THE “IMMORTAL” BOILERMAKER

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Abstract

As Purdue University grows, the school’s rich history is sometimes neglected in lieu of developments in present-day interests and needs. Often, the only remaining evidence of community events and distinguished, local individuals are memorials, archive collections, and rarely seen documents. Many communities have access to such documents; however, as the available access to these collections slowly becomes unrecognized, so does the history and remembrance of the individuals and events. The purpose of this research was to determine the source of a small, tarnished trophy in Orlando Itin’s sports memorabilia collection in Bruno’s Pizza Restaurant. This trophy stands as one of the unrecognized items of living history in West Lafayette, Indiana, which spurred the research and development of a further question: how can community historians discover the concealed facts of their local history? Throughout this research, personal interviews and careful searches were conducted through Purdue University’s Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, local collections, online databases, and academic journals to recollect the memory of the recipient of the forgotten trophy, former Indiana Governor Harry Guyer Leslie. Leslie was not only a Purdue graduate, but a survivor of the infamous 1903 Purdue Wreck. He made numerous contributions to the University and overcame adversity to become governor of Indiana, but his memory and contributions to the University and state are barely documented. This article explores not only Governor Leslie’s history, but also examines the methods community historians can use to conduct their own local research.

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THE “IMMORTAL” BOILERMAKER:

Exploring the Forgotten History of Harry Guyer Leslie

Elizabeth Hudson, Professional Writing and American Studies

INTRODUCTION

Small communities throughout America have unique elements that set them apart from urban cities. In these small communities, chain restaurants and franchised stores are often overshadowed by customized, community-oriented businesses. For example, Bruno’s Pizza in West Lafayette, Indiana, is a niche restaurant that contributes many memories for locals. It is in Bruno’s that a forgotten individual from the community history was discovered. This discovery encourages other communities to find the forgotten within their area and to become local historians who question the presentations of history around them.

Community Archives

Immediately upon entering Bruno’s Pizza, observant or veteran patrons recognize that Bruno’s is not simply a restaurant, it is a museum. In the foyer alone, patrons see photographs, posters, ephemera, and memorabilia that commemorate local athletics. Orlando Itin, co-owner of Bruno’s, is a collector, and he uses his restaurant to share his passion with his customers by displaying the vast amount of items that he owns. While the collection does not discriminate based on athletic success, as it includes memorabilia from the local high school sports teams to Super Bowl-winning quarterbacks and Olympic divers, it does have one overwhelming focus—Purdue athletics.

The walls of the restaurant are covered with autographed jerseys, photographs, magazines, footballs, and signs. In Big O’s Sports Room, where the athletic collection is housed, there are even several tables made from Purdue University’s old, wooden basketball court floor. To look at each item would take days, yet Itin is able to discuss each one. In addition to the items on the walls of the dining room, there

is a large display case that features hundreds more of the smaller and more valuable items in Itin’s collection. In this display case, customers will find the oldest item in Itin’s collection, a football program from 1901, as well as football bowl game rings, autographed National Football League helmets, and various other items—nearly 200 in all. Among the trading cards, programs, rings, footballs, and photographs is a small, tarnished football trophy. As a researcher tasked with documenting the collection and making it accessible to future researchers as an “unusual archive” (Stephens, p. 10), this trophy caught my eye.

Searching for Facts: Methods for Researching the Forgotten

The trophy is simply engraved, “H. G. Leslie—Football—1903–1935,” and suggests no further explanation for its purpose. To begin uncovering its history, I first spoke to the owner of the collection, Orlando Itin. Unfortunately, Itin did not have much information about the source of the trophy, but he recollected that H. G. Leslie played football for Purdue and was later governor of Indiana. Itin then directed me to the State Road 26 bridge over the Wabash River because it had recently been dedicated to Leslie.

My interest was piqued by the questions that arose from the ambiguity of the trophy. Expecting to find information quickly and easily thanks to advances in modern technology, I conducted a simple online search for “H. G. Leslie,” hoping to read a short biography of his

Figure 1. (above) Harry Leslie was a member of the 1903 football team that was involved in the Purdue Wreck. He is pictured here with the rest of his team that season. Courtesy of the Purdue University Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center.

achievements and then move on to other work. However, the results of the search proved to be disappointing, and I struggled to find anything of substance. The lack of readily available materials posed a challenge and elicited further inquiries. I felt inspired to delve deeper and take more action than conducting a simple Google search. It was at this point that I recognized my potential investment in the uncovering of Leslie's story, and the responsibility I had as a community member to learn more and inform others of my potential findings.

