and the May Pole Dance, the only school-sanctioned dance of the year.

Athletics held a popular role on campus. Football – which had been banned from campus in 1906 and had its return announced to the student body at the same 1922 assembly announcing Mrs. Linfield's donation – was immediately the most popular sport on campus.

Intercollegiate baseball, basketball and track were for men only. There was a coed tennis team and a “girls' athletics” team, which competed with local high schools in basketball and played handball and baseball. Women also competed in inter-class basketball contests (sophomores vs. juniors, for example), with the winning squad earning a homemade chicken dinner.



DOWN MEMORY LANE: A look at a 1920s scrapbook preserved in the Linfield Archives and Special Collections.

Football's return did not immediately make it the school's most important competitive activity, however. Forensics and intercollegiate debate – with both men's and women's teams – were the pride of the school, winning numerous championships in the early 1900s. Individual champions were the toast of the school, and the Oak Leaves and Linfield Review seemed to relish reporting any time a Linfield Oratorian bested a rival from Willamette.

The more they remain the same

When we share the scrapbooks in our collection, one thing we emphasize is that they show how much college has changed, but also how little. Photographs show trips to the Oregon coast or shopping with friends. Hiking was popular, and students in campus leadership went to retreats and conferences with students from peer institutions. Tickets and programs from athletic events, recitals, plays, lectures, formals, mixers and graduations were prized keepsakes, and photos of friends with nicknames and

inside jokes are scattered through the pages.

These materials give us a glimpse of what it was like. Most activities, then as now, were held on campus and designed to bring a mix of Linfield and McMinnville communities together. Most students belonged to a number of organizations and stayed busy outside of classes. They enjoyed supporting each other's events, hanging out with friends and working campus jobs. Courses were taught in a variety of subjects with the stated goal of producing well-rounded graduates by a dedicated group of faculty members who often went above and beyond their official roles.

In short, Linfield then was a lot like Linfield now. The growth and changes of the last 100 years are undeniable, and yet the core remains remarkably similar. Even noting the changes to the school's religious underpinnings, the materials from the Roaring Twenties that exist in our archives showcase the themes of service, learning, community and spirit that remain the Linfield ethos today.