

Rising From the Ashes

Financial problems, with roots as far back as the 1940s, plagued the three Merrill-Palmer presidents who served from 1967-1981. Presidents J. William Rioux (1967-73), Michael Usdan (1974-77) and Francis Palmer (1978-81) faced challenges – compounded by Detroit’s social upheaval – that ultimately could not be overcome.

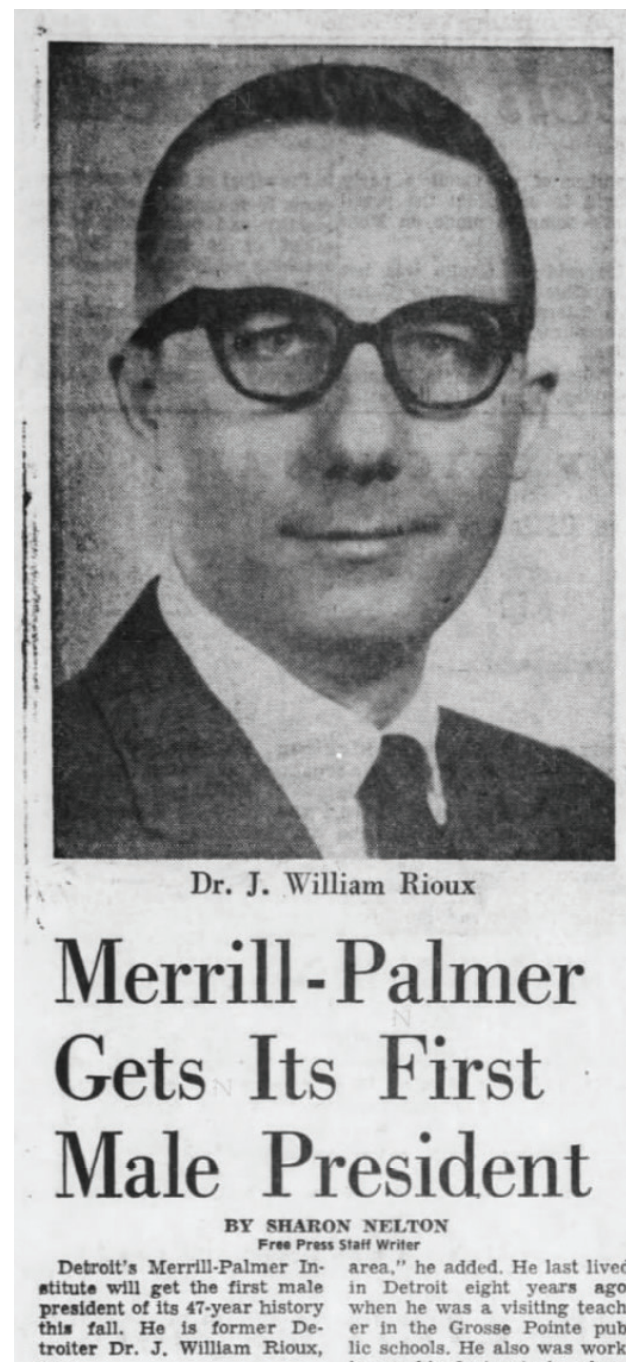
Each president took a different approach to survive: community programs, research, or starting Institute degree programs. By focusing on a singular approach, each president lost the connection among education, science and community that had defined Merrill-Palmer from the beginning. Nothing worked. To make matters worse, the Institute had been spending down the endowment while new donors and grants were insufficient to make up the shortfall.

Eleanor Clay Ford’s death in 1976 served a final blow and ended an era. She had joined the Merrill-Palmer board in 1926 and served for 50 years, contributing her talent and philanthropic gifts. She began volunteering at the Franklin Settlement nursery in 1911 at the age of 15. This nursery served children from poor immigrant families and Mrs. Ford then brought her interest in impoverished Detroit neighborhoods to Merrill-Palmer. She was recognized for all her contributions in a 1976 resolution.