After my initial search yielded few results, I determined that a thorough search of local archives and collections was the next step in the process of learning Leslie's history. The Purdue University e-Archives as well as the Purdue Libraries Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center provided information about Leslie that directed me to additional sources and keywords to further my research. This process of archival research became my method of gathering information—using information and key terms from archives to search for events, activities, organizations, or individuals to which Leslie had been connected. The process took me from e-Archives to physical archival collections, books, magazines, newspapers, online databases and websites, government publications, and personal interviews. These research sites, all of which would lead to information at another, worked collaboratively to make a history. What I discovered is that the materials needed to understand Leslie's life were out there, but because they had not already been brought together by a researcher, there was little authoritative interpretation of Leslie's history. This lack of interpretation has led to the forgotten legacy of Leslie in the West Lafayette and Purdue University communities. What follows here is a compilation of these varied sources to memorialize Governor Leslie, as written by this researcher.

THE "IMMORTAL" BOILERMAKER

Harry Guyer Leslie was born April 6, 1878, in West Lafayette, Indiana, to Daniel Leslie and Mary Burkhart. He and his siblings, Frank and Amy, lived on a farm in West Lafayette where he attended and graduated from the local high school. In May 1899, Leslie sought and was elected to his first position in politics as town clerk of West Lafayette (Kriebel, 2000, p. 186). In the fall of 1900, Leslie arrived at Purdue University as a freshman and immediately began to make a positive impact on his classmates. At Purdue, Leslie was nicknamed "Skillet," a moniker whose source has long been forgotten, as only close friends knew of its derivation (T. Leslie, personal communication, March 2010).

In his first year, Leslie was elected class president, a position he would be re-elected to each of his next four years as a Purdue student (*Debris*, 1901–1905). From his freshman year, "Skillet" was a varsity player on both the football and

baseball teams. In football, he played the fullback position, and in baseball, he played center field and first base (*Debris*, 1901–1905). In both sports he was recognized as a "Wearer of the 'P,'" the letterman award at Purdue. In his junior year, Leslie was named captain of both the football and baseball teams; the honor of holding the captaincy of two varsity teams simultaneously is a feat that no other Purdue athlete can claim (Gugin & St. Clair, 2006, p. 280) (Figure 1).

"Skillet" was known throughout the community. He was regarded by the local newspaper, the *Lafayette Journal and Courier*, as "one of the most popular men at the university" (Kriebel, 2009, p. 88), but it was not until the fall of 1903 that Leslie could be recognized as the "immortal" Boilermaker. Leslie was involved in the infamous Purdue Wreck that killed 17 people, including 14 of his teammates, as the football team traveled by train to Indianapolis to play against Indiana University in their annual matchup (see Figure 2). Leslie was among those considered dead at the scene and was actually taken to a temporary morgue. He remained unconscious for hours, until an undertaker noticed his arm twitch and felt a faint pulse. He was immediately taken to City Hospital in Indianapolis where he began a long and arduous 38-week recovery (*Purdue Alumnus*). He would forever walk with a limp, which would serve as a reminder of that fateful day as a Purdue football player. In the 1904 yearbook, Leslie's strength and perseverance was recognized by his classmates, who said of him, "He has had a strenuous athletic career, and nothing, not even a railroad wreck, ever got the best of him" (*Debris*, 1904).

"Skillet" would continue his education at Purdue, graduating with the class of 1905, who had adopted him as one of their own. While at Purdue, he was involved in many activities outside his athletic endeavors. He participated in the Athletic

Figure 2. *Debris* from the October 31, 1903 Purdue Wreck where 17 Purdue students and boosters were killed. Courtesy of the Purdue University Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center.

Association throughout his Purdue career, serving as a student on the Board of Directors and also as manager (*Debris*, 1901-1905). In 1904, he created the Purdue University College Republicans organization and was a member of such groups as the Bird Club, Masonic Club, Minuet Club, Sigma Pi, Lambda Chi, and Acacia Fraternity (*Debris*, 1901-1905). After completing his education at Purdue, he went on to the Indiana University School of Law in Indianapolis. He received his law degree in 1907 (Ruegamer, 1978).

Leslie did not stay away from Purdue for long. In 1908, he returned to West Lafayette where he continued to play an active role in the football program at Purdue, serving as an assistant coach for a season (see Figure 3) (*Debris*, 1908). He also coached the football team at Battle Ground High School (Post, 1984, p. 150). It was around this time that he met his future wife, Martha Morgan. Additionally, he played an integral role in memorializing the Purdue Wreck. He helped raise the funds to build the “Memorial Gymnasium” to commemorate his colleagues and teammates who lost their lives in the disaster (Purdue Sports). Memorial Gymnasium was finally dedicated in 1909, after much effort from Leslie, the Alumni Association, and fellow Boilermakers (see Figure 4). While in the West Lafayette area, he became involved in politics, opened a law firm, and was eventually elected as Tippecanoe County treasurer, a position he held from 1913 until 1917 (Ruegamer, 1978). Leslie was named executive secretary of the Purdue Alumni Association in 1925 and also served as the Purdue’s first athletic director (Purdue Alumni Association, Gugin & St. Clair, 2006, p. 281). His work with the Alumni Association found him acting as the managing editor of the *Purdue Alumnus* (*Debris*, 1928) with friend and fellow Trustee George Ade.

