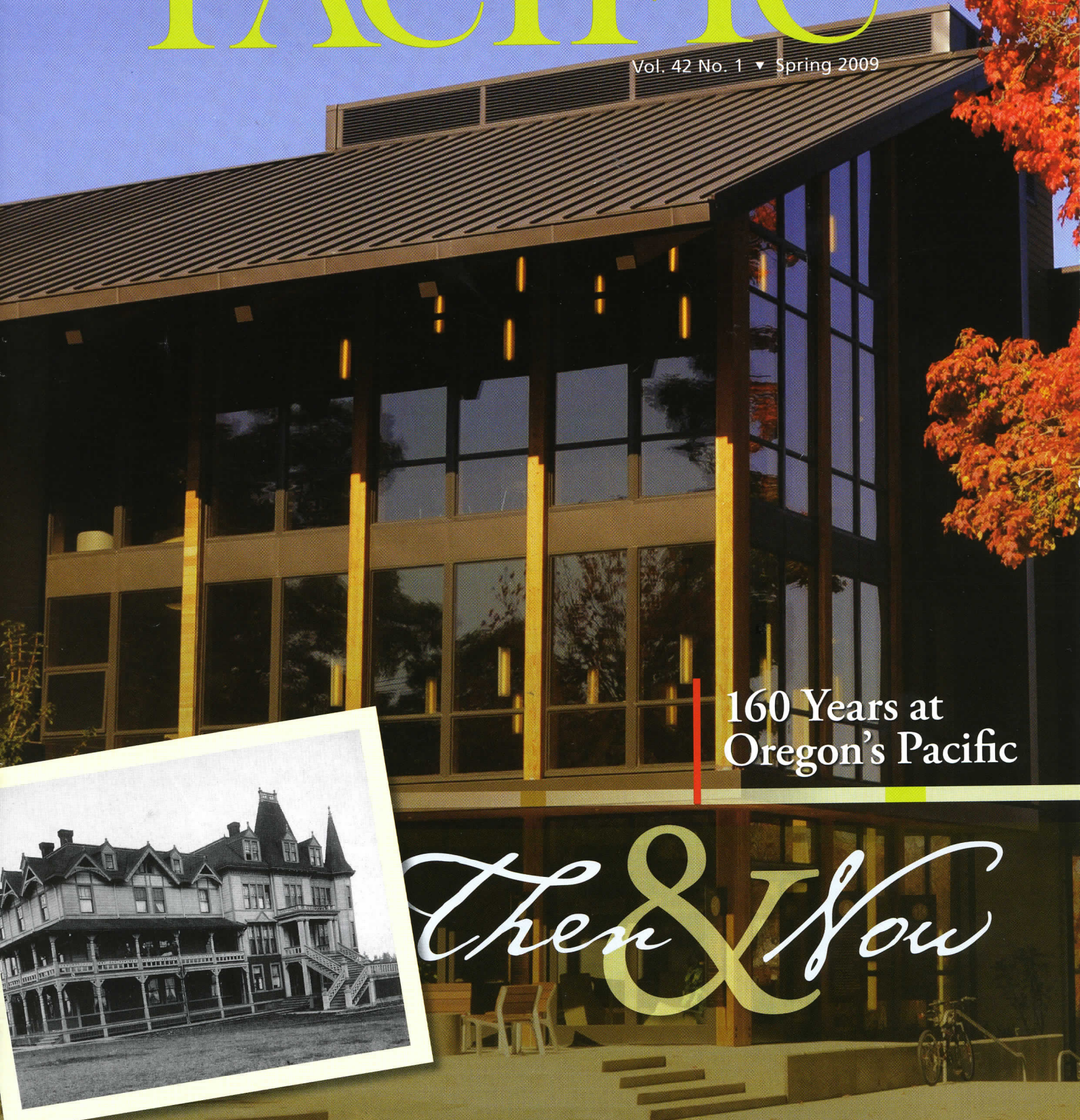


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160 Years at
Oregon's Pacific



Then & Now

Native Training School ▼ Pacific's Dr. Phil ▼ Erector Set Inventor

VOICES

OPINIONS AND REFLECTIONS FROM THE CAMPUS COMMUNITY



The training school in Forest Grove was a forerunner of the Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Ore.

