

Three Boxes: Revisiting David P. Hooper

The Hooper Center marks 40 years this September, a noble legacy to a tragic life

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Central City Concern's memorabilia about David P. Hooper's life will be shared at a 40th anniversary party celebrating the Hooper Center on Monday, September 10th from 4:30 to 7 p.m. at the Left Bank Annex, 101 N. Weidler. All are welcome; commemorative recovery coins to the first 400 people, music, refreshments, opportunity to share your Hooper story and more!

A few years ago, working for Central City Concern, I was asked to "sort through those three Hooper boxes" in the basement. Just keep the important stuff. "Hooper" is of course David P. Hooper and many people in Portland know Hooper as the city's Sobering Station and Detox Center where thousands of people have begun their recovery.

The Sobering Station is on a nondescript corner of Northeast Portland and it's where police bring unruly, intoxicated people - a place to sober up, stay out of trouble, not hurt anyone and not hurt themselves. It's no picnic. When I first started my job here, I went to tour Hooper imagining neat cots lined up and covered with fresh white sheets. Maybe little vomit containers near each cot. Not so. We are talking a near jail-like environment with concrete floors and drain holes for easy clean-up. But the Sobering Station is no jail and jail is where David P. Hooper died. The Sobering Station has a sophisticated intake system with 24-hour medical oversight to ensure that people do not die of alcohol poisoning or drug overdoses. It's a far cry from what David P. Hooper had.

In my early months working here, I had only seen David described this way: "The last person to die in jail as a result of alcoholism." A lot of years had passed since David's death on March 6, 1971, and I fell into the routine of casually inserting that phrase to efficiently describe the origins of this life-changing program. I wasn't expecting to find much of interest in those three boxes. Instead, I learned that David was a very interesting guy who, in today's environment, likely would not have died in the undignified way that he did. Actually more than just interesting, but brilliant, talented, complicated and tragic.

He was born to an apparently single mother in 1913 and lived in outer Southeast Portland. His mother worked as a janitor and also took in washing to support them. As a child, David was frequently on his own. Today, would a concerned neighbor call authorities about David? Or would his school place him in an after-school program for underprivileged children?

He went to Franklin High School and graduated in 1934 with average grades but

notoriety as a championship runner. In one of the boxes, I found a scrapbook that his mother must have put together as only a mother would. It was filled with yellowed newspaper clippings listing his rankings in the Portland high school track competitions. Carefully folded bib numbers from races were tucked into the back of the book.

A teacher saw potential in David and helped him enroll in Linfield College. She even helped him pay the bills. At Linfield in 1937, David became a star runner, breaking the two-mile record in 1937, a school record that officials believe still stands today. The Linfield College newspaper referred to him as the "wildcat distance man" and revelled in his entertaining and erratic antics on the track. David was known to sit down in the middle of a race, let everyone pass and then lurch up to finish, sometimes winning. Running backwards was not out of the question either. Or pausing, mid-race to stuff a wad on tobacco into his mouth. Today, would his coach wonder about mental illness and get him evaluated?

In another box, I found David's framed Bachelor of Arts degree from Linfield along with a certificate documenting his membership in the Sigma Tau Delta fraternity. Deeper still in the box was a framed certificate from the State of Oregon nominating David to represent the Democratic party in the state legislature in 1944. It had a gold seal and was signed by the governor. This was how elections for legislators used to function - top leadership hand picked the brightest of the brightest to run against each other in their districts. David lost the election but went on to serve as a "committeeman" in the Mt. Scott area for some time in the early 1940s.

David was married for a few years in the early '40s but it was at the beginning of his alcohol use and the marriage didn't last. Today, would his wife urge him to seek help? Would David accept help?

In the late '40s and early '50s, David drifted from odd job to odd job, his alcohol abuse growing and his behavior becoming more erratic. Today, would his employer require him to go to recovery treatment and have it paid by health insurance?

Soon, he was panhandling, living in alleys and getting picked up for public intoxication. He was arrested 93 times for such offenses.

