

" California University President

Dr. John Pierce Watkins Announces Retirement"



He's a University  
President.

He will risk his life,  
the lives of many others,  
everything he holds dear  
for the one thing  
he holds sacred...  
his pipe.

A CALIFORNIA TIMES Film

JPW

## A Personal Note

When I first met the hero this roast—then in his fourth year at California University—we were taking a class at Pitt from the famous aesthetician George Boas. John gained a measure of notoriety in this class not only for wearing a pink-striped ice-cream parlor blazer even after November's chill blasts had forced the rest of us into drabber winter garb, but for posing to the exasperated Dr. Boas questions that got lost in a forest of ambiguity long before their first dependent clauses had run their course.

I must now confess that in my note book, where my classmates were drawn as a cartoon menagerie, John Watkins appeared, blazer, pipe and all, as a piglet. When a friend of mine from California informed me that John had a baby son who was his father's miniature simulacrum ("I've even seen that infant with a pipe in his mouth," he insisted), I added to my drawing a smaller piglet, likewise wearing a blazer.

Later, we found ourselves in an evening seminar taught by the irascible and brilliant medievalist Alan Markman, who suggested (i.e., demanded) that we join him for a restaurant dinner before class each Wednesday.

Markman, who regarded California University as a slum on the wrong side of the tracks in Sodom, never ceased to bad people far, far away, and gave him the nickname "Moneybags."

One evening when John had come to Pittsburgh only to find class canceled, I invited him to my house for dinner. Upon our arriving there, John's did not like what he saw: the pipes had accumulated in their bowls what he regarded as an unconscionable mass of char.

For the next three hours or so, he reamed out each and every pipe in that heap, covering his lap and the chair in which he sat with mountains of gunk. Dinner he treated merely as a break-time snack; getting those pipes clean (and denouncing their former owner as the worst and most negligent delinquent since the apostles fell asleep in the garden of Gesthemene) had become the sole reason for his visit.

When he left, he did so with the air of a plumber who has at last repaired successfully a crass amateur's utter botch.

"Thanks for dinner," he said. "Don't let it happen again."

I've always assumed he was talking about the pipes.

After that semester, I would not see him again until 1967, when he proved beyond my deepest doubt that while Alan Markman may have been right about CU locale, working there sure beat contemplating bankruptcy every time a quarter slipped from my grasp and dropped down a sidewalk grate.

For 35 years since then, I have been part of John Watkins' World, and I still say, as Peter Falk did when accepting his Emmy, "What a way to make a living."

The following text and many of the pictures and captions for this feature appeared originally in an edition of the *Times* celebrating Dr. Watkins 25th year with the University. Years have passed since then, and some of the material is thus dated; but be assured it remains as true now as it was then.

Since 1967 John Watkins has been down the hall or across the street from where I have been working. It is hard for me—and here at least I am not joking—to imagine California without him. The place just won't be the same.

Bill Bennett

## A Moment in History

John Pierce Watkins, sometimes known as Little Huggie-Bear to his colleagues and other shady individuals, began his official administrative career at the Chicken Little Nursery School, an institution about to plunge into massive deficit. Years earlier baby Watkins barked orders from his playpen a wooden replica of Old Main. Who would have thought that this adorable little baby in a fuzzy green hat would, in later years, bark orders from the real Old Main.

Administrating was not Watkin's first choice as a profession. He often dreamed of being the prince of a fairytale kingdom, although he found that the price of his prince suit required him to play a musical instrument and walk in step at the same time. He has since set his sights lower. Much lower.

Suppose though that he had attained his dream and there was a great ball being held in the kingdom in his honor. If you were the Cinderella at his ball. Would you:

A) Blur out, despite every self-conscious effort not to, "A pleasure to meet you, Your Earness";

B) Tell him you had to be home before 7:30 or your carriage would turn back into a pumpkin and your dress would become rags. Of course you might want to pray that he doesn't go for pumpkins and rags;

C) Say to him that if by chance he should find a glass slipper at some time later in the evening, that's okay, he can keep it, you really don't want it back. Really.

As president here at this university Watkins has demonstrated many skills. Among them is the knack of getting money from reluctant alumni and fractious legislators. Of course knowing how to pick pockets does help.

