

Rufus Bernhard von KleinSmid
by Bob Padgett

As an FYI for our HCT Board members, the History Committee has decided to submit written, emailed reports before each Board meeting for the year, the biographical subject being a president of the University and the impact that president had on both the University and the broader educational community. The decision was made to email the report to the membership as a whole before the meetings, thus saving valuable meeting time and allowing a bit of time for a few questions during the meeting that the members may have about the subject president.

With that in mind, I have chosen to report on the educator who took the position of USC president in 1921 after serving as president at the University of Arizona. When first introduced to the USC community, he was billed as Doctor Rufus Bernhard von KleinSmid, A.M., Sc.D., J.D., Ph. Et Litt.D., LL.D. Quite a mouthful indeed. Dr. Von KleinSmid was viewed in the academic community at large as quite a catch, providing a broader reputational reach for USC, which had struggled at times in its 41 years of existence to stay afloat, and might have failed without the occasional financial help provided by the Methodist Church. A report of the day from the USC Committee on Education characterized the hire this way; "The coming of Rufus B. von KleinSmid to the Presidency of the University of Southern California was clearly providential. Highly trained in the science and art of education, skilled in administration, gifted with rare power of persuasive speech, with a clear vision, contagious enthusiasm, and inspiring faith, he is steadily leading our University up a shining way into new opportunities of the new day." Over-the-top, but impressive verbiage nevertheless. The subject of the flowery verbiage needed to prove himself. And he soon did so.

Rufus B. von KleinSmid's educational and administrative path before that glowing description was written featured postings at Oberlin Academy in Ohio, Northwestern University, DePauw University, and two years on loan from DePauw to the state of Indiana for the establishment of laboratories of research. In 1914 he accepted the Presidency of the University of Arizona, and spent the next 7 years in Tucson and traveling in Europe, Mexico, Peru, Panama, and Ecuador, often representing the USA in various prestigious educational conferences. Then it was off to USC for the next 26 years as president and 17 subsequent years as a frequent formally dressed visitor to campus.

But back to his USC presidency. His inauguration was probably the most elaborate in USC history. It occurred in conjunction with a Rufus von KleinSmid planned Pan American Conference on Education, a three day event that was the first such conference held at an American University. Four hundred delegates attended, representing 14 of the 22 Latin American countries as well as Great Britain and Italy. And RVK's inauguration was given tremendous pomp and circumstance that it otherwise would not have.

It did not take long for von KleinSmid's reputation and effect on the educational mission of USC to result in benefits. In December of 1922, USC was invited to join the Association of American Universities, which meant that degrees from every department of USC would be recognized by other institutions belonging to the association and that educational credits earned at USC would be interchangeable with those of other member institutions.

With increasing academic prestige came growing enrollment requests. Dr. von KleinSmid, of course, welcomed this growth in student numbers, as long as student academic standards were maintained, and set out on a plan to build new facilities commensurate with this growth. He was not much for enhancing

the University's endowment; he believed in building now and endowing later. Or maybe the endowment would become somebody else's problem downstream. The Science Hall, the Law School Building, an Architecture Building, Bridge Hall, the Student Union (the exact reason for the roofline monkey thumbing his nose at a profile of RVK is still in doubt, despite many competing stories), Mudd Hall of Philosophy, the P.E. Building, and Doheny Library. And these mostly magnificent structures were all built within the first half of Dr. von KleinSmid's tenure as president of USC. More followed in the second half.

A couple of von KleinSmid's early achievements were establishing the Graduate School in 1923 and creating the General Alumni Association with Edward L. Doheny, Jr., as its first president. In 1935, Dr. von KleinSmid welcomed to campus and hosted former president of the USA, Herbert Hoover, followed by the current president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The latter individual was honored with the provision of the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws.

One of Rufus von KleinSmid's most repeated declarations was that the reward for work is more work. The caliber and qualifications of the faculty at USC improved greatly during his administration, and many awards to individuals and to the institution brought more national and international acclaim.

In June of 1940, Dr. von KleinSmid, sensing that the U.S. would eventually enter World War 2, contacted FDR in Washington D.C. to offer the services and grounds of USC for various military training options. The entrance of the country into the war resulted in the cessation of RVK's ambitious building program, but it also resulted in a number of military training programs being established on campus. There were reportedly nearly 1,500 trainees enrolled at USC in 1943, mostly making up for the financial hit caused by the reported 2,600 former USC students who left the University to enter the armed forces. The opposite problem, of course, occurred when the war ended, with the onset of the "G.I. Bulge". Enrollment jumped from around 9,000 in 1945 to nearly 24,000 in 1947. Hiring of faculty and staff was immense and frantic. Quonset huts were erected, night classes were expanded greatly, Saturday classes occurred, 7 AM classes made their debut, and campus was quite busy. This was the era in which all the streets on campus were public thoroughfares, so automobiles competed with pedestrians for space. No skateboards, however.

1947 was also an important year in the presidency of Rufus B. von KleinSmid. The Board of Trustees, though being quiet about the process, were of a mind that RVK had lost a step. Or maybe more. So they selected a new president after a four month search. Dr. von KleinSmid did not approve of this process, and would not vacate the president's office when Dr. Fred Fagg, from Northwestern University, arrived to assume his new posting as USC president. This created a dilemma, and it was eventually solved when a brand new position of "USC Chancellor" was created. Dr. von KleinSmid eventually accepted being moved to the new office that was created for "The Chancellor". Duties unknown. And before RVK would agree to the move, he insisted that his name would be at the top of all University letterheads and communications. Which it was, for a time, until he was not paying attention.

The Marx Brothers movie character Rufus T. Firefly (Duck Soup, 1933, Paramount Pictures) is obviously a play on Rufus B. von KleinSmid. Not only is the name similar, but the physical appearance between the two is also impressive. And one last add to the legend of Rufus von KleinSmid. He was an avid practitioner of the sport of fencing, and was well acquainted with film actor Douglas Fairbanks from the world of that formerly very popular sport. In 1929, Fairbanks made the off-the-wall suggestion to his fencing pal Rufus that SC should consider establishing a school of cinema. "Talkies" had only been in existence for a year at that point, and people in cinema generally did not enjoy an upstanding

reputation. But Rufus von KleinSmid, a visionary, took this suggestion and ran with it, creating the first cinema school in American higher educational circles. And now, 90+ years later, a statue of Douglas Fairbanks occupies the center courtyard of the USC School of Cinema-Television.