

Report of the Pomona College Songs Committee

12/5/2008

Executive Summary

In response to a poster put up during Family Weekend in February 2008, President Oxtoby appointed the College Songs Committee to make recommendations on the future use of the college Alma Mater, "Hail! Pomona, Hail!", and "Torchbearers". The committee met three times during the fall of 2008, held meetings on campus for students, faculty, and staff, and solicited opinions from alumni and other members of the campus community. In addition, the committee sponsored an educational performance on blackface minstrelsy.

After careful consideration of the history of these songs and the opinions of all of the college constituencies, the committee makes the following recommendations:

Recommendations on "Hail! Pomona, Hail!":

1. We recommend by a vote of 9 to 1 that "Hail!! Pomona, Hail!" no longer serve as the College's official Alma Mater.¹ The song should not be on the program at Class Day, Convocation, or Commencement.
2. We recommend unanimously that "Hail! Pomona, Hail" may continue to be sung at alumni events, such as the Through the Gates program at Alumni Weekend.
3. We recommend unanimously that student a cappella ensembles may choose to sing "Hail! Pomona, Hail!" at alumni events at their discretion. Students should decide whether or not the song would be sung in advance of the event.
4. We recommend unanimously that the Glee Club may choose to sing "Hail! Pomona, Hail!", with historically informative program notes.

Recommendations on "Torchbearers":

The committee developed the following three options for "Torchbearers" and voted for them as indicated:

1. Continue to allow performances of the song as it currently exists, while placing it in an appropriate historical context through program notes or other means. (3 votes)
2. Only support performances if the song can be altered by changing certain lyrics and musical gestures that are deemed to be offensive. (5 votes)
3. No longer support any public performance of "Torchbearers". (2 votes)

As detailed in the report, it is our hope that the compromises recommended here will serve to recognize both the passion for these beloved songs and the hurt of a spotted past. We recognize the strong feelings on both sides of these issues and the difficulty of reconciling significant and sincere differences of opinion on a resolution.

¹ One member of the committee missed the last meeting, but we have included the votes he communicated later in these totals.

Introduction

During Family Weekend in February 2008, flyers were posted across the Pomona College campus. The flyers consisted of copies of the liner notes of a 1954 album put out by the Pomona College Glee Club. These copies contained information on the history of the origins of the Pomona College Alma Mater, "Hail! Pomona, Hail". The poster had circled the portion of the description that indicated that the song was composed to close a blackface minstrel show held on campus in January of 1910 to benefit the baseball team.

While this information had been available in the college's institutional records, and the origins had been discussed in a letter to the editor of the Pomona College Magazine in the spring of 2002, most members of the college community were unaware of the history of the song. This information caused some members of the campus community to raise questions about the appropriateness of the Alma Mater, given its origins in a show with such strong negative racial depictions.

In response, President Oxtoby decided to suspend singing of the Alma Mater at Alumni Weekend, Commencement, and the Opening Convocation until a committee could be convened to make recommendations on this song. Because of complaints about Torchbearers in years past, the president also asked the committee to consider that song. The committee was also asked to help educate the college community about these issues.

The committee was appointed in April 2008, though it did not have its first meeting until late September 2008. In the meantime the college funded research projects for two students to look into the history of college songs at Pomona and elsewhere. The information obtained by these students, Grey McCune '11 and Cyrus Winston '10, helped the committee to understand the historical context of a performance of the Alma Mater in a blackface minstrel show at Pomona.

The committee members were Frank Albinder '80, alumnus, Alix Coupet '09, student, Sid Lemelle, Professor of History and Black Studies, Terry Hodel '64, Trustee, Sarah Miller '09, student, Tania Pantoja '95, Executive Assistant to the Dean of the College, Julie Tate '09, student, Nancy Treser-Osgood '80, Director of Alumni Relations, and the committee co-chairs, Jeanne Buckley '65, Trustee, and Kim Bruce '70, Professor of Computer Science.