**EDITOR'S NOTES:** as one proceeds through this publication, one will see that the grotesque pants, far from being a single day's satorial aberration, would become — like his garish ties and some of the most loathsome jackets this side of a lunatic's flea market — a Watkins trademark; to what end, no one knows. Asked by a reporter what pleased her most about her son's ascending to California University of Pennsylvania presidency, Watkin's mother (who for years had been held responsible for many of her son's hideous outfits) answered without hesitation: "Now he'll have to start wearing decent clothes. If he doesn't, the governor will write him a nasty letter." Although there is no tangible evidence, it was speculated that he had worn decent clothes in the privacy of his own home. One must still wonder if he ever received that nasty letter from the governor.

## The Many Faces of John Pierce Watkins



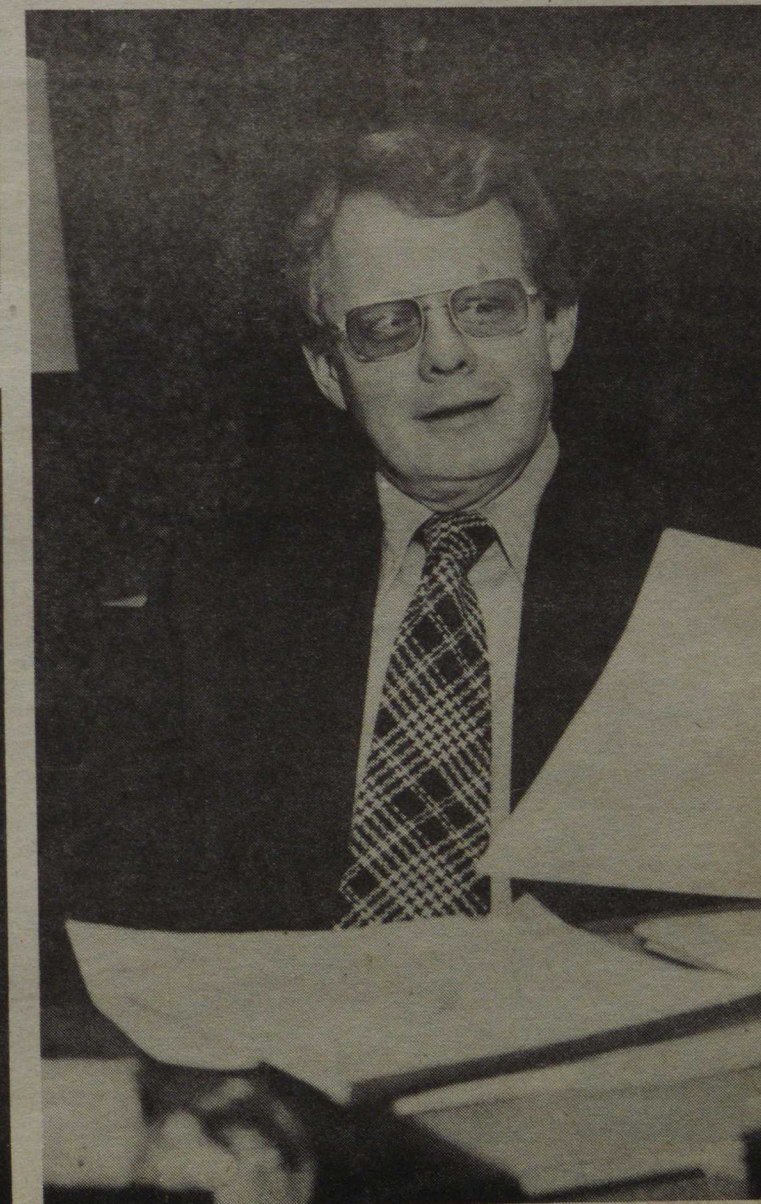
As Watkins spoke to a packed Hamer gym, the guests of honor could not help but think of the reception afterward, lost sleep, and plans for the weekend. Watkins, as ever, went unaffected.



