Sweet are the uses of adversity

THE UNEARTHED LEGACY OF PRESIDENT CARL KNOPF

BY ERIK SCHMIDT ’05

IN MAY OF 1992, the summertime heat came early to the Willamette Valley. On the first Wednesday of the month, while most Willamette students toiled indoors on final papers, a small group gathered in the shade of the Star Trees. They weren’t there for respite. They were carrying out their end-of-semester work in the soil.

The students were members of an entry-level archaeological-methods course taught by professor David McCreery, and they were preparing to overturn what might have been the university’s most hallowed earth. The spot was the geometric center of the five trees, a plot that had been trodden on endlessly — it was exactly where a pair of lovebirds, according to tradition, might pause to look skyward through the star-shaped canopies above — but never exposed by a shovel since the year the trees had arrived as saplings from California. That had been 1942, Willamette’s centennial, and the sequoias that would grow to become the largest on any college campus in the United States were originally tended by Willamette’s shortest-tenured president, a quiet and enigmatic man named Carl Sumner Knopf.

Fervent in his thought but reserved by disposition, Knopf was dismissed from the presidency after just nine months when it became clear to the Board of Trustees that neither he nor the university could outrun a controversy for which the new president was only partly responsible. At the epicenter of the public-relations mess, which intermittently involved the national Methodist Church, The Oregon Statesman (precursor to the Statesman Journal) and the United States Selective Service, Knopf watched his nascent administration, as well as his reputation as a leader and scholar, disintegrate around him.

Within three wrenching weeks of his departure, he was found dead in his own home. In spite of a coroner’s report ruling out foul play, there were whispers here and there of depression-related suicide. After that, for the most part, his legacy was gradually covered by the detritus of expired years and all but forgotten.

Those young Willamette men and women gathered under the Star Trees some 50 years later because they had good reason to believe that Knopf had left something behind. It wasn’t bound to just be an artifact, either. As they knelt down to begin their work, they hoped that they might discover clarity.

Knopf was, after all, an archaeologist before he was a president.

Willamette president Carl Sumner Knopf (Wallulah, 1942)

THE SCHOLAR PRESIDENT

Knopf was an interesting choice, in 1941, to take over the keys to the institution. At the time, Willamette's presidents, like those at its peer institutions, were most likely to be distinguished for their prominence in the Church (two years earlier, the gregarious Bruce Baxter had been named bishop of the Oregon Conference of the Methodist Church). But Knopf's signature trait was academic prowess.

As an archaeologist and Bible scholar, most of his work was interpretive — he contributed more with a pen than with a shovel — but his thought was integrative and especially nuanced. He was an Assyriologist, which is to say that he studied the remnants of civilizations in what we now call the Middle East. These groups commonly archived their ideas in cuneiform on clay tablets, and Knopf became a world-renowned collector of these pieces. His collection was so vast that scholars today are still hunting it down and trying to catalog it. In 1987, one researcher from the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity at Claremont wrote that Knopf had personally possessed more than 800 such artifacts.

What drove Knopf — and what probably had assuaged the university trustees who hired him — was a foundational belief in Christianity and its durability through history, even though he applied his convictions in ways that set him apart. He viewed his work through an ideological lens that was at the same time squarely conservative, as far as scholars of theology go, and sneakily progressive in application. His progressivism, while easy to overstate, came out most of all when he had to decide what the role of administrations should be in the cultivation — or dictation — of religious minds.

One of the first things Knopf did when he arrived at Willamette was to eliminate mandatory chapel attendance for students. It stunned quite a few members of his new community. According to former dean Chester Luther, Knopf believed that he could make religious life so popular at Willamette that even the uncommitted students would need no coaxing to make it into the chapel or the First Methodist Church two blocks down State Street.

The experiment failed quickly. When student attendance plunged and Knopf's hoped-for surge in religiosity never came (despite the encouraging support of some of the more dedicated students), mandatory chapel was reinstated, and it wouldn't be touched again for 20 years. Knopf's rationale in the case appears to have been that he preferred that students' relationships with God be unforced and authentic to them. And whether or not that confidence was misplaced, it was an important outgrowth of something deeper — a worldview that defined him at least as much as God or archaeology or administrative practices or anything else.

This worldview was based on the freedom of conscience. It was Knopf's most distinguishing and lasting trait. It was also his downfall.

"HE WAS COURAGEOUS, TOLERANT, AND ALSO VERY OUTSPOKEN IN HIS VIEWS. BOTH IN THE SCHOLARLY REALM AND IN TERMS OF ETHICAL ISSUES."