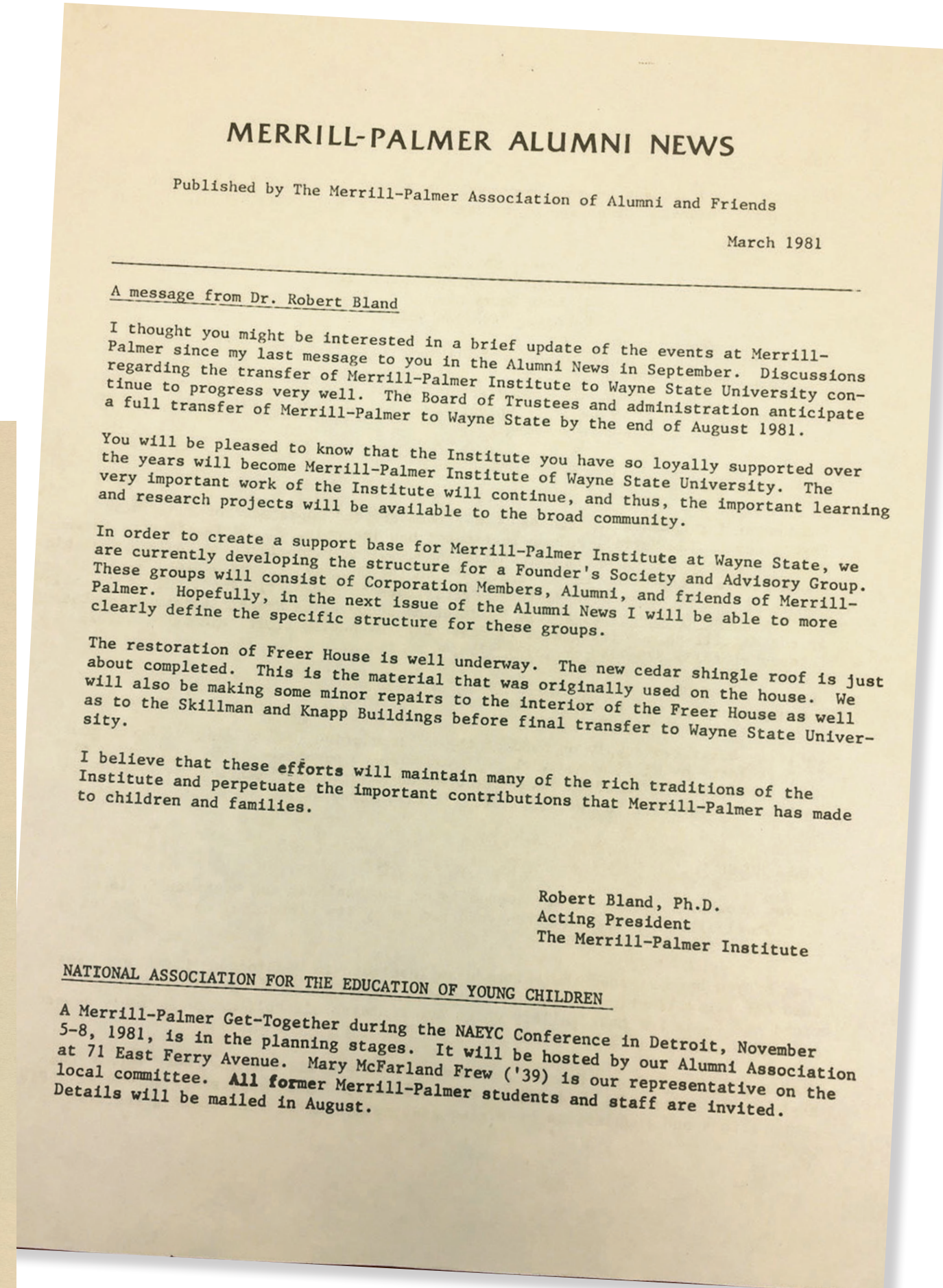
Eleanor Clay Ford (center) with unidentified reception attendees (c.1960).



End of an Era



“I thought (community involvement) was a change that needed to be made . . . Many people wanted to do what they had always done. Many people were not interested in changing.”
 – **J. William Rioux**
 Merrill-Palmer president, 1967-1973 (from 2019 oral history)



Clark Moustakas, a longtime Merrill-Palmer faculty member, served as the first president, and Cereta Perry as vice president, of the new Center for Humanistic Studies.

Three years after Mrs. Ford’s death, the Merrill-Palmer Institute announced bankruptcy. Talks with Wayne State University (WSU) about acquiring the Institute began as early as 1977 with WSU President George Gullen, but Thomas Bonner (who succeeded Gullen in 1978) formally added the Institute in 1981. Robert Bland, acting president of Merrill-Palmer at the time, oversaw the dismantling of the independent Institute.

Part of the Merrill-Palmer Institute lived on in the founding of the Center for Humanistic Studies in 1980. Institute master’s programs in Human Relations and in Humanistic Psychology, both begun in the 1970s, migrated to the Center, which was accredited as an independent graduate school in 1981. It continues today as the Michigan School of Psychology, offering a broad range of graduate degrees.

Images courtesy of the Walter P. Ruether Library