Evergroove: A Personal Look at the Beginnings of The Evergreen State College

by Steven Willis

Third time's a charm, or so they say, and that is certainly the case with Evergreen being the third attempt to create a college on Cooper Point.

In 1894 Ohio Prohibitionist John R. Chaplin reserved 25 acres, "to build upon said College Site a plant suitable for college purposes and to be occupied and used for the same, which shall cost not less than $50,000 and which shall be completed within two years from date." Apparently, the college never went beyond paper and the venture fizzled out.

Six years later, the same Mr. Chaplin spearheaded another attempt. The 1900 venture was called The People's University. Could you imagine if it was here today all the jokes about "P.U."? This time the new school made it as far as getting a flag pole on the Cooper Point campus (apparently situated in the Athens Beach area).

While the Cooper Point site was still awaiting development, a building was used on Plum Street and the University did in fact operate for a short time with students, faculty, and even a school paper, *The College Independent*. But it died out about 1906. Chaplin had real estate ventures on the Westside, to help finance his academic vision, under the name Olympia Development Company. The ODC manager, fellow Ohio native Arthur S. Caton, was the Prohibition Party candidate for Governor in 1908. A street on the Westside still bears his name.

When TESC began to form, some Olympia old-timers recalled Chaplin's dream. He was remembered either as a charlatan or utopian, depending on the teller of the story. Apparently this split view would carry over into the third attempt.

So there was this thing called the Baby Boom, you see. And then there was this other thing the Library of Congress Subject Headings manual calls the "Vietnamese Conflict, 1961-1975." Combine these two terms, and you have the main ingredients for the creation of The Evergreen State College.

Who are the Baby Boomers? Those children born from 1946-1964 in the United States. The Boom peaked in 1957 at 4,308,000 estimated live births. However, for the purposes of this essay, I'll be mostly talking about the first wave of Boomers, those who were born during the Truman years and in Ike's first term, 1946-1957. The majority of TESC students in the 1970s came from this generation.

We were born into a country with 48 stars on the flag. Where television was just starting to become the cultural glue that would, for better or worse, bind my age group together more effectively than any political or religious movement. Where computers were the size of a minivan. Where segregation was still alive in the South. And where the threat of Hitler and the Japanese had been replaced by the Soviet Union and China.

The United States went into panic mode when the Soviets launched the world's first satellite, Sputnik, in 1957. To add insult to injury, that little chunk of metal flew over our skies on a regular basis and was easily spotted with the naked eye. The Cold War heated up and the Space Race began with a manned lunar landing being the prize in the contest. Once Neil Armstrong set foot on the Moon in 1969, the United States gained a major psychological advantage in the struggle to be the #1 superpower.

When John F. Kennedy took office the Cold War

A gathering at The Evergreen State College in the early 1970s. *Courtesy The Evergreen State College Archives.*

really got scary. The Berlin Wall went up overnight. The Bay of Pigs got messy. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, many people believed WWIII was about to begin. At Roosevelt Elementary we had three drills: fire drill, earthquake drill, and nuclear war drill. The nuclear war drill was like the earthquake drill (get under your desk) except the siren had a more eerie and mournful pitch to it. After several of these drills, many of us kids wondered if we were going to make it to adulthood.

This sense of being in a state of war, of being on the edge of disaster, persisted throughout our childhood and teen years. JFK was assassinated in November 1963 and Nixon resigned in August 1974. Those two dates in my mind serve as bookends for an era of chaos.

One world event that took place right before we were born, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, was the real dividing line between the way our parents viewed life and the way we perceived things. Having grown up in the shadow of that mushroom cloud gave us a sense of urgency in our protests. Working through the system seemed pointless. Something had to be done NOW!!!! before we blow up the whole world!

Also there was the draft. In the 1960s-early 70s, if you were male, you'd get a little notice from the Selective Service about a month before you turned 18 informing you that registering for conscription was the law. They had a lottery system based on your birthday. If you were assigned a number between 1 to 90, the odds of getting drafted were pretty high. My number was 68. But as fate would have it, Nixon ended the active draft that year. Also it was possible to avoid military service by simply being in college.