IN CONSIDERING THE HISTORY of the Forest Grove Indian Industrial and Training School, the only thing that can be established with any degree of certainty is that little can be established with certainty. The nature of the topic has made it difficult to be objectively approached by many authors, and any study of the subject is severely handicapped by a lack of primary documents. Additionally, many of the necessary documents either have been destroyed in the intervening years, or never existed in the first place. This leaves much of the school's history up to interpretation and extrapolation from known facts, which are in some cases exceedingly few. As a result, published histories vary widely in their narratives of the school's early years. What follows is something of a synthesis of these different histories, and an attempt to put forward an understanding, though not necessarily a comprehensive one, of the Forest Grove Indian Industrial and Training School as it related to Pacific University. —*E.G.*

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Native American Training School

View from The 1880s

BY ELIAS GILMAN '09

EARLY VISITORS to the Pacific Northwest, most with missionary motives, established various institutions for the inculcation of the native population. While mostly religious in nature, elementary education was also an intermittent function. In this sense, the federal government of the United States was a latecomer to the field of native education.

The Office of Indian Affairs (later the BIA) was not established until 1824. Following a poor record of success with the few on-reservation boarding schools built from the late 1850s onward, the Secretary of the Interior authorized construction of two off-reservation boarding schools in 1879. One opened that year in Pennsylvania, and was followed shortly thereafter in February of 1880 by the opening of the Forest Grove Indian Industrial and Training School in Forest Grove, Oregon. The placement of the school was controversial: the 1881 report of the school's superintendent recalls that Forest Grove was "a community where the hope was expressed that the buildings might burn down before scholars could be gathered to put in them." However, the school gradually won over the hearts of townspeople, to the point that when the girls' dormitory was damaged in 1884, forty families offered their homes for the use of the displaced students.

The purpose of the schools was ultimately to facilitate the assimilation of native populations into white society. This was accomplished through a rigorous system which drew heavy inspiration from military discipline. A strict English-only language policy was enforced. Classes were taught in subjects assumed to be useful future occupations for acculturated

students: housekeeping, shoemaking, tailoring and similar skills. The decision to establish such a stringent schooling system was an outgrowth of earlier efforts and their results. Previous schools had been both on-reservation and driven primarily by religious values and teachings. These two factors had been blamed for poor results by some in the government: participants had a fair incidence of returning to their native beliefs after schooling was completed. And as might be naturally expected, living on reservations in full contact with their native languages and culture, little incentive existed to encourage adaption of a different language or foreign cultural practices. Thus, the determination was made that students should be separated from their native surroundings and be schooled in an exactly controlled environment.

The head of the Forest Grove school was Lt. Melville Wilkinson. Wilkinson had been in the Northwest since 1874, serving as General O.O. Howard's secretary. His time in Oregon prior to managing the Indian Training School is a relatively blank slate; other than involvement with the Young Men's Christian Association, little can be definitively established about his character or motivations. Regardless, he was apparently upstanding enough to win the support of the Pacific University Board of Trustees, which appointed him Professor of Military Science and Tactics in 1879. The Board was also aware of his previous work with Indian education, a

part of his position with Gen. Howard, who was known to be a supporter of native education programs.

The founders and trustees of Pacific University and Tualatin Academy were also familiar with efforts to aid Indian education. When Harvey Clark came to the Oregon Territory in 1840, one of his first efforts was to establish a school, in 1842, that served Native American children, holding classes in his home a scant ten miles from Forest Grove, where Tualatin Academy and then Pacific University would be founded seven years later. Though Clark was no longer living by the time the question of an Indian School in Forest Grove arose, other members of the Board of Trustees were strongly supportive of providing education for members of the native community.

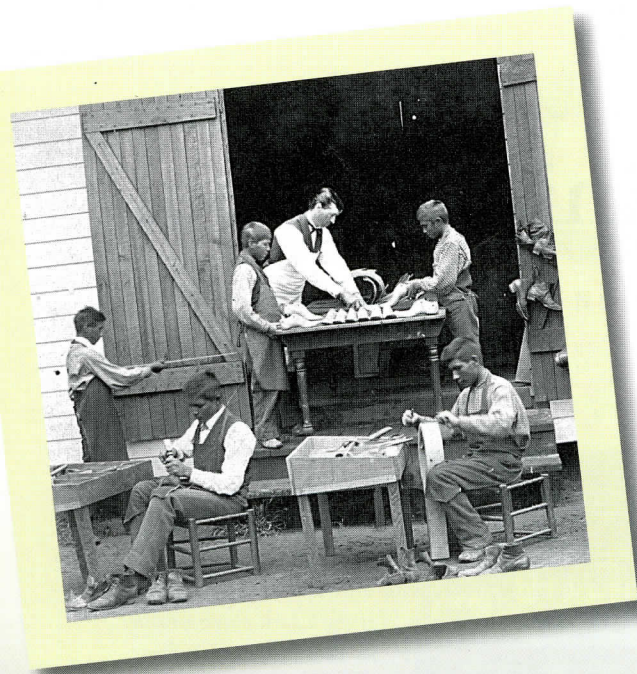
The trustees were fully aware that in getting Wilkinson, Forest Grove would be receiving an Indian school as well. However, the minutes of the Board of Trustees record that the board wanted a clear distinction to exist that such a school would be an institution of

