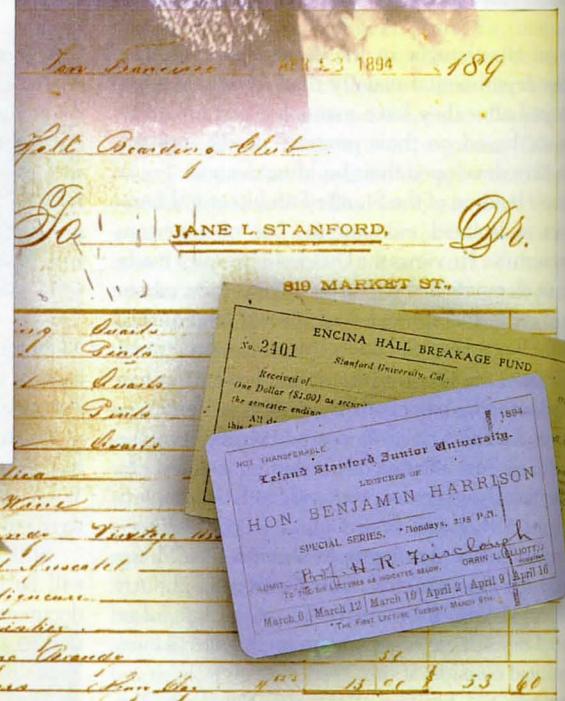
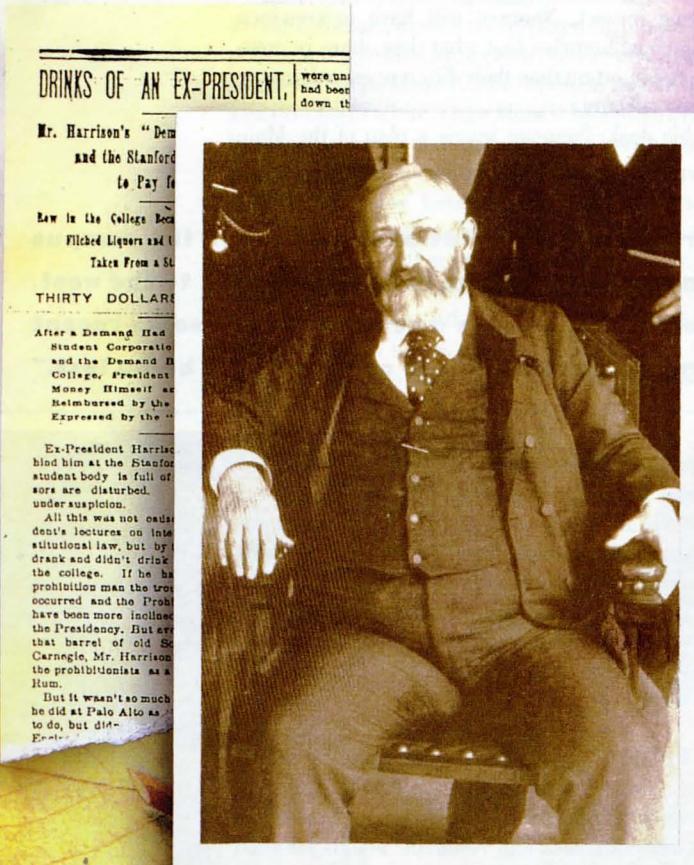


# Who Stole the President's Wine?

BY HOWARD BROMBERG



**I**t was the smallest of crimes. Not even a crime, really, no more than capturing the Axe is a crime. The heist of wine, whiskey, and cigars from a dormitory suite was a student stunt, a college prank, plain and simple. Certainly, the stolen goods wouldn't be missed. And, besides, they shouldn't have been there in the first place, violat-

ing, as they did, the well-known dorm rules against liquor and tobacco.