Now remember, we are the Baby Boom. Everywhere we went filled up. In Olympia, the grade schools were at top capacity in the 1960s. We opened up Oly's third junior high school, Reeves in 1969, built to accommodate our growing numbers. Olympia High School, which was Oly's only high school during this era, was as packed as a Japanese commuter train. And, thanks to the incentive of avoiding the draft, we filled up the colleges.

Now, when the Council of College Presidents released "A Plan for Public Higher Education in Washington" in 1964, calling for the creation of the first four-year school in the State in the 20th century, I'm sure they had all sorts of high-minded reasons and justifications. But the real deal was this: the Vietnam War was driving

thousands of young men into the world of higher education, where they might otherwise not have gone.

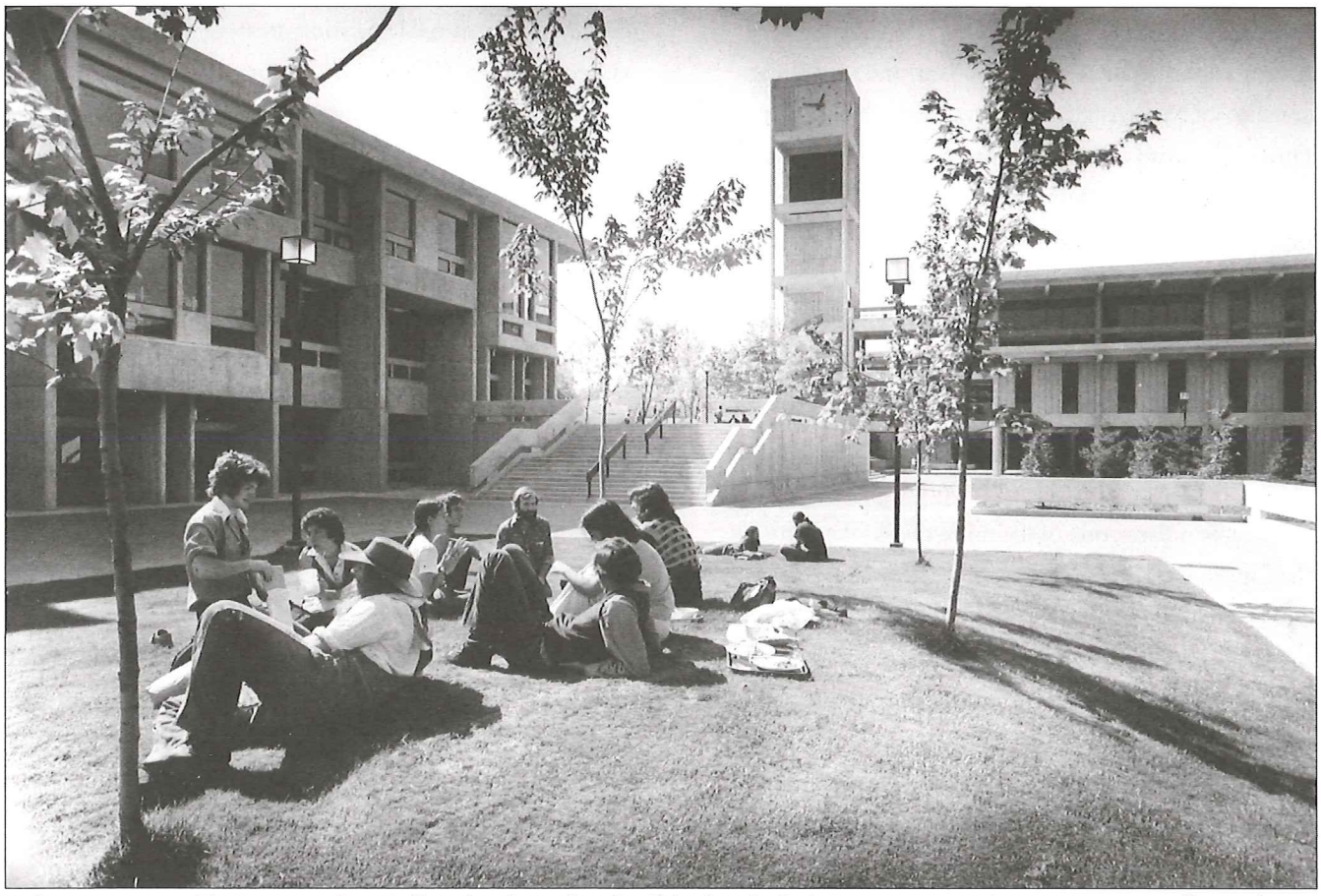
And so the stage was set.

