

Pride and gratitude: two eras, two yearbooks
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In the past, yearbooks were important social media for college students—full of memories, photos, and jokes, and deliciously inscribed by friends and teachers.

What can college yearbooks tell us about students' lives at two important moments in United States history? This essay will analyze the 1936 and 1950 *Ramblers*, college yearbooks from San Benito Junior College. The two dates are equidistant from the United States' entry into World War II, the biggest event in U.S. history and in the lives of most who experienced it.

In 1936, of course, the United States, and especially California, were suffering through the seventh year of the Great Depression. Many students and their families had to work hard and be resourceful to survive. Though classes at California community colleges were free, students still had to buy books, and feed, clothe, and shelter themselves. As a result, during the Depression, a college education was out of reach for most young people. Thus, the students we meet on the pages of the 1936 *Rambler* were exceptionally lucky, exceptionally hard-working and/or exceptionally determined.

Yet these students are not grim drudges trudging dully forward. The first impression one has of the *Rambler 1936* is one of beauty and quality. It wears an impressive blue-tooled leather cover with a Conestoga wagon scene; it boasts gorgeous heavy paper and lovely webbed over leaves, fine pen-and-ink drawings, and consistently excellent writing. Actual photographs are glued in, which must have taken many hours. The annual has a voice, a presence—stylish, thoughtful, and proud.

This *Rambler* asserts its style early on. On page two, editor Art Miller explains that “the name of the book—*The Rambler*—and its theme—rodeo—have been chosen to give you a recollection of San Benito County, a region famous for its ranch life and fine horses.” The theme is echoed a few pages later with a bittersweet cowboy poem “The Call,” and with related artwork throughout. The theme these students adopted was continued in *Rambler* yearbooks and student newspapers through the 1990s—long after anyone knew why the name had been adopted in the first place. The college mascot, a ram, was a later misconstrued reference to the theme.

Ironically, the 1936 *Rambler* staff admitted that it argued for months about whether to put out a yearbook. The students working on the project had no experience, no money, and no clear support from the student body. The Great Depression pinched deep—no one had much to spare. Ad sales (about which more later) made the annual feasible. The hard-working staff's pride did the rest.

Pride is, in fact, another key theme in this yearbook. First and foremost, students made clear that they took pride in their college. We learn on “A History of the School” page

that since its founding in 1919, San Benito Junior College had enrolled almost 700 students, and approximately 160 had gone on to other higher education institutions. Scholarship mattered to these students, and they appreciated their teachers. In 1936 SBJC had 16 faculty, 7 men and 9 women, including Claude Settles, the Junior College's dean, to whom the yearbook is dedicated. Fully 12 of the 16 had done all or some of their academic preparation in California, often at the University of California, and others came from colleges and universities all over the the West. Nearly all had completed graduate work, and their credentials are carefully listed.

The gender dynamics at a college with a slight majority of female faculty become more interesting when we note that SBJC was part of a trend common in early 20th century higher education: female students frequently dominated academically when they competed pencil to pencil with men. The top five students at SBJC in 1936 —Mary Barulich, Mary Brown, Louise Kurtyak, Margaret Melhus, and Caryl Ladd--were women. Numbers six and seven, Warren Hain and Fulton Picetti, were men who were also Block H athletes. (If women had had sports opportunities, would their grades would have dipped?)

Gender is also an intriguing factor in graduation rates. There were twenty graduates in 1936. Fourteen were women and six were men. This ratio is typical. A *Rambler* yearbook from 1957 lists every graduating class from 1922-1957. If we disregard two abnormally small years (1931 and 1932, with only two graduates each), graduating class numbers were robust from 1928-1942, averaging about 19 students each year. Usually more women than men graduated in this period. As we shall see, the war reversed these ratios.

These students were also proud that 16 of the 20 graduates were headed for further studies; they listed each scholar's destination along with his or her photo. The four graduates who announced no further college plans were all women. Five others, male and female, intended to go to UC Berkeley, and two to UCLA. Three said they'd attend San Jose State and one Stanford—though in the end, Fulton Picetti joined Warren Hain there, despite Picetti's stated intention to enroll at St. Mary's. Three women were heading to Munson's Business College. In the depths of the Great Depression, these students were looking ahead to bright futures.

Student pride comes up again when the *Rambler* staff explains a mixed men's athletic record. A page is dedicated to frank discussion of the problem that the junior college, which should have led in local sports, was at a disadvantage because local high school teams got first shot at using the athletic fields and gym. SBJC was not part of a league, and athletes played a random assortment of opponents, including high school teams. They had a 5-2 record in football and 0-4 in basketball. The complaint is made earnestly—given better opportunities, the athletes naturally would shine. But there may have been another factor in the less-than-impressive showing. There were only 17 athletes total in basketball and football combined—with four who doubled in both

sports. In any case, the athletes appreciated their own exertions: the Block H Men's Athletes club asked the student body to pay half the cost of letterman sweaters, and the student body did so.

