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PREFACE

Dr. Epler founded Portland State University fifty years ago. To commemorate the occasion, I have compiled a short biography of his life.

The primary source for this project has been Dr. Epler's own words. Details have been verified and added through the use of other sources such as Dr. Epler's own written account of the history of Vanport and Dr. Dodds historical research. Since I did not meet with Dr. Epler face to face, I supplemented my perceptions of his personality by reading material that others have written about him and by talking to people who know him.

I conducted the interview with Dr. Epler, who lives in Sacramento, California, from the Portland State University campus during a series of long distance telephone conversations which were tape recorded through the use of a speaker phone.

The purpose of the biography was twofold: Portland State University was looking for someone to write Dr. Epler's oral history as a way of remembering and honoring the university's creator. Also, a class assignment necessitated that I interview and write an oral history of an older adult with the explicit purpose of creating a mutually-positive social interaction. I had a wonderful time talking with Dr. Epler and I've thoroughly enjoyed writing this. Throughout our conversations, I noticed a characteristic emerge in his personality that has taught me how to successfully navigate my own way through life. The repeating pattern that I noticed in each success of his was an attitude of service rather than personal achievement. His goals have consistently been directed toward filling another's need instead of toward personal gain. Although I didn't get to meet Dr. Epler personally, I'm looking forward to meeting him when he comes to Portland to celebrate the fifty-year anniversary celebration of Portland State University.

CHAPTER ONE

"Why Not Start a College Right Here?"

The tattered Vanport College guest book still sits on a bookshelf in the Portland State University alumni office. Its pages, moldy and torn on the edges, still preserve almost three hundred signatures. Two tiny red ropes, which have since faded to a pale yellow, bind the crisp pages in a forest green cardboard cover that resembles a well-traveled road with numerous potholes. As I carefully turned the brittle pages, I wondered if it had been salvaged from the flood that washed away an entire city.

It was almost fifty years ago when Vanport College had its first open house. In honor of the fifty year anniversary, I have retraced the life of the man who created that college—now known as Portland State University.

Stephen Edward Epler was in Florida when he received word, toward the end of 1945, that his three years of service in the United States Navy would end just in time to spend Christmas with his family as a civilian before embarking upon his new job that, unbeknownst to anyone including himself, would soon change Portland, Oregon forever. This was the news he had been waiting for since the time he wrote to his commanding officer in Washington, D.C. to be released so he could accept the position that was offered to him by the Chancellor of the Oregon State System of Higher Education. Epler had written to the chancellor that he was interested in going back to Oregon and wanted to be...

CHAPTER TWO

Go with the Flow

Epler's success was undoubtedly attributed to his environment and circumstances. Although it wasn't long before he would experience his first of many Vanport related disappointments, his lifelong quality of flexibility enabled him to expand, redirect and create new goals as needed from time to time.

Born October 5, 1909 in the tiny town of Brooklyn, Iowa, Epler spent part of his childhood and a substantial portion of his early adulthood in tornado territory where a tricycle, if absent-mindedly left on the front lawn, was at risk of being sucked up and hurled into a structure smashing it into pieces. The summers were so hot and humid that you could take a shower at seven AM and then sweat on the way to the breakfast table. The maple and oak trees that stood outside of the old Victorian and Midwestern style houses offered some relief but not enough that you couldn't help but wonder if the brutally cold winter that was sure to come might be easier to tolerate.

West Liberty, Iowa, his family's next move and Fairfield, Nebraska, where he started kindergarten, were pretty similar to Brooklyn. They were all small towns where you had to come up with your own entertainment. It was common for the townspeople to get together and play a game of basketball or baseball. Young Stephen liked sports from the time he could walk. He played on the grade...

CHAPTER THREE

Six-Man Football

He went straight to the top, the superintendent, and said, "Why don't we reduce the team size?" The superintendent was the real administrator and had more power than the principal did. He reviewed the school's history of experiences with football; it was typical of other schools of that size. There were so few big boys that they had to mix them with smaller boys and the younger ones ended up getting hurt. A serious injury was not uncommon after a few games and they would have to cancel the remaining games because of opposition from the parents who didn't want their boys hurt. Also, it was expensive during the depression days to buy equipment for the team which really needed to consist of about twenty-two to thirty players in order to have a practice team to play against. "That's a good idea," the superintendent replied. "Why don't you work it out and I'll see what we can do to get it tried out."

Epler went to work writing down some rules for the new game. Basically, he modified the rules of eleven-man football just enough to accommodate a smaller team. He wanted to get the team to the smallest number possible. The small high schools in the area all had basketball teams with five players. If they could get five good athletes to play basketball, they ought to be able to get five to play football too. Six players would allow for three linemen and three backs. That sounded like a good arrangement so he wrote the rules with that in mind. The finished..

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