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Sacramento: Curious historical bedfellows: Sac State and its racist benefactor

After receiving honors aplenty from university, C. M. Goethe left most of his big estate to it

By Tony Platt -- Special To The Bee

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Every time that I've driven through the main entrance to Sacramento State University, I've been taken aback by the signage that announces the C. M. Goethe Arboretum. As a longtime faculty member, I know that Charles M. Goethe (1875-1966) was a widely respected philanthropist and benefactor of the university. But because I've been doing research on eugenics, a now discredited science popular in the 1920s and 1930s, I also know that in his 1936 presidential address to the Eugenics Research Association, he publicly defended Nazi Germany's "honest yearnings for a better population."

Why would my university, with its strong commitment to multicultural values, pay homage to somebody devoted to breeding a master race? I decided to do my own investigation of Goethe's relationship to his adopted alma mater. What I discovered was that in the 1950s and early 1960s, when Sacramento State College, as it was then known, was courting Goethe for his money and prestige, the university turned a blind eye to his widely known racist views.

If the university's motivation was essentially pecuniary, it did not hurt that Goethe also gave the young college an invented pedigree, with ties - his - to old Sacramento and mythic roots in 19th century pioneer California.

Once his well-documented bigotry became a public embarrassment to the university, especially in the mid-1960s when student and faculty protests exposed Goethe's views on eugenics, the administration held its nose and tried to distance the university from his reputation. This has been the policy for the last 30 years. It's time for a different approach.

From the mid-1950s, Goethe was closely involved with the fledgling university, founded in 1947. He gave money to his favorite faculty for research and travel, made grants to students in the hope that they would become parents and contributed to a personal entertainment fund for President Guy West - just as he had done for Vice President Richard Nixon in 1952.

In return, Sacramento State University treated him with all the pomp and reverence of a founding father: appointing him chairman of the university's advisory board, establishing an arboretum in his name in 1959, organizing an elaborate gala and "national recognition day" to mark his 90th birthday in March 1965, lobbying the state board of trustees to name a multi-million dollar science building in his honor and celebrating his birthday after his death. "Would that there were more men like Dr. Goethe," observed West in 1965 about "Sacramento's most remarkable citizen."

All the attention that was showered on Goethe paid off. In 1963 he changed his will to make Sacramento State his primary beneficiary, bequeathing his residence, library, papers and \$640,000 to the university. In addition, he left thousands of dollars and much of his silver collection as personal gifts to West and Rodger Bishton, a professor of education who befriended Goethe in the last decade of his life.

The university administered the bequest in nine separate accounts that through judicious investment grew over the years. Two of the accounts, eventually totaling over \$600,000, benefited Bishton's research projects before and after he retired from the university in 1980. An additional \$1.6 million remains today in the Goethe-related accounts. Also, the extensive renovation of Goethe's residence - designed by California architect Julia Morgan in the 1920s and placed on the National Registry of Historic Places in 1982 - has increased the value of the property to \$2 million. As a recent history concludes, "Charles Goethe made a lasting contribution to the university."

Sacramento State is not the only public institution to have elevated Goethe into the pantheon of California heroes. The entrepreneur and investor, who lived all his long life in Sacramento, was a major benefactor of redwood conservation, helped to launch the interpretive parks' movement in California and the first supervised playground in his hometown, and funded research projects involving plant biology and genetics. For these activities, the University of the Pacific awarded him an honorary doctorate, the National Park Service made him an "honorary chief naturalist" and the Save-the-Redwoods League posthumously named a grove after him in the Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park.

Locally, a middle school in Sacramento carries Goethe's name. Mayor James McKinney proclaimed March 31, 1962, as "Dr. Charles M. Goethe Day" and, three years later, the county Board of Supervisors renamed the American River Parkway South in honor of "Sacramento's most illustrious citizen."

When Sacramento State University feted Goethe in 1965, tributes poured in from dignitaries nationwide. From Earl Warren, chief justice of the Supreme Court, came recognition of a "remarkable career of public service," while President Lyndon Johnson commended him as a leader of "distinction, integrity and unceasing energy."

What was missing from these eulogies was any mention of Goethe's lifelong, passionate involvement with eugenics, the interest that shaped his worldview and drove his public commitments. The eugenics movement,

which emerged in Europe and the United States around the turn of the 20th century, was designed, in the words of one of its founders, Francis Galton, to give "the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable."