The committee had three three-hour meetings, on 9/26, 10/29, and 11/21, and also utilized e-mail extensively in sharing information. Although members of the committee approached the issues from very different points of view, the committee functioned well and worked through disagreements with respect for each other. This report describes the issues that the committee worked through and our recommendations for President Oxtoby.

The Historical Record

While the committee did not attempt to research or write a complete history of “Hail! Pomona, Hail!” or “Torchbearers”, we felt that it was useful to understand the context of their composition and early performances.

Hail! Pomona, Hail!²

According to the liner notes of the 1954 album “Songs of Pomona College”, by the Glee Club and Band, William F. Russell, conductor:

“The song that has become the Alma Mater was composed for a blackface minstrel show in the season of 1909-1910, staged to raise money for a set of new uniforms for the baseball team.

Author-composer Richard N. Loucks, ex '13, recalls that the show was “at the dress rehearsal stage when it dawned upon those in charge that, in the excitement of selecting and rehearsing sentimental ballads for the silver-throated tenors and side-splitting jokes for the end men, nothing had been done about an ensemble finale. Temporary consternation prevailed, resulting in a few cut classes and several hours at an old, battered [...] piano [...] Out of all this, proving that necessity is the mother of invention, emerged *Hail, Pomona, Hail!*, written to ring down the curtain on the best minstrel show that ever trod the boards of old Holmes Hall.” “

The quotes from Loucks are taken from an undated letter from Loucks to his son, who at that time was a member of the Music department faculty at Pomona.

In 1958 Loucks was invited to give a talk to the Glee Club where, according to note cards left to the alumni office, he elaborated on the story of the creation. He also retold his story of the origins as part of an oral history taken in 1986, excerpts of which were published in 1988 in the Pomona College Magazine. In spite of the fact that Loucks only attended Pomona for one year, in 1972 he was awarded the first Trustee Medal of Merit for his contributions to the college for writing several important college songs.

On the note cards referred to above, Loucks indicates that he was unable to find a copy of the program from the January 1910, minstrel show where the song debuted. Moreover, the song was not mentioned in a review of the show published by *The Student Life* in 1910.

Alumna Rosemary Choate '63 provided the committee with a report in September 2008 that posits that the Alma Mater was not in fact performed as part of the January 1910, minstrel show. She bases this on the omission of the song from *The*

² We note that the punctuation associated with the song's title seems to vary. We will include two exclamation remarks in the title except if they occur differently in the source of direct quotes.

Student Life review and the fact that the song did not immediately appear in printed collections of college songs. Her report asserts that Loucks confused “Hail! Pomona, Hail” with another song that he wrote, “The Blue and White,” that The Student Life article (and Loucks in his own notes) states ends the first act of the show.

The committee carefully reviewed the Choate report, the other historical records, and a critical essay on the Choate report provided by another alumnus, and unanimously agreed that it was more likely than not that “Hail! Pomona, Hail!” was indeed written for and performed in the January 1910 blackface minstrel show, as described by the composer. For the rest of this report, we proceed on that basis.

We note that blackface minstrel shows were common occurrences on college campuses during this era. The committee has numerous photographs and descriptions of student performers in blackface from several shows on the Pomona Campus. Our student researchers have also provided us with pictures of posters for blackface minstrel shows from many campuses in the northeast (and surely would have found them from other regions of the country if we had looked). Thus, while the content and costumes from these shows are clearly racist and demeaning to African Americans, they were a part of the cultural milieu of predominantly White educational institutions of that era.

Torchbearers

Professor Frank Brackett related the origin of Torchbearers in his book “Granite and Sagebrush”. In the summer of 1890, Brackett and a student, David Barrows ’94, attended a fiesta of the Cahuilla Indians. Late one night they were awakened by sounds associated with a dance that they then secretly observed. A short article about the origins of “Torchbearers” in the Winter, 2001, Pomona College Magazine, states that Brackett and Barrows “may have been among the first non-Native Americans to witness the riveting circle dance that was the centerpiece of the 1890 Ghost Dance movement among tribes of the West and Plains. The Cahuilla refrain they heard was incorporated into a hastily written College song, *Ghost Dance*, that proved popular on campus.”

