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Chico State was something else

A 1950 grad shares tales of Pioneer Days, veterans and marrying the big man on campus

By: **Sarah Schaale**

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Betty Porter remembers when her classes were held in Kendall Hall and Bidwell Mansion. She remembers starting college with veterans from World War II. She remembers when the campus population was just over 1,500.

"Our professors were the ones all the buildings are named after," Porter said.

Porter, 74, graduated from Chico State University in 1950. Her college memories include Pioneer Days, "Little Nell" and her sorority, Delta Sigma Epsilon.

She doesn't know Chico State in terms of budget cuts or alcohol-related problems that first-year students came into when they started school in fall 2002. In 53 years, the campus has grown in size, population and events. Being a college student then was similar, but still an experience that was before the campus and community went through major developments and got to where it is in 2003.

Porter, then Betty Greenwood, said that when she was a student, Trinity Hall was the school library and her large lecture classes were held in Laxson Auditorium. There was a swimming pool behind what is now Selvester's Café-by-the-Creek. Shurmer Gym was the only athletic building, and a place where Porter spent much of her time.

And she knows her athletics. Porter married a Chico State basketball player.

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"He was the big man on campus," she said.

Porter and her husband, Clark, met in her first year of college. Their first meeting illustrates the Chico atmosphere of friendly interaction.

"I was riding with a girlfriend in her convertible and he was riding with a friend in his pick-up," she said. "And we sort of stopped and visited and that's how it all started."

Porter holds this memory as her favorite from college. She said she and Clark would often go out with another couple after Clark's basketball games, which Porter said were the place to be back then.

Porter said the students were very involved in the school's athletics back then. Women weren't a part of intercollegiate sports in the late 1940s. Porter said she would have tried to play if she could, but instead spent most of her time cheering on her husband.

Porter said although she thinks Nettleton Stadium and the baseball team has done a lot for school spirit at Chico State today. When she was a student, they would sing a hymn before each sporting event to promote school spirit and unity.

"It was sort of like the national anthem," she said.

Porter and her husband continue to support the team Clark was once a part of. The two of them have season seats to Chico State basketball games.

And of course, Porter remembers the football team. While Porter said it wasn't the focus of athletics, it was an important asset to the school. She said she wishes it were still a part of the university for times when the sport was traditionally more important.

"Somehow homecoming without football isn't homecoming," Porter said.

But football isn't the only thing Porter experienced that students don't have now. She remembers the pranks, parades and parties that were extinguished from Chico State in the 1980s.

"We had the infamous Pioneer Days back then," she said. "It was something the whole town participated in. It was just a week of fun."

Porter said the student body would elect "Little Nell," who would lead the parade with the elected sheriff.

"People would come into our classrooms and say that Little Nell had been kidnapped, and all the guys would get up to go save her," Porter said.

There were also parties. Porter said the university would put on a pre-Pioneer Day dance along with a Pioneer Day dance. She said there wasn't the out-of-control debauchery or riots that led to the cancellation of the holiday.

"It was a celebration," Porter said. "There was drinking, but not to that extent. We didn't have any of the problems that developed later."

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She said the fraternities would put on dances where a lot of students would drink, but alcohol wasn't considered to be an issue that many consider it to be now.

"Nothing happened like has happened recently," Porter said.

Porter said being in a sorority helped her to be involved with the university. She said there wasn't any elitism with being a part of one and that it was just another club on campus.

"We had teas and fashion shows," she said. "I enjoyed it then."

She said there wasn't a label on sororities and fraternities that many students put on the organizations now.

"Some had classifications, like some (fraternities) would be all athletes," she said.

Porter said her sorority would hold its meetings on campus in a classroom because the organizations didn't have houses. Her sorority adviser was Vesta Holt - the woman whose name rests on a building on the north side of campus.

The university didn't have dorms, either. Warner Street held a "Vets' Village," a small neighborhood for married veterans and their families.

Porter said that being in college with the veterans was entertaining, because they knew how to be serious but still have fun.