The student body at SBJC was small and close-knit in 1936. There were only about seventy students total, though their surnames reflect the already-considerable diversity of the area—among the Smiths and Jarvises and Hains, there were also Italian, Portuguese, Croatian, Japanese, and Mexican surnames.

The students mixed often and well. The Associated Women Students held Friday night dances in the sewing room, a “Jinx,” and a tea for students' mothers. The only fraternity on campus was coed—and exclusively for journalism student “pledges.” The Dramatics department abandoned old three-act plays and opted for nimbler one-acts. They had fun—there's a slang section, a section on students and their “crimes”, and sly recaps of the year's events, including Sneak Day (known as Ditch Day to later generations). Given the prevalence of real hoboes during the Great Depression, it's interesting to note that students held a Hobo Day. Photos at the end of the book show students in oversized clothes and old hats—insensitive to the ruin many experienced, true, but an irresistible chance to get out of the ordinary.

It's hard to trace what happened to most members of the class of 1936. Many women disappeared into marriages that changed their surnames, though Mae Renfrow was still living, at age 102, in 2018. Fulton Picetti served honorably in WWII and eventually returned to Hollister, where he died in 2012 at the age of 96. A lifelong advocate of education, he left behind a legacy that now funds three local educational organizations through the Community Foundation. Loren Bryan lived to be 90, ranching in Paicines and working for the local Farm Bureau. Warren Hain also survived the war to come home and continue his family's farming tradition.

The students from the class of 1936 returned from the war to a changed world. Historians tell us that the war transformed just about everything, from the structures of aspiration and opportunity to the materials used in everyday clothing and food. One predictable local change was that the number of SBJC graduates dropped as the war developed. Men went to war, and women had other new, and excellent, work and life options. As a result, enrollment at the college declined. Muriel Winter Brem, a student during the war years, remembers classes of only seven or eight students but a strong *esprit de corps*. In 1943 there were only nine graduates (three women, six men). In 1944 there were eight graduates (seven women, one man), and in 1945 there were only three female and no male graduates. There was no paper for printing yearbooks during the war—and in fact, according to the 1949 yearbook, there had been no yearbooks produced for eleven years. Whatever the reasons for not producing a yearbook from 1938 on, once the war began, Brem says there was simply no paper available for printing an annual.

The many changes that occurred after the war are reflected in the 1950 *Rambler*. The class of 1950 was smaller—only 13 graduates-- and there were only about fifty students total enrolled at the college. But suddenly in 1950 there were frosh, sophomores, and 15 “specials,” students who got special permission to take less than a full load—i.e., part-time students. This was not an advertised option in 1936, but it became inevitable. The specials had a photo in the yearbook but seem uninvolved in campus activities which suggests that they may have been older, working, and/or raising families. It also suggests that the college was embarking upon a gradual process of opening doors to less traditional students, who became a large percentage of the student population by the 1970s.

After the war the number of graduates began to increase, and male graduates slowly began to outnumber women through the 1950s. Perhaps because of veterans’ needs and changing gender patterns, there are ten male graduates in the 1950 *Rambler*, and only three women. This yearbook also has a much stronger Mexican-American presence than that of 1936, with four or five graduates who have Hispanic surnames. Significantly, there was also one Japanese-American young woman graduate. (After internment, some families returned to San Benito county to start life over again.) (The presence of students from diverse backgrounds does not automatically, alas, result in sensitivity—a 1950 student minstrel show is proof of this.)

What else changed?

In the reinvented 1950 *Rambler*, we immediately sense a different era. The bright yellow annual is well-made, but the lettering seems jokey, even cartoonish, compared to the sophistication of the 1936 version. The annual is less carefully put together, with far less text, almost no commentary from students, and far more photos without captions. It was clearly intended for people who were there, who would remember without reminders why there were donkeys on the basketball court or what Mr. Heffley taught. This was an annual created for student enjoyment in the moment, not for posterity.

And yet this yearbook made important written statements up-front. If the 1936 students were proud, the students in 1950 seem, above all, grateful. Right at the start, they give a serious thank you to the superintendent and Board of Trustees. They were particularly appreciated for “maintenance of the college at a high level of educational service to the young men and women who enroll each year.” The Board President, Dr. J.M. O’Donnell, was singled out as having served in 1919 at SBJC’s inception. Students also expressed gratitude to Dean Bauman, who fought to get them a lounge room, and to Mrs. Nolte, the counselor who kept records and transcripts. At the end of the yearbook, two more rounds of thanks were given to staff at the college, including custodians and cafeteria workers, and to people in the local community who supported the yearbook.