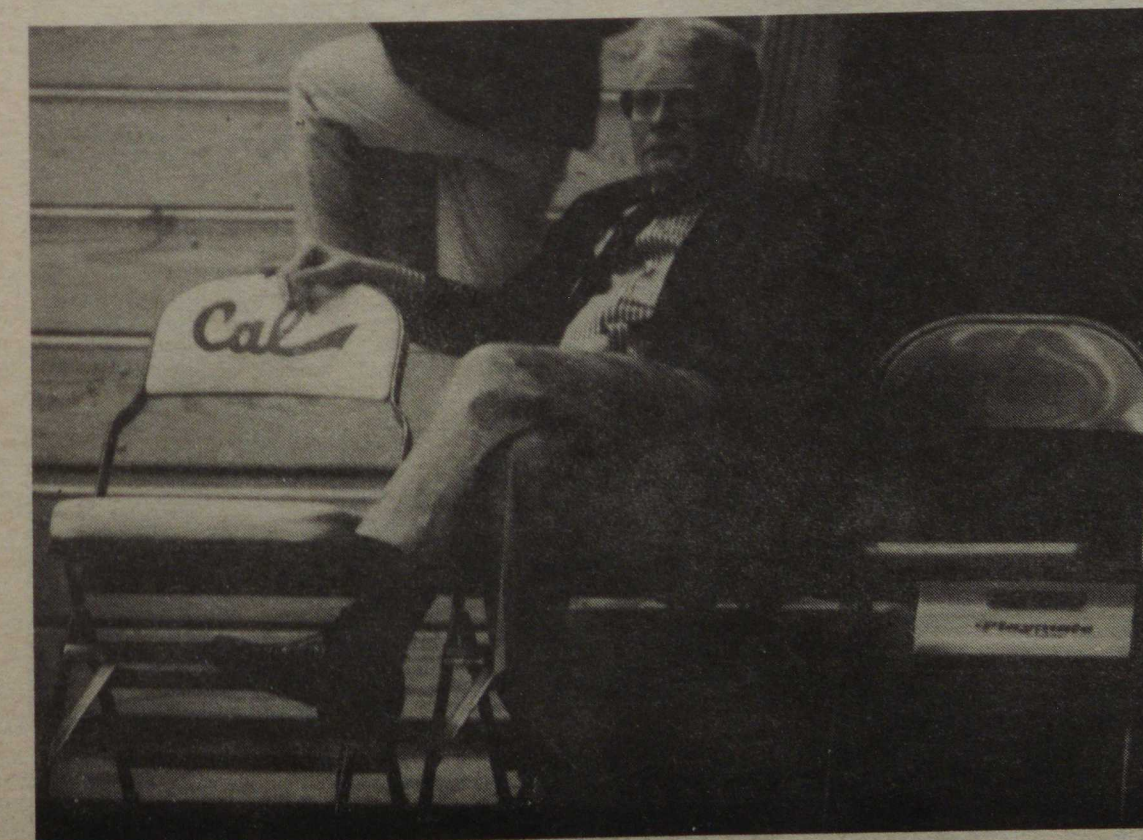
Watkins, not always the eloquent orator as he is now, illustrates during a faculty convocation how he overcame his stagefright.



While we can't identify the event, pictured above, this photo is probably the most animated exhibition by the oft-maligned master of reserve.



Watkins, as he will be remembered best, with criss-cross tie, smoker's jacket, boyish grin and showing off his skill of twirling his eyes.



An obviously exuberant Dr. John Pierce Watkins relishing in the delights of his NCAA #1 ranked championship basketball team.



## Introduction

35—Count Them—35 Years

Thirty-five years. Well over one quarter of a century. Unless one automatically thinks in eons and millennia, and uses the word "yesterday" in reference to the Age of the Pharaohs, 35 years is a long time indeed—particularly, as some will be quick to point out, if one is speaking of 35 years spent at California University.

One hesitates to be a stickler about such things on this August occasion, but if one counts his time as a student, John Watkins has actually spent 39 years here, and that fact—while marred by the awkward asymmetry of the clumsy number 39—is perhaps even more awesome.

What, one wonders, can induce a man to give literally more than half of his life to a single institution, especially an institution in which his first four years were spent as an inmate?

Several theories have been put forward, none of them altogether convincing despite a ring of truth in the details of each. They deserve our consideration here.

Some say that when their son was born, John's parents, much like those of Prince Gautama (later the Buddha), determined that the boy should never experience the sorrows and disappointments of the outside world, and thus taught him that California and its environs were the entire universe, the absolute and only reality, and that college was an enchanted palace in which little John would someday dwell.