Evergreen's dedication ceremony took place in April 1972 and provided one of the earliest flashpoints in the town/gown war that would rage for the rest of the decade. Here is my eyewitness account. The ceremony afforded many Olympians their first glimpse of the school. And you have to remember that the 1960s never really happened here. We knew about it from TV, but basically life in this town in the 1960s was really an extension of the 1950s. Evergreen was like an alien ship that landed in our midst, and, as College President McCann liked to say, the school, "dragged Olympia kicking and screaming into the 20th century."

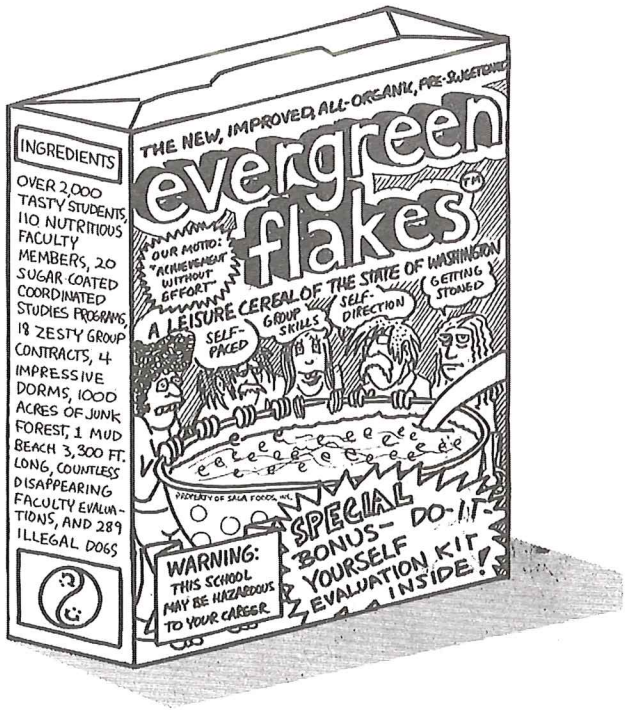
On dedication day we arrived at the circle and the first thing we saw was the flag at half mast. The same flag that had been presented to the College a few days earlier. Why was it at half mast? By coincidence, this day was also a national protest against Nixon's Cambodian bombing. This half mast flag alone was worth, and I'm not kidding, a year's worth of angry letters to the editor of the local newspaper. Then we walked across Red Square where flamboyantly garbed students handed out flowers and wished us peace.

The ceremony took place inside the lobby of the Library Building, with the landing on the stairs acting as a stage. President McCann, as part of the national protest, was wearing a black armband. This was also worth many angry letters from Olympians. Somehow, the fact that Dan Evans, our Republican Governor was also wearing a black armband, was mostly overlooked. Governor Evans spoke about the dwindling natural resources and our runaway consumerism and how he hoped TESC would be part of the answer in saving the planet. It was a visionary speech.

At some point in the presentation, students seized



Early 1970s scene on The Evergreen State College that shows the school's landmark Clock Tower. *Courtesy The Evergreen State College Archives.*



This 1974 cartoon by Matt Groening was originally published in TESC's *Cooper Point Journal. Courtesy Matt Groening.*

the microphone, denounced the War, and then hung an effigy of Nixon off the balcony. It was the first time I heard the words "Right on!" used in public (as I said, Olympia was a bit behind in those days). I enjoyed every minute of this and knew this was the school for me. That effigy of Nixon remained employed around campus for several years and seemed to go from one room to another. I often wonder whatever became of it.