But the contraband goods were taken from the Encina Hall quarters of Benjamin Harrison, the 23rd president of United States and Stanford's first professor of law. They were also a gift from Stanford, widow of the University's founder, Leland Stanford. The disappo-

He left the campus in an uproar in the spring of 1894. The school was embarrassed, the newspapers, delighted, and Harrison, humiliated.

Despite the frantic efforts of Stanford officials and, possibly, private detectives, the culprits were never found. The theft from Harrison's suite entered Stanford history as an unsolved mystery. As late as 1946, Ray Lyman Wilbur, who had reigned as University president and who had been an Encina resident at the time of the theft, said the incident lacked a proper denouement.

"There never has been a straightforward clearing up of just what happened," Wilbur wrote. "It was never found by the University authorities and no one has ever confessed openly that he took part in either taking it away or in consuming it."

Perhaps no one has ever confessed openly," but there is a document in the University archives, one of thousands of reminiscences and anecdotes sent in by a single alumnus, that purports to solve the ancient Encina mystery.

The disappearance of the wine, whiskey, and cigars brought a controversial conclusion to what had been one of Stanford University's greatest triumphs. In 1894, Benjamin Harrison was a professor at the University, the first former U.S. president to teach at a college. Harrison was recruited by Senator Leland Stanford, who lured his personal friend and political ally to California with the phenomenal salary of \$10,000 to teach one course. For the 3-year-old University, landing Harrison brought unimaginable prestige and credibility.

For Harrison, the professorial appointment meant a dignified and lucrative second career in an age when former presidents were not given pensions. (The result of this policy could be tragic, as in the case of Ulysses S. Grant, who wrote his memoirs on his deathbed to rescue his family from financial ruin.)

The arrangement also offered Harrison the chance to enjoy the hospitable California climate and recuperate from an unhappy term in the White House, which had ended with his loss to Grover Cleveland in the election of 1892. During his stay at Stanford in March and April of 1894, Harrison found time to hobnob with the San Francisco elite at the Union League and University clubs, tour the soda springs of Napa Valley, and hunt the abundant wild game in California. Adept with a gun, Harrison shot 60 geese in one afternoon.

Harrison had even more success as a teacher than as a hunter. Although he has gone down in history as a minor president who is best remembered as the grandson of William Henry Harrison (Old Tippecanoe), Benjamin Harrison was a scholarly man, an eloquent orator, and a fervid patriot. His mission in coming to Stanford was not only to teach the students about the law, but to instruct them, he said, "in the rights and duties of good citizenship."

Harrison offered fresh insights into the Constitution. He challenged the traditional view of the Constitution as the product of sudden genius of the Founding Fathers. Instead, he argued that it had been slowly "perfected" over centuries of development. His lectures, innovative as well as informative, were a great success. Newspapers throughout the country reported the lectures in great detail and with favorable reviews.

But not every aspect of Harrison's stay at Stanford went smoothly. The difficulties had begun on June 21, 1893, when Senator Stanford died. Stanford had used his political finesse to recruit Harrison, but he left behind a University administration that lacked experience in handling someone of Harrison's stature. Meanwhile, William Randolph Hearst Jr. had taken over the *San Francisco Examiner* and was spurring circulation with a new style of journalism. Sensationalistic and aggressive, the newspaper relished exposing the famous and powerful.

Mistakes by the school's administration and revelations in the *Examiner* would plague Harrison from the inception of his relationship with the University. In December 1892, a University official had leaked Senator Stanford's secret negotiations with Harrison to a probing *Examiner* reporter. The *Examiner* blazoned the job offer in the next day's headlines, to Harrison's embarrassment. The administration failed to bar stenographers from transcribing Harrison's lectures, despite his specific request; the *Examiner* printed Harrison's first lectures verbatim. "Do not steal what belongs to ex-presidents!" Harrison demanded of the *Examiner*. Despite his admonition, he was able to stop the unauthorized publications only by copyrighting his future lectures. But the most embarrassing incident of all would arise only at the end of Harrison's tenure.

