

Knowledge in the Company of Friends

A Brief History of UCSC's Beginning

by Sarah Weston

UCSC - History to 1964

In a sense, UC Santa Cruz came into being as the result of two men trying to broker a peace between the state's two major universities of the 1950s.

"I was very much concerned having seen the terrible battles between Berkeley and UCLA," said one of UCSC's original founders, Clark Kerr, in a 1987 interview. "There was a real fear that they would bust the university apart because of their antagonism."

In 1957 Kerr, a labor economist, assumed the presidency of the University of California system. Around that time, both Berkeley and UCLA agreed to a maximum of 27,500 students each, which made it apparent that excess capacity was going to have to be found elsewhere. In 1958, Edmund G. Brown was elected governor of California. Brown recognized these growing pains, and his solution was to commission a team of educators to develop what was called the California Master Plan for Higher Education.

"The Master Plan has been called 'The California Dream,'" Kerr said. "We were not dreaming the California Dream... we were more trying to escape the nightmare that was otherwise facing us."

Not everyone agreed with the recommendations for new universities in San Diego, Irvine, and Santa Cruz. The Democratic Lieutenant Governor didn't like that each of those locations was heavily Republican, while Brown's assistant was convinced that more state colleges, not universities, were called for.

However, it was President Kerr's vision that won out.

From the beginning, Kerr had very definite ideas of what the overhauled university system, particularly the new northern campus, should look like.

Though his doctorate was from Berkeley, Kerr had a particular fondness for Swarthmore, where he had done his undergraduate work. He considered Berkeley's organization to be along Germanic lines, a big school emphasizing graduate work and research at the expense of undergraduates. Swarthmore, on the other hand, was small enough to get to know everyone else. It was the intimate social experience of this small liberal arts college that he sought with the new UC Santa Cruz.

A "Small" University in Santa Cruz

Organizationally, he sought to emulate the English style used by Oxford and Cambridge. Any fan of Hogwarts and Harry Potter will find it familiar; the school would consist of a number of colleges, each with its own identity, theme and architecture, each watched over by its own provost. Kerr also drew his inspiration from Aigues-Mortes, a small French fishing town where he had summered, and was drawn to the idea of a walled village clustered against the forest.

Kerr's idea was that diversity in the university system was the key, so that instead of essentially identical institutions competing for students, each would attract those inclined to its particular style.

Kerr's right hand man from

the beginning was his old roommate, Dean McHenry. The two men had attended Stanford and Berkeley together for their advanced degrees, and McHenry now served at UCLA as a professor of govern-



McHenry above and Kerr were best of friends

ment studies. McHenry had recently directed a survey of higher education in Missouri, and now Kerr made him his assistant. He soon appointed McHenry UC's representative on the survey team for the Master Plan, and eventually founding chancellor at Santa Cruz.

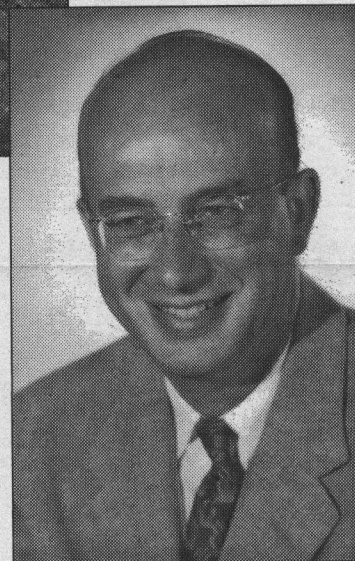
The Cowell Family Gift

Generally the men were best of friends and very like-minded, but their agreement was not universal. Most notably they differed as to the site. There were 70 or so original candidate sites, which were narrowed down to Santa Cruz, Almaden and Evergreen. No one, apparently, strongly favored Evergreen, but McHenry preferred Almaden because it was closer to San Jose's population center and political support. However, the selection team happened to visit Santa Cruz on an especially glorious day, and Almaden on an especially smoggy one, and the Presi-

dent's vision won out.

Another advantage was that while the Almaden site had 63 individual owners, Santa Cruz only had one, and they were willing to turn it over for free. The Cowell Foundation, owners of the former Henry Cowell ranch, accepted \$2 million for it, but then gave the money back to fund one of the new school's buildings.

Kerr disliked the first proposal for the new university, liken-



Kerr believed that diversity in the university system was the key.

ing it to a Tahoe motel. An urban legend is that the school's decentralized design was to discourage student radicals, who would have no central place to rally. But the final design predates that era, and there was plenty of disagreement about it between Kerr and McHenry.

The Cluster Approach

Kerr stuck to his vision of each college having its own identity, where students could enjoy the benefits of a major research university without becoming depersonalized. For

his part, McHenry feared that this would create ghettos where engineers, for instance, would never meet anyone studying the humanities. McHenry wanted much the same architecture and curricula from one college to the next.

In the end, the school became something neither man envisioned. Kerr's earnest efforts at collegiality were widely derided, from its lack of letter grades to its memorable "Chicken Course," history from a chicken's point of view. Some of its first students called it "a scruffy nascent utopia," while in general UCSC was said to stand for "Uncle Charlie's Summer Camp." Its first graduation ceremony was so disrupted by radicals that Kerr stayed away from the university for two years.

Still, UC Santa Cruz has probably become the most successful of the many experimental schools founded in the '60s. It has had letter grades since 1997, though most are still supplemented by written evaluations.

Its prestigious staff serving what are now 10 colleges includes members of the Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Academy of Sciences, and one MacArthur Fellow. It ranks first nationally for research in space sciences and physics, and boasts the highly regarded Arboretum and Long Marine Laboratory.

Though it has become virtually the opposite of the cozy liberal arts enclave its founders envisioned, it did contribute heavily towards its ultimate goal — peace within a troubled university system and a worthwhile alternative to what might have been a menu of megalithic academic machines. ■