OCTOBER 2, 1880 | U.S. President Rutherford B. Hayes came to Forest Grove to visit the Indian Training School, the only sitting president to visit the city.

the government, especially with regard to "pecuniary liability," but also in the fact that the University itself had no role in the daily running

of the school, nor did it determine its curriculum. The trustees intentionally limited themselves to an advisory capacity as educators ("to supervise the education of the Indian youth") and actual material support given to the school from the University totaled the loan of a four-acre

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Students learned skills in shoemaking, tailoring and carpentry at the Forest Grove school.

parcel for its use. Over the five-year period that the school was in Forest Grove, the University's formal involvement was limited to the formation of a supervisory committee (comprised of the president of the University and the president and secretary of the Board of Trustees); a series of regular visits to the training school to monitor progress, campus upkeep and personnel; and the issuing of reports to the University's Board based on these visits.

On the whole, the University was supportive of the stated goals of the training school, seeing them as very much in line with other attempts at Indian education: "...the Trustees of T.A. and P.U. approve the school as an example of the policy of government to treat the Indian as a man, with rights of person and property, and to educate him to enjoy the rights, and to fulfill the duties of citizenship." Taken in strictly this sense, it is difficult to wholly impugn the motives of the board, products of their time as they were. Although modern sensibilities lean more towards preserving native cultures rather than a policy of acculturation, it appears from available documents that members of the Pacific community were motivated by a

genuine interest in furthering the well-being of the Indian students that was consistent with understandings of the period.

This does not by any means infer that members of the Board unquestioningly accepted everything about the operation of the school. In particular, Dr. Myron Eells recorded in his diary deep concerns regarding what is today one of the more controversial elements of the school. Throughout the operation of the school in Forest Grove, there were reports of children being forcibly removed from their homes and given over to the school. These were prevalent enough that some accounts of the school today report that the students were "taken from the reservations." The reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs deny the practice altogether. As with much contentious history, study seems to indicate that the situation actually rested squarely between the two extremes.

While it seems from available evidence unlikely that all, or even most, of the children were taken from their homes in a forcible manner, it is also not possible to deny that the practice ever took place. Either way, Myron Eells strenuously decried it. "The forcible taking of the last six students from the Puyallup Indian Reservation I think was unwise," he observed. Eells was similarly in disagreement with the sequestration of students at the school for the duration of their education, feeling that they should be allowed to visit their homes and families at intervals. While the best record that remains of personal thoughts of the Board is limited to Eells' diary, it is likely that others shared his concerns. The operation of the school, however, fell to the government, and the supervisory committee from the school could at best privately voice their concerns to government officials.

In the end, it is difficult to fully take stock of the involvement of Pacific University in the Forest Grove Indian Industrial and Training School. One of the few things that is sure is that it would be a mistake to conflate the University and the school, as some so often do. The school and the University were in no way contiguous, either physically (the Indian school was half way across town), or in terms of their administration. The association that did exist was due to the desire of the government to seek affiliation with a reputable educational institution for some guidance about matters of education, and genuine feeling on the part of the University's Board of Trustees that they were aiding the school's students by providing them with what was, for the time, considered a great practical education.

Some of the more contentious practices of the school were not in any way supported by members of the University, which in any case had no actual control over the operation of the school. As such, it is perhaps best to view the facts of the school's relationship with the University for what they are: the best attempts of a group of educators who were indeed products of their era to do what they saw best to ensure education for native children.

Though it is now commonly recognized that such a forced educational policy was inappropriate, it is important to remember that as far as the record shows, those members of the University who championed Indian schooling professed both in public and private purer motives than many in the government who advocated for the establishment of such schools.

While Pacific University's involvement with the school should likely not be viewed with anything approaching pride, neither, perhaps, should it be seen as a terrible thing, for it seems that if anything the presence of University advisors proved a moderating factor on the part of the government when operating the school. ☀