From Small Town to Statewide

Leslie continued to work in politics and was elected into the Indiana House of Representatives in 1923; he served as Speaker of the House in 1925 and 1927 (Ruegamer, 1978). His success in this position led to the opportunity to run for governor, and he received the gubernatorial nomination for Republicans in 1928. In 1929, he was sworn in as governor of Indiana, the first and only Purdue alumnus to hold this position (Kriebel, 2009, p. 217).

Governor Leslie took office as the Great Depression hit the United States. Leslie, blunt and simple in his political work (Ruegamer, 1978), strove to reduce taxes and government expenses. Unemployment and drought issues throughout the state plagued his term, and he worked to fix these problems. One of Leslie’s projects to reduce unemployment was to hire farmers to work on road construction projects. This was a system that was then implemented on the federal scale in President Herbert Hoover’s New Deal. He had connections with President Hoover, especially because of Leslie’s efforts to improve

children’s health and protection. President Hoover was invited to Governor Leslie’s Indiana Conference on Child Health and Protection in 1931, and the president was anxious to see the outcome of the conference and the success it would bring (Hoover, 1931).

In the years preceding his term, the Indiana Library and Historical Board collected funds to build a state library and historical building where the state archives would be housed. Governor Leslie was tasked with appointing a building commission, purchasing the land, and overseeing the construction (Indiana State Library, n.d.). This building, completed during the next governor’s term, remains in use as the Indiana State Library and is located on Ohio and Senate Streets in Indianapolis (T. Leslie, personal communication, March 2010). Leslie also played a role in the formative stages of the state park system and historical memorials. His support of Shakamak State Park in southern Indiana, the George Rogers Clark Memorial, and the Lincoln Memorial Way are a few of his contributions to conservation and memorialization efforts in the Hoosier state (Sink, 2006; Bearss, 2001; Indiana Lincoln Memorial Commission, 1932). Leslie’s most significant achievement, however,

Figure 3. Harry Leslie served as assistant coach of the Purdue football team for the 1908 season. Courtesy of the Purdue University Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center.

Figure 4. Memorial Gymnasium, the monument built to honor the memory of the 17 Purdue students and boosters who were killed in the Purdue Wreck, was completed in 1909. Originally a gymnasium, it has since been used for the Computer Science Department, and is now named “Felix Haas Hall.” Courtesy of the Purdue University Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center.

was his effort to appropriate funds for the creation of the James Whitcomb Riley Hospital for Children during his term as Speaker of the House (Gugin & St. Clair, 2006, p. 293–294). After his governorship ended in 1933, Leslie went on to help form the Standard Life Insurance Company in Indianapolis, of which he would later serve as president (Kriebel, 2009, p. 297).

Leslie's friendly nature enabled him to get along well with his counterparts, who were familiar with Leslie's down-to-earth style when it came to his governorship (Gugin & St. Clair, 2006, p. 282). However, his kindness and optimism may have resulted in unfortunate consequences. In 1929, Leslie served as a member of the parole board for famous gangster John Dillinger. While visiting the prison for the parole hearing, Leslie watched Dillinger play in a game of baseball and was impressed with Dillinger's ability. A man of great athletic talent from his college years, Leslie reputedly commented, "that kid ought to be playing major league ball" (Toland, 1995, p. 23). Although Dillinger's parole request was denied, he requested a transfer to Michigan City Prison because "they have a real [baseball] team" (Toland, 1995, p. 23). Leslie approved the transfer, but, shortly after arriving at the Michigan City facility, Dillinger escaped with fellow criminals.

Family Man Leslie

In addition to his busy life as a politician, Harry Leslie was also a devoted family man. He married Martha Morgan on August 16, 1910, and the couple had three sons: John (Jack), Richard, and Robert (Post, 1984, p. 150–151). The former governor continued to have a passion for athletics, sometimes refereeing for the professional football team the Pine Village Pros (T. Leslie, personal communication, March 2010). Leslie was also a 33rd Degree Mason; he had been involved with the Masons since college (T. Leslie, personal communication, March 2010). Leslie's son recalls having many high-profile guests visit the house during his father's governorship, including Charles Lindbergh, Admiral Richard Byrd, and even President Hoover and his wife (Post, 1984, p. 152; Gugin & St. Clair, 2006, p. 283), demonstrating the "unusual talent for friendship" that the governor possessed (Post, 1984, p. 152). On December 10, 1937, during a visit to George Ade in Miami, Florida, Leslie died unexpectedly from heart disease. His body was returned to Indiana, and he is now buried at Grand View Cemetery in West Lafayette next to his wife.