Others believe that John came to believe early on that California, Pennsylvania was the California, the sunshine paradise of which so many of us dream, and that the inclemencies of weather that have been his lot these many years are simply an inordinate number of exceptions to the rule.

These notions seem improbable, but not wholly so. In support of the first, for example, are his often-heard comments that going to Taiwan was "a trip to another world" and That Thornburgh and Company down in Harrisburg "live in a world that has nothing to do with this one."

Likewise, certain sources inform us that Watkins believes Marlin County's notorious Valley Girls are natives of this valley, and that their popularizer is in fact named Moon Zappa.

Be things as they may, one ought not to test these notions too thoroughly. Should you chance upon the president down by the river unlimbering a surfboard and humming Beach Boys tunes, you would be wise not to speak of fools' paradises, but to say instead something like "Oh wow!" or "Save the whales" or "Gag me with a spoon."

And should he remark to you that he knows why the unfinished highway comes to such an abrupt end at Denbo Heights—because were it to go any further it would simply drop off the end of the earth—say nothing. Smile and agree.

Although these theories are admittedly difficult to accept, rejecting them leaves only what may be the most outlandish of all: that John Watkins likes it here. Well, there have been instances, we are told, of prisoners who came to think of their cells as home.



**HIS FIRST PITCH OF THE SEASON**

As part of one of his campaigns to improve athletics at CU, John decided he ought to toss out the first ball of the season, just like real presidents do. So we got together some players and gave him a ball and told him to go to it. Well, the long and short of it was that John just couldn't get the ball to the catcher, so we had to keep moving him closer and closer. (You can see in this picture that he still wasn't getting the job done from ten feet away.) In the end—John just handed the guy the ball and let it go at that. —Mitch Bailey, former head baseball coach



**HIS FIRST VISIT TO THE INFIRMARY**

"Hitler's brain, huh? Interesting." That's all he had to say.—volunteer at the Downey-Garafola Center



**HIS FIRST REAL SNUB**

This may have been one of the saddest days I ever spent with Watkins. We were at a State College Presidents Conference, and during the session not a person paid John any attention. John was left with nothing more than to decipher an XYZ note someone sent him once.—Jay Helsel



**HIS ANNUAL WALK DOWN THE AISLE**

He was very nice, but quiet, talking about how far African Americans had come. He said he was very proud of me, then he started making those stupid jokes. He was sweet.—Kimmarie Johnson



**AT THE FOOTBALL GAME**

He was barking and I wasn't too pleased by it all. I mean here was a man of great respect, of honor, and he was barking. And yet, I've seen him go to basketball games and not even adjust himself in his seat. His sense of spirit is suspect.—Gerald McBreiney, NCAA

**Landmarks and/or Great First Occasions Remembered in a Significant Life, the Sequel**



**HIS ANNUAL HOMECOMING PHOTOGRAPH**

We were all just standing there, with my court on the steps, waiting for the guy to snap the picture, and President Watkins was cracking all these stupid jokes I'm sure he read in a Bazoooka Joe comic. We were laughing so hard, I thought I'd burst a button off my dress. I couldn't get over how many 'knock knock' jokes he knew. Then the guy asked us all to smile and the President just froze up. He sucked on his lips as if he hadn't any teeth. I couldn't get over it. He said something about "wearing the official smile."—Kimmarie Johnson, Homecoming Queen, 1988



**ANOTHER WALK DOWN THE AISLE**

He acted so nervous. At first I thought maybe he was a little weird, y'know, always looking down at me. Then I thought maybe he was a little self-conscious about me being taller than him. Then I thought maybe something had happened to my dress. All this time, he said nothing to me as we walked to the little podium. Then I thought maybe he was having a heartattack or something. I just didn't know what to think. Then when he crowned me, he sort of smiled. No not a smile at all, more like a smirk. But still he said nothing. Finally, I asked him if something was the matter. He only frowned and said "Mephistopheles" and kept walking.—Debbie Faust, Homecoming Queen, 1989



**FIRST CONVOCATION IMPERSONATION**

He seemed scared. I mean terrified. He stood up there, not saying a thing, with his eyes closed. Geezus, then he goes into this Jack Benny routine. I thought he was cool.—Bernie DeFillipo, English Dept.



