MURKY DROPS FROM OLD PUMP ROTTEN

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Abstract

At the southeast corner of Stone Hall on the campus of Purdue University stands the Old Pump, an oft-forgotten artifact of the University’s earliest days. As the pump fades further and further into obscurity, we lose the chance to construct a more full history of Purdue University and the lives of students and faculty long gone. Today, University tour guides and the Purdue Reamer Club memorialize this wooden facsimile of a water pump as a monument to “romance and friendship and the spirit of the Purdue Woman.” But what is the connection between women and the Old Pump, and is that really all that it represents? In my research, I used the pump as an anchor for investigation into the lesser-known narratives of Purdue University, from its founding in 1869 through the 1950s when the pump was reerected beside what was then the Home Economics building. Drawing almost exclusively from original materials housed in the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center at Purdue University, I have discovered that, within that time frame, the Old Pump stood witness to both the romantic escapades of some of the University’s earliest female population and the activities of one of the most grotesque student organizations on campus, the Ancient Order of the Dormitory Devils. Thus, the chronicle of the Old Pump ties together two entirely separate but contemporary histories to provide the researcher with a more complete vision of Purdue University beyond the institutional narrative.

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INTRODUCTION

The Old Pump is the ultimate wallflower. It stands alone and unnoticed at the southeast corner of Purdue University’s Stone Hall. Student traffic rarely passes by it; the overwhelming majority of Purdue students will graduate without ever knowing it is there. The cracked and peeling paint lends it the appearance of verdigrised bronze except where it has flaked off to reveal the pale, old wood beneath. The plaque mounted to the ground in front of it presents a vague sense of the pump’s history:

The Old Pump

Older than Purdue itself, this pump was once a meeting place for campus sweethearts. Today it symbolizes romance and friendship and the spirit of Purdue. In recognition of the contribution of the Purdue woman to the preservation of this spirit, this pump is dedicated.

Purdue Reamer Club, 1958

The pump’s obscurity has only increased over time. “How many people actually read the plaque by the Old Pump?” laments the 1989 Purdue Debris, the now-discontinued student-published yearbook (Debris, 1989, p. 528). The dummy pump that remains is not well preserved. Should it be removed, its associated memories will disappear from everything but the archives, in this case the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, the location of many Purdue historical materials. The Old Pump has stories to tell; by forgetting it, important narratives of the University’s history could be lost as well.

METHODOLOGY

This article treats the pump as a case study for gendered history. The pump has not yet disappeared from living memory, but the only contemporary preservers of the Old Pump’s history are former faculty and alumni of Purdue University who either interacted with the pump or heard stories about it, the University’s tour guides, and the Reamer Club student organization that erected and dedicated the pump facsimile in the 1950s. For information on the pump’s history it is necessary to turn to the archival record. Purdue University’s Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections was absolutely essential to the research involved in this article. The vast majority of the pump’s presence in the archive (via photographs, illustrations, poems, and anecdotes) can be dated between 1880 and 1910, the period on which this article focuses. As the pump’s history is laid out, four distinct narratives emerge. First is the pump’s earliest history as a working part of a mid-19th-century family farm. Second appears the “feminine” narrative of the pump as a site of romantic dalliance for female co-eds in the early days of the University. Third is the “masculine” narrative of the pump as accomplice to the pranks of the Ancient Order of the Dormitory Devils. The pump disappears from the archive entirely for several decades until reappearing in the 1950s when the Purdue Reamer Club erected and dedicated the facsimile. This last narrative was the event that probably ensured the
The Pump and Romance