Quoting further from the same article: “Brackett and Barrows believed they were witnessing a war dance, and presumably were aware that the phrase [“he ne terra toma”] they brought back to the College could have a combative tone. But one irony of the Ghost Dance was that although celebrants sometimes evoked past battles, and wore ochre paint associated with war—stoking fear among white settlers—the shaman who inspired the dance stressed nonviolence and racial harmony.”

While the song was popular, Brackett later characterized the lyrics, composed in 1896 by himself and Frances Fulkerson Shaw, as “rather silly.” The lyrics were completely rewritten by faculty member Ramsay Harris in 1930, keeping only the refrain “He ne terra toma”. Changes were also made to the musical accompaniment,

including the chanted “drumbeats, drumbeats, ...” at the beginning of the song. The resulting song, renamed “Torchbearers”, was sung by the Pomona College Glee Club at the 1932 National Intercollegiate Glee Club Competition in St. Louis, Missouri. The Glee Club won the competition based on their performances of the song, and the contest was never held again, leaving Pomona as the reigning champ.

The song Torchbearers has proved to be controversial for Native Americans over the years. Professor Donna Di Grazia, Conductor of the Pomona College Choir and Glee Club, reports that in 2000 a Glee Club member who was part Native American – one of only a very small percentage of Native Americans Pomona College has had over the years – was offended by both the lyrics and music, and refused to sing Torchbearers. She also reported receiving a call in 2002 from a member of the local media from one of the stops on the Glee Club tour. That person, a Native American, had read a Pomona College Magazine story about Torchbearers, and, according to Professor Di Grazia, “voiced grave concern about how disrespectful Torchbearers is to Native Americans.” After consultation with then-President Stanley, they agreed not to sing Torchbearers on that year’s tour concerts. Because of these controversies, Torchbearers has been performed on recent concert tours very infrequently, in spite of its popularity with college alumni.

Because of the controversies and because Professor Di Grazia and the Glee Club have asked for the college’s guidance on singing Torchbearers, it was included in the mandate of the committee.

Input from the Pomona College Community

The committee gathered opinions on what to do with these college songs from all parts of the college community. Alumni were invited to write to the committee in the spring of 2008, while other parts of the greater college community were not formally solicited for their opinions until October of 2008. Many alumni, faculty, staff, and students responded to the invitation. Each committee member received copies of all of the responses, with each of us reading hundreds of e-mails and letters on the subject.

A panel discussion, moderated by President Oxtoby, was held on the controversy at the April 2008 Alumni Weekend. The panel featured presentations on minstrelsy, college songs, and reactions to the controversy. The audience was given the opportunity to raise questions and express their opinions, eliciting a vigorous response from the attending alumni.

As part of our charge was to further educate the campus community, we endeavored to provide historical information to those on campus before we formally solicited the views of the other segments of the college community. One part of this was to sponsor a performance of an award-winning educational show, “The Dance: The History of American Minstrelsy”. The well-received performance drew around 350

attendees, including students, alumni, faculty, and staff, to a performance on campus.

The committee also put together a series of web pages, which may be found at <http://www.cs.pomona.edu/~kim/CollegeSongs/>, that provide information about the songs and their history. These pages include the lyrics of “Hail! Pomona, Hail!”, as well as “Torchbearers” and its predecessor, “Ghost Dance”. It includes a link to an extensive collection of documents on the origins of “Hail! Pomona, Hail!” and on blackface minstrel performances on campus, put together by Cyrus Winston ‘10. Among other documents available on the above web site are an overview of the controversy on the origins of the Alma Mater (with links to relevant documents, including the Choate report) and several informative pieces on “Torchbearers”.

Two open forums were held on campus in late October. The first was an open town meeting for faculty and staff, which was also attended by a small group of alumni. The second was a forum at which attendance was restricted to students only. Minutes of both of these sessions were distributed to committee members. The ASPC Student Senate drafted a resolution requesting a change in the Alma Mater that was passed unanimously (with one abstention). The Student Life also wrote an editorial urging a change in the Alma Mater. Letters to the editor both for and against the Alma Mater and Torchbearers that were printed in The Student Life were also passed along to the committee members.