**HIS FIRST MEDAL HE GOT TO KEEP**

For his presidential inauguration we bought Dr. Watkins a medal the size of a pie plate, and I guess getting something that big went to his head. Minutes after the ceremony he was demanding that people call him Bishop Watkins, Your Eminence, and sometimes plain Sire, and was making his way through the crowd looking for sick people so he could touch them and make them well again. It was sort of scary for a while.—Charles Talbert, Graduate Student Association



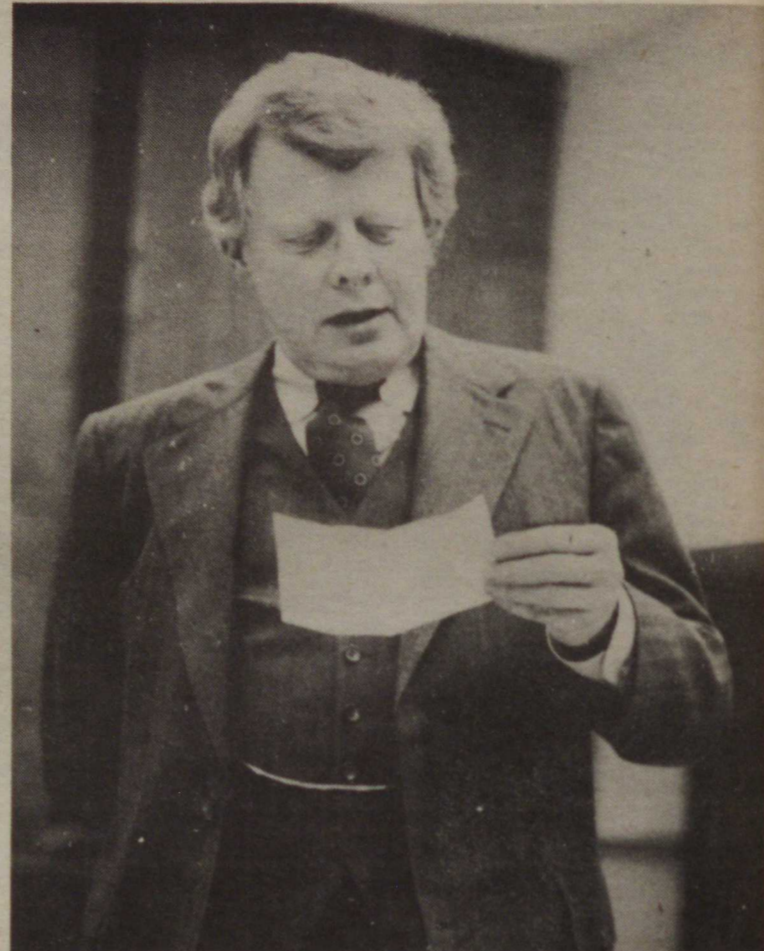
One of the best parts of this job is the selflessness. Here I am, donating not only this check for fifty dollars but also a bookcase, a lamp, and a chair to the Navajo Reservation Education project. Makes me feel proud of the university, its faculty, and especially the students whom I consider extended family.

## Dr. John's Picture Show

with comments from JPW, himself



I've always enjoyed things like Greek Week, Homecoming and other occasions that bring our Greek system together. They are probably the single most collective organization that really cares for our campus and the community. If I could, I'd give each and every one of them a little plaque and flag to hang in their safe, livable houses. They make me very proud.



Now and then at faculty convocations I'll ask my colleagues to send forward in the form of notes any questions they may have. Most often, they say things like "Won't you tell us again, Uncle Wiggly, how you threw the Scanlon into the bushes and brought the molasses home safe" or "Please say hello to everyone from Dr. Nelson, who can't be here today but promises to catch you later on TV."

But one day I got a note that just said "XYZ." I answered back to who ever sent it, "Exactly. It's all just as simple as XYZ." Everybody laughed, but I can't really imagine why. I have no idea.



One morning Jay Helsel, vice president of Academic Affairs back then, and I were scheduled to have our picture taken perusing an Important Document, but during the session every time the photographer went to push the button Jay would be looking off somewhere into space. "The document, Jay, the Important Document," I said. "You're supposed to be looking down at the Important Document."

"I can't," he answered. "When I look down I can't keep my eyes off that godawful coat, and it makes me start giggling uncontrollably."