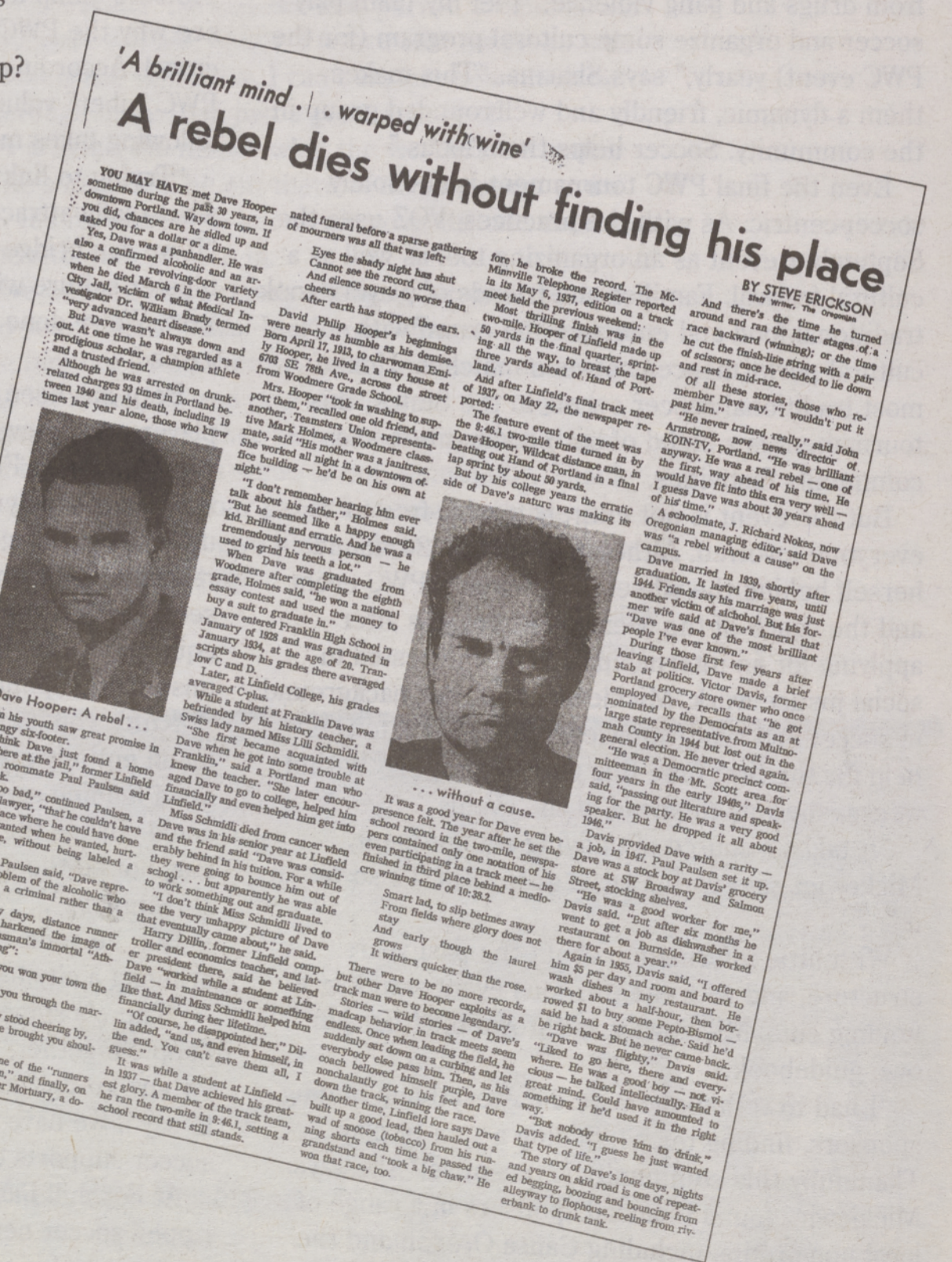
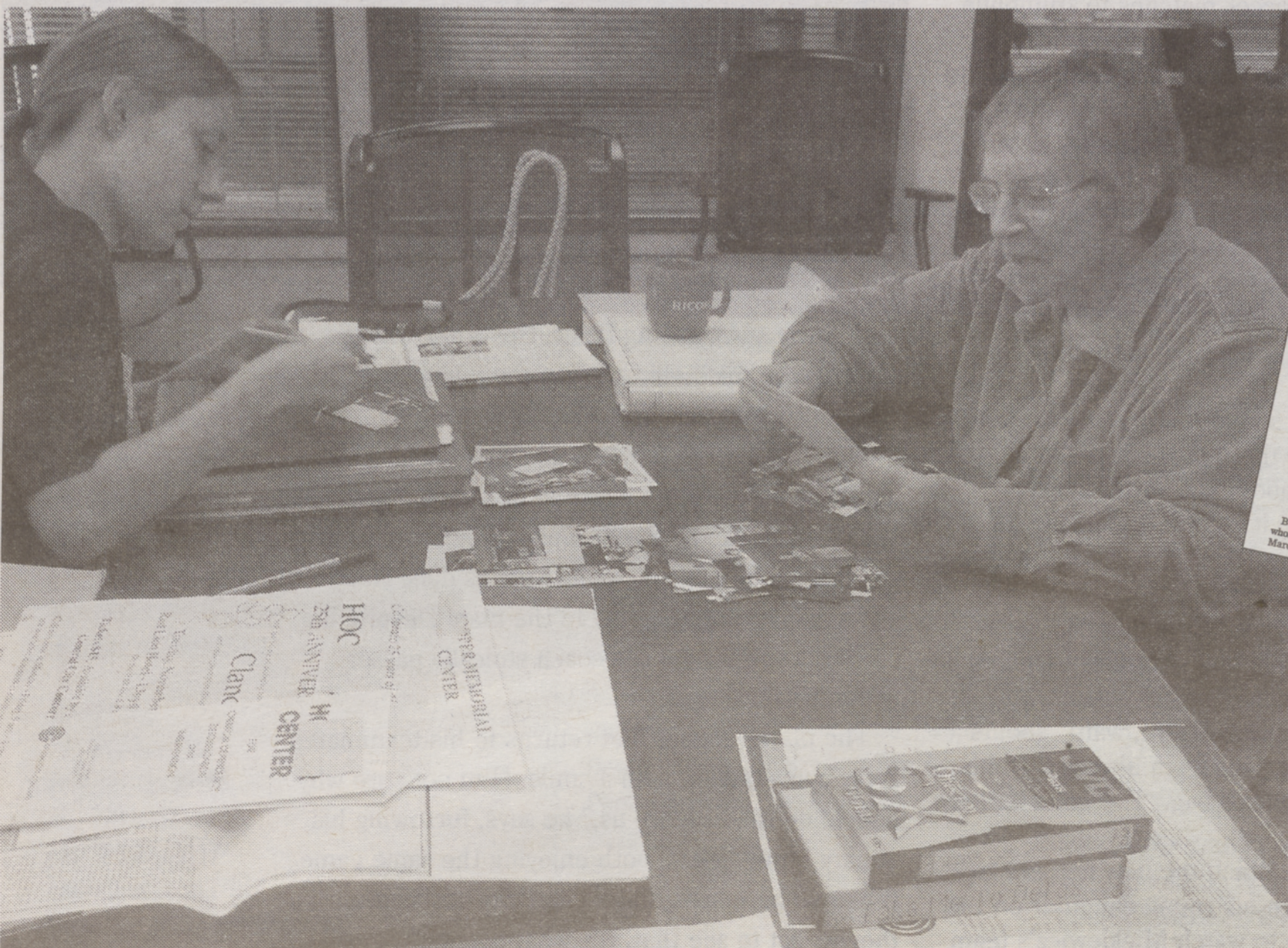
Today, police would take David to the Sobering Station. Then, as David was leaving after a few hours, the staff would try to talk to him about getting clean and sober. They'd urge him to show up at Hooper Detox in North Portland the next morning for a slot at the detox service. If he declined and was brought back to Sobering a few nights later, they'd take care of him all over again and have the same conversation again. If by some miracle, he agreed to treatment, he would have been safe for seven to 10 days as his body expelled the toxins. Then he would likely move into Central City Concern housing and ongoing recovery treatment. All of a sudden, he would have a community of people who wanted him to get it right, get healthy and work on building a real life.

Obviously we cannot change the course of David's history. But his death changed how addicted people are treated in Portland. So many people thought David was a brilliant, lost soul that after his death, they gathered to say "enough" and worked to create a safe place for people to sober up. They got it operating in a mere seven months, and they named it after David. It has not only saved thousands of lives, but it also has helped transform the Old Town neighborhood from skid row to the vibrant place it is today.

Sorting through those three boxes, I wasn't able to throw away a thing. But those boxes inspired me to change my casual explanation of who David was. Now, we write, "David P. Hooper, an eccentric, highly intelligent young man, was a talented running star at Linfield College, an aspiring politician and a chronic alcoholic."



David Hooper's senior photo from Franklin High School.



Above, the obituary for David Hooper in The Oregonian. At left, Jeanne Rivers (right) who worked at Hooper for many many years, and Marit Tegelaar, an intern from the University of Portland pore over boxes of Hooper's belongings. Photos courtesy of Central City Concern.