

Missing their mascot

At Pacific University, students long for the return of their beloved Boxer — and the school spirit the 60-pound symbol stands for

By **ROMEL HERNANDEZ**
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He's a phantasmagorical little cutie. A mongrel mix of dragon, dog, lion and unicorn, he poses with a wide, mischievous smile as if begging for a snack or laughing at a private joke.

Pacific University's Boxer mascot has been missing for two years, and it's no laughing matter for students who want him back. They hope he can fire up something that's missing on many campuses these days: school spirit.

A purported alumnus has been sending anonymous e-mails claiming to have the monster, convincing some students that the 60-pound mascot just might show up at homecoming this weekend.

"I have made arrangements for Boxer to come visit campus very soon," one of the mysterious e-mails claims. "Keep your eyes and ears open. It will be fast, it will be loud, and it will be live."

It is a curious contradiction that as Pacific celebrates its 150th anniversary this year, some students are looking backward, wanting to revitalize university traditions, even as school leaders focus forward on a "market-oriented" future, emphasizing real-world professional experience.

The paradox reflects a tension in modern university life. Many students today take a more practical approach to their education. Old totems like Boxer seem to be vanishing — for real.

"This isn't Pacific in 1965, or '75, or even '85," says

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A statue of Pacific University's Boxer mascot has been missing for two years. Now, anonymous e-mails have some students convinced that the 60-pound statue might show up at homecoming celebrations this weekend.

Boxer: Students try to revive tradition

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Steve Klein, director of student activities at the Forest Grove school. "There are many students you ask about school spirit, and they'll say, 'I'm here to get an education.'"

But for some students, nostalgia lingers for a time when tradition and pranks were the stuff of college life. "Some are too busy or just don't care," says sophomore Angie Felix. "But there are a lot of us who are really into school spirit."

A few colleges continue to treasure their old mascot traditions. Reed has the Doyle Owl statue, which occasionally emerges from its secret roost, and George Fox has Bruin Junior, a stuffed bear that students still wrestle to win.

A mascot is "an object around which to weave stories and traditions," says Gary Miranda, a Portland poet who co-wrote Pacific's new history, called "Splendid Audacity." "It binds people together."

The original Boxer, brought to Pacific in 1896 by a graduate who was a missionary in China, was nicknamed for China's Boxer Rebellion of 1900.

The quest for Boxer mirrors Pacific's own search for identity. With

its 1,800-student body divided between a liberal arts college and several health-related professional schools, it is, like Boxer, hard to neatly define. President Faith Gabelnick is pushing to integrate the university's two sides and raise its visibility.

Boxer's a part of that effort, Gabelnick says, because he symbolically links the school's present with its past. In that way, he's never really been gone, she says. "Boxer is already here. He lives in the stories."

But she turns tough when the talk turns to "tosses" — mad scrambles to gain possession of the bronze beast, outlawed in the early 1990s.

"I'm not hot on tosses," Gabelnick says flatly. "You could get killed tossing that dog around."

The tradition of stealing Boxer began soon after the statue came to campus. According to Miranda and Rick Read, the former Pacific archivist and the co-author of "Splendid Audacity," the tosses were well under way at least by the 1920s.

Whoever was in possession of Boxer would "flash" him, usually at some event such as graduation or

homecoming, setting off a wild skirmish — the "toss" — to gain possession and spirit him away. The battles were ferocious enough that the little beast's head, limbs and tail were torn off at various times over the years, and students got bruised and bloody, too.

In 1969, African American students swiped the original statue as a protest. That Boxer had never been recovered, and there are continuing rumors it was tossed off the Golden Gate Bridge or melted down.

Miranda and Read's sleuthing for the statue led them to France, the Philippines and finally to a doctor in California who refused to respond to calls, faxes, voice mails or e-mails, they say.

In the early 1980s, a group of Pacific students launched a fund-raising drive, and in 1984, Boxer II made his debut. The flashing and tossing recommenced until it was outlawed.

"It was quite a prestigious thing to have possession," says Klein, who witnessed several tosses in those years. "People would go to great extremes. There'd be 50 or 80 people in a pile, and a third of them would be bloody."

After the ban on tossing, Klein

kept the statue in his office, bringing it out for public events. But three years ago someone broke down his office door and stole Boxer in the middle of the night.

"At first I was ticked," Klein says. "Then I thought, 'Well, I don't have the right to keep holding on to it.'"

The Boxer the students hope to reclaim is the second one. The original's fate remains a mystery.

The recent spate of anonymous e-mails could be a hoax, students say. But they're hoping. They have spread the word, flying banners and posting fliers and scrawling "Give Us Boxer!" on campus. Boxer has been missing for as long as most of them have been at Pacific, but they lust for him in ways they can barely articulate.

"It was something that was unique about Pacific, and then it was gone," says senior Jason Stuwe. "I really do hope someone flashes it. I just have to believe that something good would come of it."

"We don't know what to expect anymore," Felix says. "But it would be an amazing thing just to touch it."

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