

# OREGON ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS



## Trail Notes, Spring 2019

Dear Colleagues,

It all suddenly came to me while sitting at the testimony desk before our fair state's Senate Education Committee in Salem on May 1. It was Labor Day in Mexico and a large group of Hispanic activists in our state had besieged the capitol building demanding state-issued drivers licenses (on which basis one can register to vote) for everyone irrespective of their immigration status. We were inside, trying to hear ourselves amidst the din, and yours truly was presenting the OAS report on HB 2023, which will mandate that the teaching of history and other social sciences in Oregon be organized around group identities rather than truth. The chair of the committee, Rob Wagner, was shaking his head dismissively as I read out the charge sheet showing that the bill would undermine education and harm the most disadvantaged students most of all (you can [read](#) our testimony on the OAS website). The bill was initiated by our state's governor in the name of "reversing" the teaching of history that did not put at its center the assertion that Oregon history is "steeped in racism and exclusion." Senator Wagner was signaling that he was 120% in favor of this agenda (although a colleague, Senator Haas, meekly pointed out that there was no evidence in support of the claim that the mandate would improve educational outcomes) and made his displeasure with our dissent patently clear with squirms and grimaces. The combination of what was

happening outside the window and what was happening inside the room suddenly made things clear to me. As a political scientist, it was a little embarrassing: this is democracy in action! The motivations of our elected representatives are by necessity torn between making good policy and responding to the clamor of the people. What politician in their right mind would be a voice of reason and conscience if the electorate (and soon-to-be electorate parading outside the committee room) demands the opposite? The state representative whom our governor wheeled out to be the face of HB 2023, Diego Hernandez of East Portland, cannot be blamed for doing what politicians do best: reflecting the passions and fashions of the moment. Our job as scholars who believe in truth and the freedom of inquiry is to speak meekly amidst the din and hope that, when the passions have subsided, the truth will out.



*Thomas Kay Woolen Mill team, 1904*

Before the hearing on May 1, I visited the [Willamette Heritage Center](#) across from the capitol building which is centered around the Thomas Kay Woolen Mill that operated from 1889 to 1962 and was designated an “American Treasure” by the National Park Service in 2003. Talk about amazing history! It is a mill through which the story of the whole state can be told. It got me to thinking. Suppose I am a young Hispanic girl with an interest in hands-on social studies education. The mill could easily form the centerpiece of my teacher’s social studies unit for the entire year, so rich are its resources to learn about the economy, geography, society, technology, and politics of those 74 years. Unfortunately, as we pointed out in our testimony on HB 2023, the government believes she instead wants stories about virtuous Hispanic migrant workers on Oregon farms. This reductive, and frankly demeaning, attitude towards our students is now state law. And oh, how sad it is for the historical and social imaginations of our young people who are now told that their group-identities not their individual characters are what matter to their intellects.



*Chemawa Indian Training School team, ca. 1912*

The Willamette Heritage Center has featured many fabulous exhibits about our

state’s history in recent years, one of which was about baseball teams, whose photos I have gladly borrowed for this newsletter. A determined social activist who was insistent on imposing the Procrustean “race, gender, and sexual identity” framework on all history would find little solace in these photos because they show people from all walks of life joining in our great national past-time. When our students study these baseball photos and the amazing social capital they reflected (no “bowling alone” back then), might they not be allowed to think that the history our fair state was not “steeped in racism and exclusion” but rather was steeped in toleration and inclusion? No one doubts that it is seen differently by different people at different times. And that agreeing on the causes and consequences of historical events and factors is open to debate. Still, when people talk about “the verdict of history” they are appealing to some notion that in the end, certain perspectives and interpretations have more truthfulness than others when we subject them to shared standards of justification and evidence. That is the sacred trust in all history and social teaching that we owe to those of prior generations.



