

Off Beat

NOT QUITE the NEWS

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 repeated an old (and wrong) theory that the original penguin had been part of a 1930s 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, 1933.

During the college's 50th anniversary celebration in 1983, Rakestraw recalled receiving the 4-inch-tall blue penguin for Christmas in 1932.

"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 was "walking" his penguin in the fall of 1933 when Robert Oliver, the college dean, happened by. "The college needs a mascot," Oliver observed, and Rakestraw donated his pal.

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 1939 and 1940. Clark alumnus Wallace H. 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 Cannell Library in our 75th anniversary bookcase, 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 1938 Galapagon yearbook shows him in a tuxedo next to a lovely female penguin named Suzzie, who is decked out in a gown.

His current wardrobe is a bit more informal, with Oswald wearing a necktie and tennis shoes. But whatever form he's taken over the years, Oswald continues to thrive.

"At age 76, 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.



Clark College
Suzzie and Ozzie the penguins in the 1938 Clark College yearbook