Oswald the Penguin never guilty of puffin

It turns out that Oswald the Penguin is just as smoke-free as the rest of Clark College.

Last week, an item in this space speculated on the origins of Clark’s mascot and rejected an old (and wrong) theory that the original penguin had been part of a 1950s cigarette marketing campaign.

But the penguin actually came to college with Larry Rakestraw. And you can’t get any earlier than that because Rakestraw was the first student to enroll during Clark College’s first day of registration on Sept. 28, 1953.

During the college’s 50th anniversary celebration in 1983, Rakestraw recalled receiving the 4-inch-fall blue penguin for Christmas in 1952. “If placed on an incline, it would walk down the slope with the determined but uncertain gait of a sailor on shore leave,” Rakestraw wrote. “I took it along when I went to Clark.”

Rakestraw “walking” his penguin in the fall of 1953 when Robert Oliver, the college dean, happened by. “The college needs a mascot,” Oliver observed, and Rakestraw donated his penguin to the college.

Nobody knows where the original Oswald wound up, what with the college moving to several different locations over the decades. But some replicas were created for Clark College students in 1959 and 1940. Clark alumni Wallace M. Miller, class of 1940, donated his replica to the college.

It’s believed to be the last remaining Oswald that represents the first decade of Clark College’s existence. “It was on display last fall in the Campus Library in our 75th anniversary booklet, which showcased treasured college items from a different decade each month,” said Barbara Kerr, college spokeswoman.

From tux to tennies

Lots of other versions have taken form over the years. A sketch in the 1928 Galapagon yearbook shows him in a tuxedo next to a lovely female penguin named Suziee, who is decked out in a gown.

His current wardrobe is a bit more informal, with Oswald wearing a necklace and tennis shoes. But whatever form he’s taken over the years, Oswald continues to thrive: “At age 75, he is a lively and healthy penguin,” Kerr observed. “Perhaps that’s because he never smoked.”

Off Beat lets members of The Columbian news team step back from our newspaper beats to write the story behind the story, fill in the story, or just tell a story.

Suziee and Ozzie the penguins in the 1928 Clark College yearbook.