"Skillet's" legacy continues in the memories of his descendants, who tell stories of their beloved family member to anyone who is interested. In their own attempt to memorialize Leslie, his son, grandson, and great-grandson are all referred to as "Skillet"—the name has been passed down from generation to generation. Additionally, involvement in politics, fraternities, and Masonry has also been an ongoing tradition in the family,

and his descendants have become actively involved in many of the same organizations as Governor Leslie (T. Leslie, personal communication, March 2010) (see Figure 5).

Lack of Recognition

However crucial the legacy of Leslie is to his family, community, and state, the former governor receives little recognition at Purdue, in West Lafayette, or in Indiana. Throughout his life, Leslie took the necessary steps to recognize or support the recognition of the Purdue Wreck, James Whitcomb Riley, Abraham Lincoln, George Rogers Clark, and Hoosier history. Despite his efforts, few attempts have been made in Leslie's former communities to return the favor and create a lasting legacy for him. In 1942, shortly after Leslie's death, the West Lafayette High School named their football field "Leslie Field," but the field is no longer used for high school football, but rather for physical education classes, band practice, and junior high football (West Lafayette Bands, 2008). In the past 70 years only the sign denoting "Governor Leslie Memorial Bridge," dedicated in 2003, marks his prominent presence in the community. Gugin and St. Clair incorrectly declare in their book that, "Purdue has memorialized him in several ways" (2006, p. 287), when, in fact, the University has failed to provide a memorial or even a concise biography of Leslie's accomplishments.

QUESTIONING THE PRESENTATION OF HISTORY

As my research into Governor Leslie's life and legacy suggests, if such a beloved and distinguished figure can escape memory and memorialization, certainly many important lives and events go unrecognized in every community. Although Leslie's memorial bridge commemorates his term as governor, the context of his life is missing from the memorial. This lack of information should prompt local residents to stop and ask, "What did

Figure 5. Portrait of Harry Leslie from Purdue University. Courtesy of the Purdue University Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center.

Governor Leslie contribute to this community to be honored with this memorial?” Unfortunately, this kind of questioning is uncommon because community history is not the most important history to most Americans. In *The Presence of the Past*, historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen discuss the results of a survey that they conducted with approximately 1,500 Americans. In this survey, Rosenzweig and Thelen asked their participants about their experiences involving the past and how they participate in activities that focus on the past. One of the questions inquired which past was most important to them: their family history, their racial or ethnic history, their community history, or United States history. The results provide an insightful look at Americans’ relationship with history: 66% chose their family history, 22% selected United States history, 8% named racial and ethnic history, and a mere 4% found their community history to be the most important history. (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, p. 22).

Carrying History

I argue that it is this lack of information immediately surrounding the already existing memorials that contributes to the disinterest in local and community history. Without the presence of contextual information highlighting the past associated with a memorial, developing a passion for a deeper story is difficult. This means memorials are easily overlooked and misunderstood. I intend for my research to elicit the pause—the moment one recognizes the possibility of another narrative, other than the one that is being presented. In his article “Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges,” archivist Andrew Flinn discusses the source of memories within archives, arguing that while the political, national, and economic histories that are prevalent in archives are important, they are not to be accepted as the sole bearers of history (Flinn, 2007, p. 160). However true this may be, archives also contain raw materials, such as the collection of *Debris* yearbooks from my research, which allow readers to interpret and create narratives around the sites of memory in their communities by drawing on the traces of the past that are unique to archival collections. In his classic essay “Everyman His Own Historian,” Carl Becker discusses this process: “To select and affirm even the simplest complex of facts is to give them a certain place in a certain pattern of ideas, and this alone is sufficient to give them a special meaning” (1932, p. 233). Becker affirms the ability of individuals to develop a history themselves based on the information that can be sought out. Rosenzweig and Thelen say, “people pursue the past actively and make it a point of everyday life” (1998, p. 18), and this interest in the past is what could enable community history to be more visible, as my interest in pursuing information about the trophy has shown. Additionally, memorials and remembering legacies “represent an effort by Americans to reassert the

importance of memory and commemoration” (Sloan, 2005, p. 64), but the lack of contextual information regarding memories demonstrates that for some communities, commemoration is not a priority. One participant in Rosenzweig and Thelen’s survey stated that “someone has to be the carrier of the history in every family” (1998, p. 16). Similarly, I encourage individuals in each community to become community historians, to question what is presented, to discover the history that is concealed, and to become the carriers of that history in their community.

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