Anyone interested in studying the pump as a feminine object must first attempt to understand the behavioral expectations of young female students in the late 19th century. According to University tour guides, Purdue’s female student body would arrange liaisons with their beaux at the Old Pump on weeknights when they were not allowed to receive male guests (*Purdue University tour guide script*, n.d.). This tradition is explicitly mentioned as far back as the 1904 *Debris*, which quips, “No, Cordelia, the pump in front of Ladies’ Hall was not put there for the purpose of supplying a cooling draft to the thirsty wayfarer. It was put there that the Hall girls might have a place of keeping engagements unseen by the watchful eye of Mother McRae” (p. 296). “Mother McRae,” whose full name was Emma Montgomery McRae, was the beloved professor of English and matron of Ladies’ Hall in the 1890s (Topping, 1988, p. 64). Exactly how much Mother McRae knew about what went on at the pump is unknown, but only the most stalwart hearts dared drink from the pump by 1904. A poem, titled “Ode to the Pump,” published in the previous year’s *Debris* suggests as much:

Murky drops from old pump rotten—
Been there for ages forgotten—
Microbats of all diseases
Can be found there, if one pleases
Called for convenience a well,
But it’s a demon leagued with hell.
The water there’s as cold as ice,
The spot enchants—a bower so nice
That lovers have met there for years
Whispering in each other ears.
For spooning there’s no nicer glen,
I have been told before, but then
All will agree that he’s a chump
Who dares to drink from that old pump. (p. 160)
There is more to the ode, but enough can be gleaned from these verses to assure the reader that the pump was no longer serving its intended purpose. The site’s reputation for romance must therefore have been established in earlier decades. An old illustration, drawn in 1890, by famous Purdue alumnus John T. McCutcheon includes a note that refers to the pump as the “trysting place” of the 1880s and 1890s. These sources fail to identify the origins of the pump’s reputation; therefore, interested parties must look to the earliest days of Purdue University to understand this formerly well-beloved tradition.

American conduct books of the 1880s discuss the relative freedom allowed “young people” of the United States regarding proper modes of courtship (Young, 1882, p. 182). Why, then, were trysts at the pump necessary? The traditions of the Purdue Reamer Club state that, with the exception of parties and skating, female students were not allowed to receive calls from men on weeknights (Purdue Reamer Club, n.d., p. 1). As the rulebook for the Ladies’ Hall has been lost with time, clues about such behavior must be pursued more generally in period conduct books. *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness* informs its reader that, “If a young lady is not engaged she may receive calls from any unmarried gentleman she desires” (Houghton, 1889, p. 168). A lady, however, could never call on a gentleman except for business reasons. Formal calls were typically made in the afternoon and should have been completed before five o’clock in the evening (p. 128). Oral history implies that trysts at the pump took place in the evenings. Evening calls, according to the same book, implied “some degree of intimacy” (p. 128). In a period in which a handshake between a man and woman was a delicate matter, it is not difficult to believe that the Ladies’ Hall regulated hours for male visitors.

In the 1800s, a lady’s virtue, essentially her virginity and good reputation, was her most valuable possession, according to *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness* (Houghton, 1889, p. 178). The opinion of John Purdue, founder of the University, on the matter is clear. In 1836, he wrote a letter to a Miss Ann Knauere in which he railed against “the impropriety of young ladies keeping the company of gentlemen at night” (qtd. in Topping, 1988, p. 50). The young women who risked the wrath of Mother McRae must have been both resourceful and brave.

The decision to erect the pump facsimile in 1958 beside what was then the Home Economics building has serious implications for the Reamer Club’s dedication to the spirit of the Purdue Woman. Purdue remodeled the building in the 1950s, as chronicled by numerous University Board of Trustees minutes of that decade. The original building, proposed in 1920 as “a Woman’s Building at Purdue University, combining in one structure the space for both recreation and Home Economics instructions,” was intended to legitimize the instruction and practice of home economics as a science and to raise it to “a basis equal to any other academic or technical school subject” (Purdue University Board of Trustees, 1920). Even had the Purdue Reamer Club chosen not to dedicate the pump to the Purdue Woman, its location would have associated it inextricably with the University’s female population, who in the 1950s continued their attempts to make the field of home economics recognized as a professional field of study, as had their predecessors in the 1920s.

**The Pump and the Devils**

While the pump developed a budding relationship with the young women of the University, a far less romantic history was playing out in the Purdue Men’s Hall, the seat of the Ancient Order of the Dormitory Devils. The story of the Devils and their association with the Old Pump is to be considered a masculine narrative, not merely because the Devils were male, but because it is a history of men seeking power and recognition, and wielding that power against other men.