In the end the committee felt that it had a strong sampling of opinion from all parts of the greater Pomona College community. We would like to thank those who wrote in or otherwise expressed their opinions to the committee. We found many well argued communications on both sides of the issue, helping us to better understand the controversy over the songs from many different points of view.

Recommendation on “Hail! Pomona, Hail!”

Basis for Concern

The college’s Alma Mater should be a unifying element for all members of the college, including both current students and alumni. Yet the origins of the Alma Mater as part of a blackface minstrel show remind us of a part of the college history that we now find disturbing and offensive. While all of us happily and proudly sang “Hail! Pomona, Hail!” before knowing of its origins, many now find it hard to think of the song without associating it with pictures of students in blackface. With this association, the song no longer reminds many of the best of the college, but instead a portion of its history that is less exemplary and therefore fails in its basic function of serving as a unifying element for the Pomona community.

The college is clearly a much more diverse place than it was during much of the first century of the college’s existence. This diversity is something that we value. Yet, it has become clear that having an Alma Mater with this history is something that now makes many students of color feel alienated from the community. As a result, some

argue that changing the Alma Mater will make this a more welcoming place for these students who historically did not have much of a presence on this campus as well as other students who recognize the damage caused by this unfortunate history.

Recommendation

We recommend by a vote of 8 to 1 that “Hail!! Pomona, Hail!” no longer serve as the College’s official Alma Mater.³ The song should not be on the program at Class Day, Convocation, or Commencement.

We recommend unanimously that “Hail! Pomona, Hail” may continue to be sung at alumni events, such as the Through the Gates program at Alumni Weekend.

We recommend unanimously that the student a cappella ensembles may choose to sing “Hail! Pomona, Hail!” at alumni events at their discretion. Students should decide whether or not the song would be sung in advance of the event.

We recommend unanimously that the Glee Club may choose to sing “Hail! Pomona, Hail!”, with historically informative program notes.

We recognize that by “decertifying” the Alma Mater, yet to continue having it sung by alumni, we are likely setting up a confrontation for the future among the alumni. A significant number of current students and some current alumni are offended with having the song as the Alma Mater. In recognition of this we recommend below that the college adopt a new Alma Mater and phase that in over time with the alumni.

Recommendation on “Torchbearers”

Basis for Concern

There have been many concerns expressed about the Torchbearers song over the years. These include the following:

1. The song appropriates music that was part of a sacred ritual from Native Americans, and is disrespectful of their heritage.
2. The refrain “He ne terra toma” is composed of nonsense syllables that bear no relation to the Cahuilla language.
3. As noted earlier, when the song was revised in 1930, only the text’s refrain was retained. The new version opens with a musical representation of drumbeats (they are in the piano accompaniment of the solo version of the song, and are sung by the tenors and basses in the male chorus arrangement)

³ One member of the committee missed the meeting at which final votes were taken. Hence there are only nine votes on each of the committee recommendations. This member later communicated to the committee that he would have voted on the majority side for all votes on the Alma Mater, and with the third option (no performance) on the vote for “Torchbearers”.

and the new verses refer to drumbeats, yet drums were not associated with the Ghost Dance ceremonies.

4. The music contains stereotypical elements associated with Native American music.
5. The new verses refer to “braves”, indicating a warrior status, yet the Native Americans of this area did not have warrior cultures, instead they were peaceful farmers.
6. The song ignores the horrific treatment and stereotyping of Native Americans in the United States. As one commentator wrote to the committee, “the song is a cheerful glorification of Manifest Destiny.”

Recommendations

“Torchbearers” is not commonly sung during official on-campus events except during alumni reunions. Hence our recommendations only deal with alumni reunions and other Glee Club performances.

