

# Happy 75th Anniversary Clark College

By Bob Moser

Does it matter, as Clark College celebrates its 75th year, how difficult its birthing was?

It absolutely does matter and should continue to be honored. It's an amazing history.

That any fledgling college, founded in the depths of the Great Depression, survived at all is no small wonder. The ages of older *Messenger* readers should enable them to imagine the hardships faced by Clark Junior College in 1933-34. And these hardships are well documented in the diary kept by Robert T. Oliver from January 1, 1934 through the spring of 1935.

John Todd, who had married into the pioneer Hidden family, started the college and hired Oliver, a 24-year-old with a new masters degree from Pacific University. The college had no sponsorship and no financial resources, Oliver noted in an essay he wrote in 1976. Worst of all, the few students who did agree to attend had little or no money. That one student paid his tuition in cord wood is more than a legend. It helped keep Hidden Hall, the college's rented, sturdy brick structure at 13th and Main, warm in the winter.

The person who tended the furnace lived in the building, as did Robert and Mary Oliver, and is forever linked with the college's survival during that first year of deprivation and desperation.

Lawrence Rakestraw, a graduate of Washougal High School, had been out of school awhile and was working at the Pendleton Woolen Mill. He did something that no other student could even contemplate; he paid an entire year's tuition (\$80) in advance!

As Clark's director of public relations starting in 1960, I began searching for Dr. Oliver as part of the college's effort to celebrate America's Bicentennial in 1976. Found him in Sedona, Arizona. He and the succeeding chief administrative officers—Lewis D. Cannell, Paul F. Gaiser, Dwight C. Baird, and I.S. Hakanson were invited by President Richard A. Jones to return to the campus and to the Hidden House for a reunion of chief executives in April 1976.

Each had been asked to write an essay about their years leading Clark College. They did. It's a useful document in the college's history.

Clark today is totally committed to its students. It certainly was in 1933-34 too. Oliver, who eventually had 59 books published on a variety of subjects, used the word deprivation to describe the situation faced by the four faculty members and 18 students in that first semester. But, he wrote, "there was the quality of the human spirit that refused to accept defeat. We dreamed the impossible dream and we never stopped working to insure that whether the life span of the college should be a year or two or a hundred or more, it would provide for every student a solid opportunity for substantial learning."

I carried on a correspondence with Dr. Oliver from 1976 to 1992. He became the most inspirational person I have ever met and clearly achieved more in his lifetime than anyone who has ever worked at Clark College.

Orv Iverson, a Clark speech and forensics teacher/coach, told Dr.



Robert Moser, left, shakes hands with Robert Oliver in 1984 at the Hidden House Restaurant in Vancouver.

Oliver that a speech and rhetoric text his Portland State U. professor had used had been written by Oliver more than 20 years earlier, a virtually unprecedented textbook longevity.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the first Clark dean's career was the period when he served as the personal advisor to Syngman Rhee, both before and after Rhee became the first president of the Republic of Korea. Oliver told me about a three-person meeting in Rhee's office in Seoul: Dr. Rhee, Dr. Oliver and John Foster Dulles, America's Secretary of State. Oliver was presented Korea's highest civilian award for his service to the nation.

What doesn't appear in the Oliver diary, a document I spent years convincing him to turn over to Clark College, is a discussion that took place at a faculty meeting during that first year. Should the college, which few Vancouver residents took seriously or expected to survive, struggle on or fold up its tent? The deciding factor? Larry Rakestraw had paid his full year's tuition in advance... when he was the only student to enroll on the first day of registration.

So what a treat it was for me to witness Drs. Oliver and Rakestraw meeting one another for the first time in 47 years during Clark's year-long 50th Anniversary celebration in 1983-84. Furthermore, Drs. Oliver and Lewis D. Cannell met for the first time on that same occasion. Cannell replaced Oliver as dean starting in Clark's third year.

I cannot briefly describe how fascinating Oliver's diary would be to those who've never known life before television and before scores of other modern marvels. However, disciplined would be one important word I'd use for that little band of teachers.

In Dr. Oliver's 1976 essay he wrote: "In my thinking about it at the time and also in retrospect, the word that to me best describes those first two years is not deprivation but quality. The students wanted to learn and we wanted to teach. I feel assured they got as much at Clark as they would have any place else. This was the goal our little faculty was determined to achieve. It has been the foundation on which the continuing success and expansion of Clark College has been based. Deprivation? Of course. But quality, above all."

Happy 75th Clark College!

*Bob Moser was a Clark College administrator for 32 years. He would love nothing more than to hear Robert Oliver address Clark College students and staff during the college's 75th year.*