Leland Stanford had invited Harrison and his family to reside in the Stanford home during their stay at the University. After Stanford died, the administration decided to house Harrison

in the well-appointed guest suite in Encina Hall, the men's dormitory. Jane Stanford graciously stocked the suite's pantry with fine wines, whiskey, and Henry Clay cigars. It was of course inappropriate for Harrison's daughter and two grandchildren to stay in the men's hall, and the former president decided to house them in the Hotel Vendome, San Jose's finest hotel.

The decision to place Harrison in the men's dormitory was imprudent not only because it separated Harrison from his family, but also because Encina Hall was something of a battleground in the University's first years. Encina provided rooms for 400 men and was modeled after the Stanfords' favorite Swiss hotel.

But with the rooms of hundreds of young men strung along lengthy and very social corridors, mischief was always afoot and Encina Hall fully justified its nickname of "The Madhouse." Rooms were trashed, freshmen and passers-by were assaulted, and, on one occasion, a donkey was smuggled into the dorm. After some residents released the brakes on a train car standing near the hall and sent it hurtling towards the town of Mayfield, Leland Stanford considered closing the dormitory, but was dissuaded by his wife.

Donkeys weren't the only contraband smuggled into Encina. The University had forbidden liquor and tobacco in the dorm, but the prohibition was largely ignored. Stanford men would revel all night in the nearby taverns of Menlo Park and Mayfield, and later sneak alcohol back to their rooms. The doors of the dorm were locked at 11 p.m., but late arrivals would simply crawl through the first-floor windows.

The students had, however, enough respect for the former president to refrain from any pranks during his stay—although a few daring students did venture to call upon Harrison in his suite and were received warmly. It was only after Harrison concluded his course and departed for Indianapolis on April 16 that trouble began.

Days after Harrison returned to Indiana, the liquor and cigars in his Encina suite were discovered missing. The University investigated, but failed to find the thieves or the missing \$33.60 worth of contraband. The student newspaper, the *Palo Alto Daily*, warned the culprits to come forward, as they would inevitably be found out: They didn't and they weren't. Another newspaper cited rumors that skilled detectives were hunting for

the thieves. If true, they had no more success than anyone else.

The theft remained unsolved, and, as Stanford registrar Orrin Elliott concluded, that was how the incident should have ended. The administration certainly agreed that it would embarrass Mrs. Stanford to reveal that the wine and whiskey had been her gift, given that the Stanfords had opposed alcohol on campus; and this information was suppressed. But University officials did not want the theft to go unpunished.

In a decision that was as unwise as it was unfair, the University demanded that the residents of Encina Hall pay for the stolen goods out of the Hall Breakage Fund, which had been set up to indemnify the dormitory against broken furniture. The demand provoked outrage from the residents. One student wrote to the *Daily* on April 26 and pointed out that the funds were collected only to "replace broken furniture belonging to the University. Now are wines and cigars University furniture? The entrance of such 'furniture' into the hall is prohibited."

The editor of the *Daily*, who was later to play an even larger role in the controversy, called the proposal "absurd." In a *Daily* editorial on April 25, he wrote that "the strictest rules that are in force were broken by a distinguished guest; neither wine nor cigars are permitted to enter Encina, and now it is proposed to make the students there an insurance company for the redemption of contraband goods . . . If rules are broken that person must bear the consequences."

Eventually, under duress and under protest, the students handed over \$28.55. Charles Lathrop, the University treasurer, grudgingly accepted the partial payment, writing, "If this is the best you can do, we will have to accept same . . ." And so ended the controversy on campus.

But not elsewhere. As a result of the student letters and editorials in the *Daily*, the *Examiner* learned of the heist. Still smarting over its public scolding for the "theft" of Harrison's lectures, the *Examiner* seized its chance for revenge. On May 5, the delighted newspaper struck. The *Examiner* labeled Harrison the "slave of the Demon Rum." The paper also said that the former president, to "much amazement and some surprise," left behind in the dormitory "platoons of empty bottles." Newspapers around the country, especially Democratic Party ones, picked up the story of "Harrison's tipple." Soon letters were arriving at the University expressing shock

and alarm over Harrison's "private stock."