In the United States, eugenics enjoyed wide support between the world wars and drew upon a variety of ideological views, from the birth control movement to right-wing nativism. Goethe, as founder of the Sacramento-based Eugenics Society of Northern California, was involved with its most reactionary tendency, which promoted "Anglo-Saxon" societies as the engine of modern civilization and advocated policies of sterilization and apartheid in order to protect the "high powers" from contamination by the poor, mentally ill and "socially inadequate."

Goethe believed that a variety of social successes (wealth, political leadership, intellectual discoveries) and social problems (poverty, illegitimacy, crime, mental illness and unemployment) could be traced to inherited, biological attributes associated with "racial temperament." And he put his ideas into practice: Working with the influential Human Betterment Foundation in Pasadena and the California Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, Goethe lobbied the state to restrict immigration from Mexico and carry out some 20,000 involuntary sterilizations of mostly poor women, defined as "feeble-minded" or "socially inadequate" by medical authorities between 1909 and the 1960s. One of Gray Davis' last acts as governor was to issue a public apology to these victims.

Throughout his long life, Goethe remained convinced about the superiority of white "Anglo-Saxon" elites and the inferiority of Jews, African Americans, American Indians and Asian and Latin American immigrants. Shortly before he died, he sent off a donation to the Northern League, a white supremacist organization in the Netherlands that was working to build "cooperation between all the Nordic Peoples" against "worthless peoples of Africa and Asia."

"We would wish," wrote the League's secretary to Goethe in April 1966, "that we had some more men like you among our members."

Goethe's agenda was no secret. He was proud of his views, which he widely publicized. He spent over a million dollars of his own money writing, publishing and promoting tracts on race and immigration. A prolific correspondent with a full-time, personal secretary, he fired off thousands of letters to newspapers, colleagues and public figures.

In a 1944 article written by Carey McWilliams for the New Republic, Goethe was identified as "one of the main financial supporters" of the Home Front Commandos, Inc., a Sacramento-based organization that inundated Northern California with racist, anti-Japanese manifestos. McWilliams also reported that Goethe, in his capacity as founder of the Eugenics Society of Northern California, had defended Hitler's efforts to make eugenics into an "applied science."

At Sacramento State, many people were well aware of Goethe's unsavory provenance. In April 1965, after the plan was announced to name a new building in his honor, students protested the decision as a "blasphemy against science" and compared him to Dr. Strangelove. Two years later, the faculty voted to remove Goethe's name from the building and the administration quietly complied. By the early 1970s, Goethe's huge eugenics library, annotated with his racist scribbling, and hundreds of his more inflammatory letters, including correspondence with his Nazi counterparts, had mysteriously disappeared from the university's archives.

In 1975, the Sacramento State Foundation, which manages the university's endowments, commissioned a graduate student in history to write a biographical profile of Goethe. The study, which provided compelling evidence of Goethe's attraction to "concepts of Nordic superiority" and preference for "Protestantism, tallness, blondness \[and\] blue-eyedness," was shelved and ignored.

For the last 30 years, the university has continued to fund projects in Goethe's name, while his symbolic presence on campus has eroded, much like the rotting plaque erected on campus in 1962 in memory of his wife by the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The administration quietly removed his name from his residence in September 2000, resurrecting it as a memorial to its architect, Julia Morgan. There has even been discussion of renaming the arboretum that greets visitors entering the campus.

But it's hard to cleanse an institution of its ghosts.

Moreover, we are not well served by substituting calculated amnesia for fawning celebration. We should face the fact that Sacramento State's uncritical relationship with a wealthy benefactor compromised our obligation to speak out on issues of social injustice. The university's silence made it easier for Goethe to promote racist policies in immigration, real estate and family planning that victimized untold thousands.

Rather than treating Goethe as an embarrassment to be managed, the university should welcome a transparent, public debate about how his legacy should be remembered and used, including full disclosure of the financial handling of Goethe's multi-million dollar bequest.

As a public institution of higher education, we have a responsibility to learn from our experience, to understand why the eugenics movement exercised such widespread influence. And we need to be alert to how its assumptions persist today in the demonization of immigrants, in government efforts to restrict the birthrate of poor women and in growing support for the genetic "enhancement" of the future children of wealthy families. It's time to engage the past, not erase it.

Tony Platt is professor emeritus of social work at Sacramento State University. This article is based on an 83-page investigative report - "What's In A Name? Charles M. Goethe, American Eugenics and Sacramento State"

University" - he delivered Tuesday in Hinde Auditorium on that campus. The sign at the entrance announcing the C.M. Goethe Arboretum mysteriously vanished last week. A university spokeswoman said she reported the disappearance to campus police.