So we had to settle for what you see here, me looking somewhat peevisish and Jay's Lips compressed against some outburst of hilarity. I still don't see how a guy who'd wear that tie should find my coat so funny.



We were standing around one year during Homecoming, Joe and I, talking about the future. "These kids are going to bring trouble, John." But I told him no. They wouldn't. "Joe, these are good kids. Why just look at those Greeks, they help out in the community, and they are so nice. I'm so proud of them." He only snickered. I still don't know why.



This was the most recent Homecoming. I'm not very proud of this picture. I admit, it makes it look as though I am lighting up a marijuana joint. But it's only my pipe. I would attest to that in a court of law. I've never even tried a marijuana joint. They are very bad. No, No. It's my pipe, and I didn't inhale either way anyhow. I don't understand why she looks so disgusted. That was a nice parade though, wasn't it. I thought it was kind of —ah, funky.



I love this picture. That's Chilly Billy Cardale next to me. We were having a night of the living dead feast, if you will. Oh, yes. The Count made me nervous, he was hanging on me so much. "The ketchup. You just want the ketchup!" I'm a big kidder like that. And how about that hunchback. Oh, my! How I enjoy this picture. What did we eat? Ham-hocks, legs, jiblets, and monkey brains. Oh! I'm only kidding. We didn't have jiblets. Stand up! Stand up! Oh you are standing. Oh that hunchback. He still sort of walks that way, as it were. This picture brought back quite a few memories...



One day we were sitting around—Nancy Nelson, Elmo Natali and myself—talking about this and that, when out of nowhere one of us came up with the notion that a President Emeritus, someone, say, like John Dixon, might be the very thing to install in that dandy new office down at the renovated Old Main Annex. Well, before you could say "Decade of Excellence," I had been appointed to a search committee which had as its object the finding of John Dixon himself. Armed with some old retrenching tools I'd never gotten around to using, we wandered about until we found a likely spot. But before we'd done much more than chew up a little bit of sod, Judy Ansell turned to me and said under her breath, "Has it occurred to you that we all may be playing the fool? I mean, handing out hotdogs down at the bank is one thing, but this—really." She had a point. There were many ramifications and complications to this whole business that none of us had thought out very clearly. Assuming we even found Dr. Dixon, for example, would he even accept the job? After all, the last time he'd held a similar office, he'd ended up pawning his silverware just to keep the college open. And then there was the problem of complement; could we justify hiring him? (I must say it seemed to me that a 150-year-old man would be a perfect addition to our gerontology program, but that's beside the point.) So to cut this tale short, we gave up the idea. I'm just as glad, to tell the truth, I'd been worried all the time that folks might in the end come to prefer John Dixon—whatever age or shape—to me, and then where would I be? Back in the English department teaching Comp I, that's where.

EDITOR'S NOTE: in transcribing Dr. Watkins' commentaries, we have done some editing to accommodate space limitations. Those interested in such details will want to know that we deleted 862 "as it were's," 596 "if you will's," and 2,349 short interjective guffaws.

# "Watkins Says Goodbye, Again"



President Dr. John Pierce Watkins reflects on an era gone by. Out on that playing field of life lie tragedies (both classical and modern), catastrophes, controversies, sorrows, mistakes, and around the goal posts, some successes and blades of happiness. Under this one man, California has grown from State College to State University, "little California" to "Harvard on the Mon."

Ah! To be out there, tackling ole' Elmo and playing in the new game.

"Uh, sir...sir? Do you have a pass to be back here?"

"Not on me, I used to be..."

"I'm sorry sir, if you don't have the proper authorization to be here, I'll have to escort you off university property."

And so we leave our legendary hero, running from the law with only a fistful of memories and a head full of questions like...what does XYZ mean anyway?



JPW was brought to you by  
Bill Bennett: producer and mentor in absentia  
Jeff Eicher: on the spot satirist and provider of "happy thoughts"  
Jack LeFever and Aimee Short: performers  
Jami F. Marlowe: blithering idiot, editor, and contributing author  
Frank Magyar: director and X-acto knife extraordinaire  
Jeremy Workman: fool and contributor  
the rest of the California Times: people in the street  
thanks to those who made the 25th Anniversary issue, from much we stole