Harrison was humiliated. He had come to Stanford University to help mold the character of the students. It was a role well-suited to his religious devotion and moral fervor. In his first lecture, he had told the students that he hoped that "whatever impulses I may kindle in your hearts shall be true and elevating." Now he stood accused of debauching the student body with alcohol.

Stanford's president, David Starr Jordan, and his secretary immediately wrote to Harrison, fixing blame on the "chronic kickers" among the students and the "animus" of the *Examiner*. It is unlikely that Jordan mollified Harrison. It was the administration that had insisted on wringing damages from the students, thereby bringing attention to the theft. Further, school officials had hidden the fact that the liquor had been a gift, leaving the impression that Harrison himself had secreted a large stash of alcohol in his suite for his short stay. (It must have especially galled Harrison because, sympathetic to the emerging temperance movement, he had not even tasted the liquor.) A measure of Harrison's anger can perhaps be seen by this: Although he was a fastidious correspondent who answered letters promptly, there is no record that he ever responded to Jordan's letter.

**B**ut the story does not end there, at least according to an extraordinary Stanford alumnus named Archie Rice. Rice was a resident of Encina Hall at the same time as Harrison. He was also the editor of the *Daily*, the author of the April 25 article on the rules at Encina, and a confidant of President Jordan. During his lifetime, Rice sent thousands of pages of facts, opinions, reminiscences, and stories about Stanford's first classes to the University. In one of these documents, Rice purports to solve the mystery.

According to Rice, in 1928, 34 years after the incident, he was reminiscing with a former classmate, Tommy Code. Code made a dramatic confession. He and a fellow student, Milton Grosh, had committed the theft. They were strolling past Harrison's room when they spotted the basket of wine and cigars. Grosh crept into the room through an open window and passed the loot to Code, standing outside. The goods were then shared with about 50 residents of Encina Hall.

Code and Grosh were never formally charged. Yet, although there is no inde-

pendent confirmation of Rice's account, there seems little reason to doubt the story. Indeed, there is evidence that Elliott, the former registrar and a leading authority on Stanford history, came to know and believe the version told by Rice. In his 1937 history of Stanford, Elliott blames the theft on "a couple of students" who shared the goods with a congenial group of Hall men.

Code and Grosh were fraternity members as Encina men, and their actions may simply have been the frat-house heroics for which Encina men were renowned. They may have also been a political motive for the theft. Code and Grosh were extremely popular students, the quarterback and right end respectively of Stanford's first football team (which had pulled off a stunning 14-10 upset against Cal in the first Big Game). They may have felt that they were striking a blow for all of the students by taking the wine. After all, the University's stringent rules against alcohol were hardly popular in the wine-soaked Bay Area. The president's liquor cache censed the student body, abrading its sense of fairness, as is apparent from the uproar that followed the University's demand for reimbursement.

Whatever the motives for the theft, the consequences were as far-reaching as they were unforeseeable. Benjamin Harrison never returned to Stanford. Other factors, such as the death of Leland Stanford and the toll that preparing the lectures took on the weary Harrison, dictated his decision not to return. But the theft must have struck the proud Harrison as one final indignity. He had come to Stanford with the loftiest of intentions: help train the students in virtue. His efforts had been followed with enthusiasm throughout the country. But at the conclusion of his course, his entire stay in Encina had been made to read like a month bender in a saloon hall.

In the seven years that remained to him, Harrison did not abandon his goal of promoting patriotism, especially in the younger generation. He wrote popular articles and best-selling books on American government and democracy. His writings were lectures, of sorts, but issued from his study in Indianapolis, far away from campus life, and far away from the mischief of Encina Hall. ☐

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