So when did the public get the first inkling that the new college serving Southwest Washington was not going to be a traditional institution? It would appear that Senator Gordon Sandison, one of the more overlooked among the founders of Evergreen, has the distinction of being the earliest on record for advocating an innovative approach to higher education as the College was being formed.

Gordon Sandison was born in Auburn and raised in Port Angeles, where his father served on the City Council. He attended the University of Idaho and Seattle University. During WWII he fought in the Pacific theater while in the Marines and won the Navy Cross and a Bronze Star for heroism in Guam. Returning to Port Angeles and becoming an active Democrat, his fellow citizens sent him to the Washington State House of Representatives 1947-1959, and to the State Senate 1959-1977. Governor Ray appointed him Director of Fisheries, 1977-1981. In addition, he ran his own insurance business, and was a trustee for Western Washington University from 1980 until his death in 1989 at age 70.

Sandison is chiefly remembered as the Chair of the Senate Higher Education Committee for an astounding 18 years, including the time period when Evergreen was created and opened. Here are the opening lines in his long Seattle Times obituary:

"Although he served for 30 years in the Legislature and was state fisheries director under former Gov. Dixy Lee Ray, Sandison is best known as the architect of the state's community-college system and—with then-Gov. Dan Evans—as one of the creators of The Evergreen State College in the capital. As chairman of the Senate Higher Education Committee for 18 years, Sandison sponsored legislation creating the community colleges in 1967. A Democrat, he forged an alliance with Republican Evans to put Evergreen in Olympia and to establish its nontraditional educational approach."

Dean Clabaugh, the earliest of TESC employees (he was not a dean, he was a Dean ... oh, never mind) mentioned Sen. Sandison in his document, *The Evergreen State College Developmental Aspects Prior to Appointment of the President* written in November 1969:

"... Perhaps most important was the mandate to the college by executive and Legislature for an innovative approach. Governor Evans declared the need for a 'flexible and sophisticated educational instrument' as opposed to the 'vast and immobile establishment'; and expressed the need to 'unshackle our educational thinking from traditional patterns.' Senator Gordon Sandison, chairman of the Advisory Council, remarked: 'It was not the intent of the Legislature that this would be just another four year college; ... [the college would be] a unique opportunity to meet the needs of the students today and the future because the planning would not be bound by any rigid structure of tradition as are the existing colleges nor by

any overall central authority as is the case in many states.'"

By the time the Evergreen Study was presented in 1979 by the Council for Postsecondary Education, which called for severely gutting TESC's experimental approach and making the College more mainstream, both Evans and Sandison were no longer in as powerful positions to protect the school as they had through most of the 1970s.

The Evergreen Study itself pins down the very first meeting of the Trustees as the key moment: "The earliest documentable reference to an educational mode for Evergreen that would be other than conventional appears to be in the comments of the then Chairman of the Senate Higher Education Committee ... Senator Gordon Sandison. In August, 1967, at a meeting with the newly appointed Board of Trustees for the College, Senator Sandison advised it to study the innovations and experiences of other new colleges around the country. He suggested that the new college be of a 'perhaps different type. The present three state colleges were built many decades ago and followed traditional lines. We would like this to be a college that will meet the needs of the State for many years to come and perhaps can be as modern fifty years from now as at the present.'"

So there you have it. The seed was planted by a Port Angeles WWII Marine vet and insurance salesman, and he was a true son of Washington.

STEVEN WILLIS had his formal education from kindergarten through college in Olympia, receiving his degree from TESC in 1979. He currently lives as a hermit with four cats in an overgrown huge yard in McCleary, Washington and is probably best known as the creator of Newave comix icon Morty the Dog. This contribution was modified from his 100-chapter history of Evergreen: Evergroove Trivia, available at: *http://www.olyblog.net/evergroove-trivia.*