These expressions of gratitude were the only significant statements by students in the annual. Why were they emphasized?

Context may provide some clues. As pre-teens and young teenagers during World War II, these students had their own generational trauma. They and their families were part of California's super-mobilization to fight and win the war. Japanese-American families from Hollister were cruelly interned along with 110,000 others, despite being loyal, law-abiding, and for the most part, United States citizens. California families of all backgrounds coped with having members overseas in great danger, with wartime shortages, crowding, and restrictions, and with constant fear of attack by air or sea along the Pacific Coast.

Perhaps having been subjected to such terrors and losses, the students of 1950 were grateful to enter an institution that put them at the center and devoted all its efforts to their futures. Certainly many were able to pursue opportunities lost to older relatives and friends. In a war of unimaginable destructive power—there were 407,000 American deaths alone, and 20 million worldwide—everyone knew someone who didn't come home. Perhaps having survived Pearl Harbor, Hitler, and atomic bombs, this class of students took less for granted than generations who had been raised in peacetime. Perhaps it simply meant a lot to these students that they were being helped towards a brighter future. Maybe they were eager to get on with that future, and so they spent less time in self-reflection than the students of 1936. Their major achievement—acquiring a lounge—suggests an interest in strong social networks. Perhaps these young people had learned that it takes a community to get through a war—and a college education. Certainly one aspect of the yearbook reinforces the idea that these people appreciate each other and want to stay in touch: a list of faculty and student addresses at the end.

As a bonus, the list tells us where everyone (except a good proportion of the specials) lived, and thus how far they travelled to SBJC. The faculty without exception lived in Hollister. Students were more far-flung. The majority, 35, were from Hollister, but 11 came from San Juan Bautista, three from Tres Pinos, three from Gilroy, and one from Aromas. There was a bus to collect students and bring them to town for classes, but these numbers (and some photos and ads in the 1950 *Rambler*) also suggest an increasing reliance on cars in the post-war world.

Other post-war changes well-documented by historians are just becoming visible in the 1950 yearbook. The United States economy took years to convert from war- to peacetime, thus the consumerism of the 1950s is only hinted at here: female students were wearing a little more jewelry than they did in 1936, and the new lounge had a Coke machine dispensing 6.5 ounce bottles. Young women no longer wore everyday clothes to do PE; they had special shorts and blouses. And while the students in 1936 took a trip to Santa Cruz for fun, the 1950 trip was to the snow, which would take more planning, clothing, cars, and money. (The students in 1950 also didn't resist the snow trip's Sharp

Curves Danger road sign with curvaceous female students standing next to it—a mild enough joke today, but one that the 1936 students likely would have rejected as too suggestive. In 1936 prurience is limited to petting jokes.)

Academics seem less central to the college experience for these students. In 1950 there were eight women and eight men on the faculty, but the yearbook introduces them only briefly and does not give full names, let alone academic credentials or fields. Faculty and classes didn't take up much space in this yearbook; students emphasized their social, sports, and cultural experiences.

A final difference between the 1936 and 1950 yearbooks is in advertising. We learned from Art Miller, the 1936 *Rambler* editor, that two staffers, Annagrace Clark and Caryl Ladd, sold ads to make that yearbook possible. They sold, in fact, an impressive 73 ads. Perhaps even more impressive is what this tells us about the community—many, many business owners wanted to help out. The fact that 58 of those ads are the smallest size available tells us that business owners supported the students even when they may have had little to spare themselves.

By contrast, the 1950 yearbook has only 30 ads total. Perhaps the yearbook was funded in part by the college, making ad sales less important. Perhaps the students were less ambitious about producing an expensive, high-quality yearbook, and so didn't need to sell many ads. Or perhaps they simply had less time or less interest in visiting local businesses—these students seem happy in their own world at their hard-won lounge. Perhaps local businesses, consequently, were less interested in supporting the college yearbook—though with only six of the ads the smallest size and therefore least expensive, we can surmise that the local economy was doing better than in 1936.

Fourteen years apart, at the same college, with the same intention to publish for memory's sake, two groups of students produced considerably different results. They were marked by their experiences, which were in turn shaped by historical forces. If we look carefully, what was left behind—the memories, photos, jokes, yearbooks--reflects concerns and intentions that shed light on those experiences, those forces.