The committee had more difficulty agreeing on recommendations for “Torchbearers” than for “Hail! Pomona, Hail!” The committee developed the following three options for “Torchbearers” and voted for them as indicated:

4. Continue to allow performances of the song as it currently exists, while placing it in an appropriate historical context through program notes or other means. (3 votes)
5. Only support performances if the song can be altered by changing certain lyrics and musical gestures that are deemed to be offensive. (5 votes)
6. No longer support any public performance of “Torchbearers”. (1 vote)

Recommendations for the Future

Creating New College Songs

Committee members believe that college songs can play an important role in uniting the student body as well as uniting the different generations of college alumni. Therefore we strongly recommend that the college, with leadership from the current student body, encourage the creation of a new Alma Mater as well as a replacement for “Torchbearers”.

While the committee has received a wide variety of opinions on the musical strengths and weaknesses of “Hail! Pomona, Hail!”, it has played a very important role in student and alumni lives in providing a musical connection to the college. We strongly recommend that the student body create a contest or some other mechanism for selecting a new Alma Mater. We recommend that the judges place a premium on selecting a song that ties together current students with those of past generations.

The committee member who voted to retain the Alma Mater differs from the rest of the committee on this recommendation. That member believes that while writing a

new Alma Mater is certainly possible, it would be very difficult to effect widespread adoption of any new song. Based on anecdotal evidence, it appears that current students have little interest in a new song, and alumni response to such an offering could well be hostile. If it is deemed necessary to designate a song as the Alma Mater, the vast repertoire of previously composed college songs could be examined to find a suitable replacement. Yet another option is to have no song designated as the Alma Mater.

The committee members unanimously believe that “Torchbearers” plays an important role in Alumni Weekend ceremonies. As a result, some wish to retain the song as is, while others wish to attempt to modify the song to remove the objectionable lyrics and musical gestures. Even those who do not believe this is possible recognize the importance of the song and hope that a replacement embodying some familiar aspects of “Torchbearers” can be found. The notion of passing the torch of knowledge from one generation to the next is an important one. We hope that members of the college community can create a song that can play this role in uniting the generations of the college community.

Increasing interest in the College History

The committee members believe that there is little understanding of the College’s history among the greater Pomona College community. While some historical materials are available in the Honnold Library archives, most are not easy to access, and are not generally used to educate Pomona students about the history of the college. While college histories by Frank Brackett and E. Wilson Lyon are available, few students choose to work their way through these tomes. There are a few collections of materials available on-line, but they include a wide variety of materials about the College and Claremont, requiring great efforts to find information about particular topics.

We highly recommend that the college begin constructing web pages on the college history, with the idea that students and others researching different aspects of the college history would add to this information. The web-based historical material could be used during first-year orientation by creating activities that would encourage new students to reference this material. We recommend that the College create a space on campus for a curated exhibition of items relevant to the college history. We also recommend that the college consider instituting an annual lecture on aspects of the college history, perhaps scheduling it near the beginning of each academic year (or even during orientation days for new students).

Summary and Conclusions

The committee members are well aware that this is a very contentious issue and any resolution is unlikely to satisfy everyone. In making our decisions, we have been careful to listen to all voices in all constituencies, and to respond to them all as much as possible.

The committee understands well the very strong feelings of those who feel a deep emotional connection with these songs and how they represent their connection with the college. We understand as well that the lack of definitive proof of the origins of the Alma Mater raises questions for them as to why we are acting on this song at all.

On the other hand, we understand the feelings of those who are dismayed by the history of the Alma Mater, even understanding that the origins may never be verified. We also hear and understand the complaints of those who feel that “Torchbearers” represents a misrepresentation of the history of the indigenous people of this area.

It is our hope that the compromises recommended here will serve to recognize both the passion for these beloved songs and the hurt of a spotted past. We recognize the strong feelings on both sides of these issues and the difficulty of reconciling significant and sincere differences of opinion on a resolution.

We hope that these recommendations, and the president’s subsequent decision on the songs, will allow the college and its various constituencies to move forward with respect for the past and with understanding of how the college, and indeed society as a whole, has changed. This is one reason we would like to encourage the creation of new college songs that reach back to the history of the college, reflect the present, and also look forward to the future of the college.

Respectfully submitted,

The Pomona College Songs Committee