—Lane McGaughy

THE WAR

When Japanese aircraft bombed Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, the Willamette football team was in Hawaii for an exhibition game. It was odd historical timing, and shortly after the bombs had stopped falling, the players found themselves informally conscripted into armed guard duty. Women along for the trip went to work at a local hospital for the wounded. The group remained in Hawaii for some time, eventually making its way back across the Pacific Ocean on a troop transport bound for San Francisco.

It's no surprise, then, that when it came to the war effort, Willamette men and women were aware, interested and participatory. With the declaration of war on Dec. 8, things changed drastically on campus. Enrollment for the following semester dropped by a quarter, prices went up and the curriculum had to be modified to better serve wartime needs. Spring vacation was canceled so men who had been drafted could finish their studies more quickly. Willamette University mobilized.

And this was incredibly disturbing to President Knopf. A longtime pacifist, he jotted down the following on a piece of yellow scrap paper as he tried to process the changing national reality:

"How my mind has not changed since 1914" might be the title of an article, a symbol of tenacious faith, or a sign of senility. To one who lived through World War I in a pacifist position, however, there has been little to change.

…

Now it is all upon us again. The drums beat out the same hollow mockeries of truth.

These were not malleable views. To Knopf, war was an intrinsic — not just circumstantial — evil. "He was courageous, tolerant, and also very outspoken in his views," says Lane McGaughy, George H. Atkinson Professor Emeritus of Religious and Ethical Studies and current research fellow at Willamette's Center for Ancient Studies and Archaeology. "Both in the scholarly realm and in terms of ethical issues."

When another slip of paper crossed his desk, this time mailed from the Selective Service, Knopf was put in the position of exposing himself for the ideas he held.

THE CONTROVERSY

The main sequence of events took place over just a few minutes: On Monday, April 27, 1942, Knopf reported to the Salem armory to fill out his selective service card; his would, at most, be a noncombatant role reserved for men more than 45 years old. Well versed in Selective Service regulations, he advised the workers that he would be writing "Conscientious Objector" in the margin of the card; they refused to allow it. After both parties reviewed the rules — Knopf said he returned briefly to his office and brought back a copy of the regulations, still to no avail — he agreed to fill out his card without any annotations, wrapped up the conversation, and left.

But on Thursday, May 7, the Capitol Journal newspaper published "allegations by American Legion Post No. 9 that Knopf had become publicly agitated during the registration process and only relented when officials threatened to call the police." These allegations were packaged as a letter addressed to Willamette's Board of Trustees, but because the Legionnaires sent it to the newspaper before they sent it to anyone at Willamette, the university was caught wholly off-guard.

On that same morning, the faculty met, and already there were people suggesting that Knopf might be forced to resign.

1950s: The young sequoias stand near Waller and Collins Halls.

Charles Sprague, editor of the Oregon Statesman, refused to print the American Legion's letter. He was among the more vocal supporters of Knopf who said that there was simply no cause for such an uproar. Among them was Robert Gatke, a prominent professor of history (and the author of the original Chronicles of Willamette).

"Rumors are buzzing around so thick that they are like a winter fog," Gatke wrote as he lobbied other members of the community to resist forcing Knopf to resign. "This has been a hard year and any president, new or old, would have had hard sledding."

Nevertheless, on May 20, a special fact-finding committee reported to the Board of Trustees that even though Knopf had created no public disturbance and made no threats at the armory, he "should have kept in mind that the reactions would spread beyond himself and that they would tend to be recognized in the public mind as stating the position of Willamette University."

The Board of Trustees asked for Knopf's resignation, and he complied. He stayed on at Willamette to finish the semester and see the graduates of 1942 off. One of the last things he did was plant five saplings from California near Waller Hall.

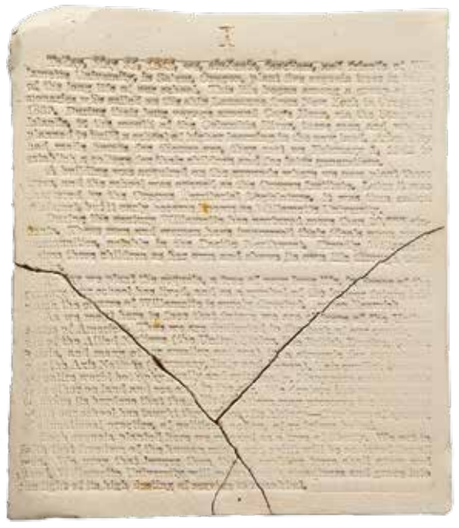
THE ARTIFACTS

Finding a pair of clay tablets in the earth between the Star Trees was far from inevitable. The Collegian had reported in May 1942 that "several clay tablets will be buried under a grove of sequoia trees to be planted on the campus…" but because the planting took place after the semester was over, there was no further reporting.

Still, McCreery remembers arriving at Willamette to hear that a former president might have left behind an artifact of his own creation, or maybe even some of those ancient cuneiform tablets.