*Oregon State Penitentiary team, 1910*

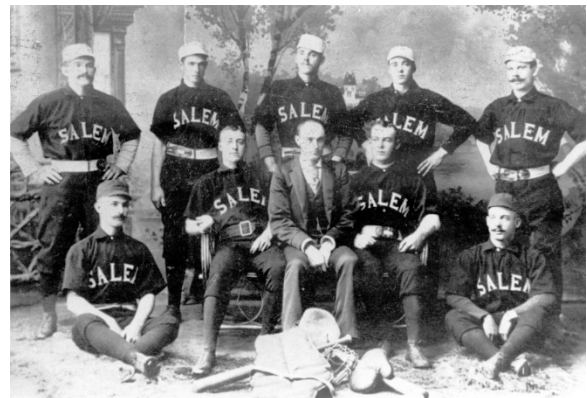
It has been a busy six months for the OAS. In addition to our testimony on HB 2023, in February we submitted [testimony](#) opposing

the misguided Senate Bill 664 on mandatory genocide education in Oregon public schools. The Holocaust was one of the world's great evils and should be treated cautiously by vote-seeking politicians. Instead, the bill perniciously uses the memory of the Holocaust as a bait-and-switch policy to impose classroom instruction on all sorts of social ills, real and imagined, under the ludicrous assumption that they are "precursors to genocide." You know where this is going, indeed the bill extolls classroom environments where students will be labelled "perpetrators, collaborators, and bystanders" , agents of potential genocide, when they step outside the boundaries of the contemporary social justice agenda. This is Holocaust trivialization at its worst. As Dr. Michael Weingrad, the Schnitzer Family Professor of Judaic Studies at Portland State University wrote in his testimony: "What the students and the citizens of our state need is not the intellectually sloppy if well-meant conflation of the Holocaust with other social ills, but specific, historically grounded education, free of clumsy political fashion. It is no improvement on not teaching the Holocaust to teach it in superficial, distorted, and exploitative fashion, which is what this bill will promote." Amen to that.



*Mt. Angel Girls School team, 1912*

What do Mark O. Hatfield and Richard M. Nixon have in common? A lot and a little. But one thing that has struck me recently is how important it is that the history of these two public leaders should be kept open to debate rather than narrowly stuffed into a given category. I had a chance to talk about Nixon in January while attending with other OAS members the NAS winter meeting in sunny California. Nixon's presidential library was a stone's throw from the conference venue and I spent some quality time with our fearless president, Peter Wood, making an NAS [podcast](#) on the importance of intellectual pluralism for a free society, and making the same appeal in my [talk](#). The recently revamped Nixon library is a fabulous demonstration of a truthful accounting of a man with many flaws and many virtues, including a brutally honest section on Watergate. By contrast, our revered Hatfield is increasingly the subject of hagiography in our state. "Hands off Hatfield" I want to say, every time my academic colleagues speak dreamily of their imaginary friend Hatfield whose memory is increasingly unrooted from history. There's that word history again.



*Salem team, 1891*

Our state's own Linn-Benton Community College in Albany made it into the "Top 10 Colleges in the U.S. Where You Won't Have

to Walk on Eggshells” compiled by Heterodox Academy founder Jonathan Haidt. In spring 2018, LBCC deployed Heterodox Academy's Campus Expression Survey to figure out which groups of students were afraid to engage which topics and why. Using the results, the school launched a series of campus conversations and initiatives designed to strengthen an already strong campus expression climate. In an October 2018 report, President Greg Hamann, reflecting on the college's new freedom of expression and academic freedom policy, said, "We now need to live individually and collectively in ways that respect and promote these freedoms, and we need to learn how to do so in ways that develop and preserve the culture of inclusion that we seek." This is quite an attainment. As Haidt wrote in a blog post in May: "LBCC is a small community college that has made big strides in creating a campus that welcomes and celebrates viewpoint diversity." LBCC students and faculty will share their experiences with a national audience at the Heterodox Academy's annual conference and Open Inquiry Awards in June in New York.



*Salem College team, 1872*

Speaking of awards, our first annual Oregon Campus Freedom Awards will be announced in late May and a ceremony honoring the winners will be held in Salem in mid-June. We hope to make the awards will draw attention to the efforts of students across our state to expand freedoms, encourage civilized debate, and uphold due process and the sacred role of individual thought in higher education and beyond. Stay tuned for details and please join us in Salem if you can.



*Chemawa Indian School team, ca. 1912*

Your membership in the National Association of Scholars and our Oregon chapter matters more than you think. In May, I attended and spoke at a conference at Oxford entitled "Academic Freedom Under Threat?" Our British colleagues have been slower to organize than in the U.S., in part because higher education there has been slower to capitulate to radical control. But one conclusion of our British colleagues was that they need an organization like NAS, which they are now planning. I shared our experiences in the OAS of celebrating academic freedom, supporting embattled colleagues, and providing a voice of reason and common sense at the regional level. Thanks for all you do!

Bruce Gilley

OAS President

[www.oregonscholars.org](http://www.oregonscholars.org)