

UC Designs on Deaf-Blind Site Span 57 Years

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(First of a two-part series:)

University of California efforts to acquire the California Schools for the Deaf and Blind span more than half a century.

If the university succeeds in its current bid to acquire the 50-acre Berkeley property, it will be the realization of a largely-hidden dream pursued by the highest levels of the university's adminis-

tration as far back as 1922.

The two state schools and the university have been neighbors for more than 100 years. The schools arrived first, in 1897. The university, which began in Oakland, moved to the Berkeley campus six years later.

College of Agriculture

The university's reasons for wanting the schools' property have been many and varied. Files uncovered in a continuing investigation by the Daily Californian

show that in 1922 the site was desired as a new location for the College of Agriculture, which was threatened with removal to another part of the state because of crowding at the Berkeley campus.

Because support for the agriculture college was the university's main source of money, there was "grave concern" expressed in correspondence at the time that its removal would adversely affect the financial backing of other departments.

"This tract (the deaf and blind

schools' site) is probably the best in Berkeley for the growing needs of the university," agriculture dean Thomas Hunt wrote to President David Barrows, "... although I understand that those at present in charge would consider it an unfriendly act for the university (to acquire it)."

Barrows wrote to State Superintendent of Public Instruction Will Wood, the top state official responsible for the deaf and blind schools, about the "possibility of
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ROBERT SPROUL

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Deaf/Blind

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the state's requiring a new site and plant for the Schools for the Deaf and Blind" and turning the property over to the regents.

One of Wood's aides wrote back: "The experience of the past year convinces Mr. Wood that under no circumstances should the suggestion be given publicity at this time . . . either officially or unofficially."

Later Wood himself wrote back to Barrows: "The impression I have gained during the time that I have been Director of Education is that neither the deaf nor blind want to leave Berkeley." Wood nevertheless said he would refer the matter for a "thorough investigation."

By late 1926 Wood arranged to have introduced in the state legislature a bill to relocate the schools. Barrows had been replaced by William Campbell as UC President, but the university official who had taken charge of the effort to acquire the site was the young comptroller — Robert Gordon Sproul.

Sproul, who was later to earn fame for his political skills during his three decades as UC President, went to Sacramento and succeeded in having the university designated as the "preferred bidder" in Wood's proposed legislation to move the deaf and blind schools.

By the time the bill reached the Assembly education committee three months later, however, Wood was no longer in office. As-

semblymember Harrison Kelsey, who had introduced the bill on behalf of the Department of Education, changed his mind.

"Alumni of the institution had protested, and Berkeley residents in the vicinity of the school were strongly opposed," he told the committee, according to the Berkeley Daily Gazette of March 14, 1927.

The state Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction, Sam Cohn, also helped stop the bill by saying the state would lose money by selling the property to the university as a preferred bidder.

"You did the university an injustice," Sproul wrote to Cohn. "The university planned its attitude toward the purchase of the land of the School for the Deaf after conference with your office and after assurance by former Superintendent Will C. Wood that he was in accord with the university's program."

Sproul's Secret Committee

After 1927, the record of university interest in the site is scant — a brief flurry of correspondence with President Sproul in the '40s — until 1957.

In May Vice President Stanley McCaffrey wrote to Sproul: "While there is no present suggestion of this possibility (of acquiring the deaf and blind site) . . . there might be value in discreetly having this considered, particularly in view of the very great pressure in the City of Berkeley concerning the expansion of the Berkeley campus. Should the deaf blind site be made available to the university, it would be entirely feasible to alter Berkeley

campus expansion plans so that it would not be necessary to purchase so much private property south of campus. The situation with regard to removal of additional land from the tax rolls of the city would be eased since the Blind and Deaf schools would presumably move to another location outside Berkeley and since that property is already off the tax rolls . . .

"As the method by which it might be considered . . . one of us (I could do it since I am well acquainted with some of the officials of these Schools) could informally chat with the Schools officials on the subject . . . Assemblyman Tom Caldecott of Berkeley (could) explore the subject . . . (Vice President James) Corley . . . might, if asked, be able to explore the matter in Sacramento."

"At top level and with maximum secrecy . . ."

— Sproul to Kerr, 1957

In July Sproul wrote to Berkeley Chancellor Clark Kerr: "The idea behind a possible purchase of the Blind and Deaf School site seems to be that it would be an ideal location for a "satellite campus" or for residence halls . . . (or) a model two year lower division or junior college as part of the university."

"In order that these suggestions may be explored at top level, and with maximum of secrecy," Sproul asked Kerr to serve on a committee with Vice Presidents

McCaffrey and Corley and make a preliminary investigation.

Five months later, the committee reported to Sproul that the site could very well be used for a number of possibilities such as the School of Social Welfare and other special institutes, residence halls, and special graduate units.

The committee recommended that Sproul "make informal contact with Dr. Simpson" (then state Superintendent of Public Instruction).

At the same time, the committee stressed that "any possible indication of the university causing the

Blind and Deaf Schools to be relocated would have very unfortunate results from a public relations standpoint and every effort should be made to avoid any such impression."

Two months later in February, 1958, shortly before the end of his 28-year presidency, Sproul reported in a memo that Simpson seemed unwilling to consider university acquisition of the site. "He told me that he knew of no plans for moving the Blind School."

(Part two: the Kerr decade and up to the present.)