



**1942:** Robert Gordon Sproul crowns Homecoming Queen Peggy Rich in 1942. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

## How Berkeley's University Howled for Sproul

Cultivate the art of enjoying things without owning them," Bob Sproul, who had been university president for a year, told the 1931 graduating class. "The beauty of a redwood forest, of a rushing mountain stream, of a cypress-shaded headland or a snow-carved peak is never destroyed no matter how often it may be absorbed and assimilated . . . Don't let the dead weight of material prosperity clog up the fountains of happiness."<sup>1</sup>

Could any sentiment be more Berkeley?

Few presidents did as much as Robert Gordon Sproul to transform the University of California from a homey, albeit superb, school into a modern juggernaut. During his tenure—1930 to 1958, the longest of any president—the university grew from 19,773 students at all its California campuses to almost that number, 19,344, at Berkeley alone. In the 1930s, the university had a medical school in San Francisco, a "Southern Branch" in Los Angeles, and an agriculture college in Davis.

By 1958, the university—which had added campuses at Riverside and Santa Barbara, and had converted the Southern Branch into the University of California, Los Angeles—was educating 47,000 students and was planning for many more.

It was Sproul who brought Ernest Lawrence to campus and supported his radiation lab, repeatedly increasing the lab's

budget and staffing, and doing whatever it took to keep Lawrence. It was the lab more than anything else that caused Cal to become a scientific powerhouse in the years before and after World War II.

But none of this explains why students loved him. He was as fine a public speaker as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Norman Thomas, or Haile Selassie, and according to one connoisseur, Sproul had "a reverberating voice and a phenomenal memory," a booming laugh, and a back-slapping manner that made him friends everywhere, from the Berkeley Rotary Club to captains of industry.<sup>2</sup> "At one time he belonged to 268 organizations," the *New York Times* noted.<sup>3</sup>

### Places

*Sproul Hall, the campus's administration building, faces Sproul Plaza, a major gathering spot and longtime theater for protests and worse.*

Unlike most university presidents, Sproul's background was not academe. With an undergraduate degree in civil engineering from Cal, Sproul sought work with the city of Oakland as an efficiency expert. He got the job and, efficiently enough, married the woman who interviewed him for it. Sproul rose through the university ranks in a series of comptroller jobs and still found time to help run the Save the Redwoods League and help found the Mt. Diablo Council of the Boy Scouts of America.

Like his predecessor, Benjamin Ide Wheeler, Sproul got to know many students personally, even though he lived part-time at UCLA. *Chronicle* sports reporter Will Connolly remembered running into Sproul at a university "Sirkus," "a sort of

campus Mardi Gras in which the co-eds run around in little girl pinafores and the boys look silly in Buster Brown outfits.” Sproul had joined the fun, almost incognito, Connolly said, “a modest guy . . . in the funny hat.”<sup>4</sup>

In early 1939, word got out that Sproul was taking a higher-paid job at a bank—\$50,000 versus his current \$13,500.

All afternoon, students painted signs. They alerted Sproul’s wife, Ida, who kept it to herself. By 7:30 p.m., they gathered in

front of the president’s mansion on campus, a Renaissance villa with a balcony above three deep arches. Sproul, Ida, and Sproul’s mother stepped onto the balcony when they heard the commotion.

“More than 5,000 wildly cheering young men and women, to the accompaniment of modern tom-toms, did a tribal dance that would have made Cherokees jealous,” the *Gazette* reported.

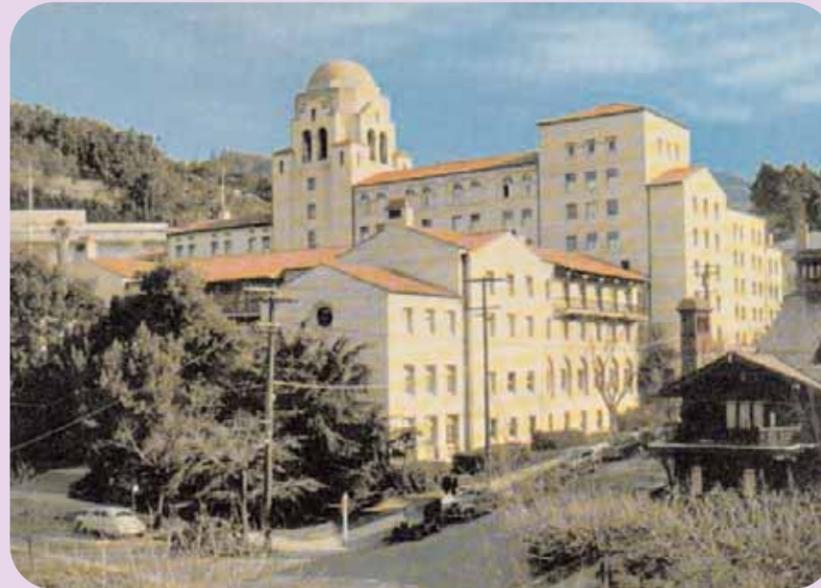
“Hey, Stay,” the placards read. “We Howl for Sproul.” Bands played and student body presi-

dent Alan Lindsay spoke:

“We have seen you around campus every day, and have spoken to you and brought our troubles to you. But until tonight we never thought it necessary to come to your house and tell you how much we like you.”<sup>5</sup>

Sproul, his arms around his wife and his mother, announced that he had declined the bank’s offer. “And this is supposed to be a commercial age,” the *Gazette* editorialized. Soon everybody was singing “All Hail Blue and Gold,” “even Bob’s mother.”<sup>6</sup>

Sproul, for once, was left almost speechless. “Oh boy,” he told Ida, “what a swell night!”<sup>7</sup>



### **International House,**

*which opened in 1930, was one of the first places in Berkeley to provide integrated housing. For decades it has forged international friendships and presented multicultural events. The building is a landmark inside and out by architect George Kelham. Postcard courtesy of Sarah Wikander.*