"Knowing Knopf's level of expertise," McCreery says, "he'd understand that if you want to preserve something, you don't put it under a sequoia. But there were enough rumors around

The dig begins. In the temperate Northwest, root systems pose challenging obstacles.



Read a full transcription of both tablets online at willamette.edu/scene.

for us to think that there might be something to the idea. I thought that if there had been some sort of ceremony in which Knopf buried something, it wouldn't be under one of the trees, as people have thought. But it might be between them."

Today, Knopf's formal collection is stored in an incomplete state at Claremont. Rumors have persisted that he must have stashed the remainder of it somewhere or given it to relatives prior to his death. Maybe the tablets are sitting in the old president's house (which still stands at State and 25th in Salem) between layers of lath and plaster; maybe they're buried; maybe they're destroyed.

This sense of mystery and possibility is what drove McCreery and his team to follow the best, if still tenuous, lead that had survived the years.

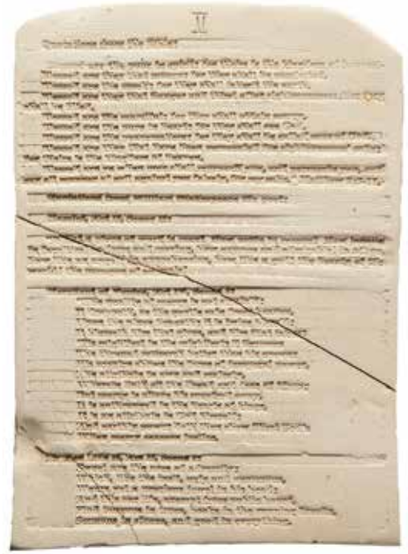
The trees were never envisioned as "star" trees initially; they were planted as a ring. With this in mind, McCreery decided that he would measure the distances between trunk centers, find the midpoint, and stretch three strings attached to an opposing trunk so that they intersected at what must — roughly, at least — be the center of the original circle. Then the team would mark off a square working area that would be large enough to account for the imprecision in measurement but small enough to be a realistic project to carry out before the semester ended.

They dug carefully and, occasionally, for hours longer than they had planned on any given day. When they had gone down approximately 18 inches, they finally hit something hard in the southwest corner of their plotted square. It was redbrick very similar to what builders had used to construct Waller Hall. Beneath that protective "hearth" lay a rectangular lead box.

The vessel is magnificent for its simplicity: Constructed from four thick-gauge walls soldered together to be watertight, it was scarred by the years in the earth but remained intact. It is curiously heavy, too; the lead is prone to sagging under its own weight.

After McCreery pulled it out of the ground, he used a razor blade to shave off the solder that held the lid on, and what he found inside was more intriguing than anyone would have expected.

There were two clay tablets whose messages are in modern English. They measure roughly four-by-six inches and are a quarter-inch thick. They still smell something like the clay



"I THOUGHT THAT IF THERE HAD BEEN SOME SORT OF CEREMONY IN WHICH KNOPF BURIED SOMETHING, IT WOULDN'T BE UNDER ONE OF THE TREES, AS PEOPLE HAVE THOUGHT. BUT IT MIGHT BE BETWEEN THEM."

—David McCreery

found in today's ceramics studios, and the rough scallop at the back edges suggest that a blade or a cutting wire was pulled through a clay mat before firing, probably hurriedly. Both have been broken — one before it was buried, even. It was discovered already reassembled with 50-year-old glue.

The impressions, of course, are the focal points. The characters evoke old typesets, each letter placed individually and somewhat imprecisely. But their messages are easy enough to discern and have certainly withstood a few decades in the ground. (Despite their seeming crudeness, one might admire the tablets' permanence and readability compared to, say, a 1990s floppy disk.)

The messages are from Knopf. Alongside a transcription of his only Willamette commencement address, he chose Bible verses and excerpts from Shakespeare; the latter two sources are the most poignant and give us the most room for reading between the lines.

They tell, above all, about justice, about persecution, and about the nature of man. They clarify for us what many have thought all along: that Knopf's dismissal, despite the calmness with which he accepted it, troubled him to the core. He had, after all, conducted his public life in a way that was consistent with his moral convictions and disposition, and because of this his career had been shattered. He was only able to leave behind a durable message because the medium he chose to deliver it ensured that it would be delayed — so that fresh ears might receive it. One can only wonder what Knopf's last hopes were. They probably had something to do with mercy.

He should have the last word, then — drawn from Shakespeare and pressed onto a wet clay tablet at Willamette in 1942, probably by an art student:

Sweet are the uses of adversity;
Which, like the toad, ugly
and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel
in his head;
And this our life, exempt from
public haunt,
Find tongues in trees, books
in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and
good in everything. S