Most of the archival record of the Ancient Order of the Dormitory Devils is of questionable reliability, as it comes from the Devils themselves. The group was featured in the Purdue *Debris* of 1902, including a picture, the names of members, a brief history written by Dr. Test of the Department of Mathematics (the elderly man in the group picture), a record of the year’s events by the “Keeper of the Historical Scroll,” and a brief statement about the hall by the group. The previously mentioned record of the year’s events by the Keeper of the Historical
Scroll includes several mentions of the “Jordan” *(Debris, 1902, p. 165)*. As there is no body of water on campus, the Jordan is likely a reference to either the Old Pump or the nearby Wabash River. There is substantial evidence to support claims that the Devils made frequent use of the pump in their pranks. “Vague mysteries floated in the atmosphere around the Dorm. Belated travelers whispered fearfully that little drops of water had fallen like thunderbolts from a clear sky when they ventured too near,” wrote the Keeper of the Historical Scroll (p. 135). This brief excerpt refers to the rumored popularity of the nightly dousing of latecomers to the hall with the freezing water of the pump. Stanley Coulter, dean of the School of Sciences from 1905 to 1926, wrote fondly of the early days of the University and of this particular prank by the Devils in a piece titled “When I Came to Purdue,” featured in the 1924 *Debris*. He remarked, “No wise professor ever passed near enough to the Dorm windows to come within range of one of those paper bags filled with water” (p. 135).

In addition to the Devils’ official colors “hell-fire” and “absence of light,” the group’s official flower was the water lily and their motto was “Cleanliness is Next to Godliness” *(Debris, 1902, p. 163)*. Even without specific examples, one may gather from these choices that water, and therefore the pump, was important to the Devils. The group roster included five “Jordan Flood-Gate Attendants” (p. 163). I have identified three: Harland “Poke” Holman, William “Shark” Jackson, and Clyde “Barber” Keirn; but “Goosie” Jackson and “Caliper” Miller remain elusive *(Debris, 1904, p. 86; 1903, p. 215; 1904, p. 89)*. These attendants were likely responsible for fetching the invigorating water of the pump at any time that the “Instigators” required it. In 1902, Instigators “Cold Water” Mitchell and Hartley “Sleepy” Rowe seem to have graduated from the University in good standing, except for Instigator “Scorcher” Cumrins, who fails to appear on any lists of graduating seniors *(Debris, 1904, p. 99, 107)*.

One may speculate as to the power the Devils possessed given that they had no compulsions about dousing University faculty; if faculty were not safe from the Devils’ pranks, students could certainly not expect to be so. The 1901 *Debris* chronicles a brutal assault by the Devils on a man, presumably a student, who claimed that he “could go into the Dorm. any time he d—m pleased, and they wouldn’t do a thing to him” (p. 249). The Devils shaved their victim “with the sharp edge of a board,” dunked him repeatedly in a tub of cold water, stripped him, forced him to dance, and then made him run through the halls of the dorm, all the while “hot-ending” (which possibly meant spanking) the unfortunate fellow at each turn. Finally, they covered his body in drawings of the emblem of the Devils and sent him away with a warning (p. 249–250). The Devils’ pranks were not always harmless; in fact, they were sometime malicious, as this anecdote illustrates. Yet there is no known record of punishment for any of their activities, even when they mistakenly harassed the most powerful man at the University.

Robert W. Topping chronicles the incident of the dunking of President James H. Smart in his 1988 history of Purdue University, *A Century and Beyond: The History of Purdue University*, in which he writes that President Smart encouraged an atmosphere of “enjoyment and youthful exuberance” (p. 139). President Smart’s relaxed attitude came back to bite him when he became an accidental victim of the Devils. Topping writes:

> A favorite trick of the “dorm devils” . . . was to hide in the bushes and grab some unsuspecting student passerby and douse him under the campus water pump near Ladies Hall. On one occasion, they seized Smart himself and had him under the pump before his own protestations—“I’m President Smart! I’m President Smart!”—told them they had made a grievous error. (p. 139)

None of the perpetrators were punished, but Topping writes that several later confessed to being afraid that the president knew their identities by the sound of their voices (p. 139).