"Here were these young innocent girls thrown in with these boys who had just gotten back from war," she said.

She said they weren't very open about their war experience.

"They didn't talk about it much," Porter said. "I think it's rather indicative of what they went through."

She said the veterans were mature, which she said was a nice change from boys in high school. She said they had their priorities straight and were driven to make it through college. She said she was the same way.

As an elementary education major, Porter had a full load of classes on top of working for an accountant for extra money.

"I didn't have a lot of time to fool around on campus," she said.

In her school years, Porter remembers the students having close interaction with their professors because the campus and community were both so small.

"You made dear, dear friends with the faculty that carry on to this day," she said. "It would be so difficult to get to know people that personally (now), I think, because of the size."

And as such a small community, transportation was still rather effortless as it is now. Porter said Chico wasn't yet a "bicycle town," but the community did utilize their legs to get around.

"We didn't have a car in our family, but walking, I could get to class in minutes," she said.

The apartment she lived in with her family while going to school still stands at Third and Hazel streets. Porter said she doesn't think it's changed since she lived in it over 50 years ago.

Porter was born in Hill City, Kansas, and came to Chico following her mother's family before she began Chico High School. Clark was born and raised in Chico. Although neither of them have any immediate family in Chico, this July will mark their 11th year back in Chico after returning to begin their retirement. But their experience this time was quite different than when they were students.

Porter is in her last year on the Chico State Alumni Board, where she is working with other members to resurrect the alumni association and get a local alumni group started. She said there are a lot of alumni living in Chico from before her generation all the way to recent graduates.

Clark continues to be involved in the university also. He was a member of the Iota Sigma fraternity when he was a student, as well as captain of the basketball team. He now serves on the advisory board for the natural sciences department and is a member of the Century Club board.

He still keeps Betty's 1950 sorority yearbook picture in his wallet.

"I always tell him, 'Get something more up to date,' but he's still got it," Porter said.

As she flipped through the worn pages of the book, she points to her husband's basketball picture and said, "That's my man."

Tucked in her 1950 edition of "The Record," Chico State's yearbook, are papers with long lists of names spelled out of them. She said two years before her 50th college reunion, she and Clark went to his Golden Grad Luncheon, where only about 16 alumni showed up. She said she was determined give hers a better turnout, and went through the yearbook and commencement pamphlet to find names of those she could ask to come. She said the turnout was much better.

Porter taught at Hooker Oak Elementary School before leaving Chico, and then continued to teach as she moved around. She and Clark spent their 40 years away from Chico in everywhere from New York to Missouri. After she graduated from Chico State, she moved to Corvallis, Ore., where Clark was in graduate school and Porter continued to teach.

Porter said she didn't have to do any extra work when she wanted to teach in other states, and that her degree from Chico was always well-respected.

"I felt my work at Chico State stood very well," she said.

They had two girls, Janice and Karen, when they moved to Westchester, N.Y., and Porter took 10 years off from teaching to raise her children. Clark worked at a chemical company as a plant pathologist.

The couple came back to Chico about every other year, so they saw the town go through

the evolution of the past 50 years. She said it's nice to see that the town has grown, but that she misses the humble town in her memories.

"In many ways it's still a very small town," she said. "And a lot of people who have gone to high school and college here come back to retire here."

She said being a college student now is probably very similar to her experience, but that possibilities are much greater for students today.

"I wish I were back doing the same thing," she said. "I'm sure I would have gone off in a different direction if I had the opportunity to go that way."

Porter said living in Chico helped her to have a college experience in a time where being a student wasn't as commonplace. Her and Clark were the first in their families to receive bachelor's degrees.

"I was just happy to be able to go to college," she said. "I don't think I would have been able to go to college if we hadn't lived in a college town because of finances."

Although she said being a Chico State student might not have changed much, she said she thinks that her class was something special.

"It was a very unique time to be in college," Porter said. "I don't think any other generations have experienced that."

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