The 1902 *Debris* features an eerie photograph of the Devils dressed in white nightshirts that evoke later images of the Ku Klux Klan. The white-clothed students in the photograph gather around a nude young man kneeling in a supplicant position before a devil figure. The accompanying text reads:

> Some time later one of the spies came by stealth to visit his kinsman, but the ever-watchful Demons captured him, and to remove all traces of unbelief, he was baptized three times in the “Jordan.” He was then disrobed and made ready for the sacrifice. When all was ready he was placed upon the alter, the lightnings of Jove came down and enveloped him in a flash of blinding light, while the smoke from the incense hovered above as a cloud. (p. 165)

A cropped version of the photograph, this time featuring only the prostrate nude figure, is included in the *Debris* of 1904 with the caption: “This is Jimmy Brown, who was easy enough in his Sophomore to pose in this unique costume while the Dorm Devils took his picture” (p. 271). The only James Brown to attend Purdue University in those years was James Graham Brown of Marion, Indiana, born August 18, 1881 (Kleber, 1992, p. 128), of the Purdue University class of 1904. Brown
apparently never graduated, as his only other appearance in any Debris is his name on “The Melancholy Role of the ‘Also Rans’” in the 1904 Debris (p. 120).

Jimmy was not the only victim of the Jordan that night: “Many of the outer world wandered in, saw the error of their ways, and were baptized in the cool and sparkling waters of the ‘Jordan.’ But the multitude stood afar off, for they had heard rumors of the coldness and purity of the water” (Debris, 1902, p. 165). The purity of the pump was abysmal, if the author of “Ode to the Pump” is to be believed. The same writer also called the water “cold as ice” (Debris, 1903, p. 160). The threat of a dunking in the pump water posed a truly unpleasant danger to the student body.

The Devils disappear from Purdue University in 1963, after nearly a century of harassment under their belts (Purdue Reamer Club, 2013, p. 8). There is no known archival evidence for this particular date, only hearsay. The 1902 Debris was the last time the Devils, one of the most infamous student organizations in the history of Purdue University, offered any statement that still exists today.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This article treats the pump primarily as a case study for gendered history, but it is also colored by narratives of archival violence—the way that some histories disappear from the historical record or are overwhelmed by other—often safer—narratives. Though the question cannot be answered here, it is important to consider why the feminine history is the “safe” narrative that continues to be preserved in contemporary memory, while the antics of the Ancient Order of the Dormitory Devils almost exclusively appear in association with the archives in documents from around the turn of the 20th century. The 1958 decision to dedicate the pump to the “Purdue Woman” both erased the pump’s farming roots by connecting it exclusively with the University and created a gendered association. Nevertheless, the archives demonstrate that the Old Pump that sits at the corner of Stone Hall represents two histories. One is the “feminine” history of the pump as a trysting place for female students; the other is the “masculine” history of hazing and moderate violence carried out by the Devils. Yet if the Devils were so powerful and well known, why is the pump not dedicated to their doings? Why is it that the feminine history of the pump is the only one that remains? It is clear that Purdue University and the Reamer Club have constructed a gendered history of the pump, but further research is necessary in order to determine why the pump’s identity is so closely associated with late-19th-century femininity. Additional research might also lead to a better understanding of the Purdue Woman and just what she is meant to represent, as well as why the pump was chosen as its symbol instead of, say, Amelia Earhart. Other topics for investigation are the history of gender at Purdue University and student life around the turn of the 20th century. In any case, the Purdue University campus holds countless monuments that go largely ignored. Case studies of these other monuments hold immeasurable potential for uncovering forgotten or little-known narratives of Purdue University history.

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Figure 5. The Dormitory Devils in their nightshirts surround the vulnerable form of James “Jimmy” Brown, who kneels nude before a devil-like figure. This image was published in the 1902 Debris. Courtesy of the Purdue University Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center.