

THE MAKING OF A PRESIDENT

The search for the University's eighth president was handled purposefully, discreetly, and successfully; the story of the entire classy operation is unfolded for you here

The seven members of the OU Board of Regents entered the wood-paneled, green-carpeted President's Office in Evans Hall shortly after 9 a.m. and took their seats in the red leather chairs around the conference table in the spacious, high-ceilinged old room. The regular meetings of the board are held on the second Thursday of each month, but a special session had been called for this Monday morning in the latter part of May.

Dr. Cross was in his customary place at one end of the table; the president of the Regents, James G. Davidson, a Tulsa attorney, sat in the chair at the opposite end. In addition to the administrative officers who normally attend the monthly meetings were an unusually large contingent from newspapers, radio, and television and a number of other persons, the most conspicuous being a man and a woman who the day before had arrived from Washington, D.C. During the past week the man had been the subject of widespread, apparently well informed speculation in the state's news media; the woman was his wife.

Davidson opened the meeting by placing before the board the only business of the day, the nomination of J. Herbert Hollomon as successor to Dr. George L. Cross as president of the University of Oklahoma upon the latter's retirement in June, 1968. The members voted unanimously for approval, and Davidson turned to the man from Washington and said, "The deed is accomplished, Dr. Hollomon."

With dramatic simplicity in this brief, anticlimactic scene, the long, complicated search for the University's eighth president officially ended. Many hours of discussion, investigation, travel, interviewing, and decision-making had preceded the formal appointment; and from start to finish the operation had been conducted with thoughtfulness, discretion, patience, and delicacy. It had been a textbook exercise in the way to select a university president.

The search began shortly after Dr. Cross made public his intention to retire upon completion of 25 years as president. In a statement to the Facul-

ty Senate on May 30, 1966, Dr. Cross told of his retirement plans and urged that the Regents, with whom the final decision would rest, and the senate begin immediately to seek his successor.

Despite the lack of guidelines and suitable precedents, within a week the two bodies had established the procedural machinery through which they would cooperate in the coming weeks. The president of the Regents at the time, Dr. Mark Johnson, an Oklahoma City physician, and his fellow board members decided to create a 12-man nominating committee whose job it would be to solicit names for consideration, screen them, conduct interviews, and make recommendations to the Regents. The committee was composed of nine faculty members from the Norman campus, selected from a list of 27 professors nominated by the Faculty

Nominating Committee

Members of the nominating committee were Dr. Fite, chairman; Dr. Lloyd Williams, education; Dr. Colin Plint, physics; Dr. Robert Collier, microbiology; Dr. Lowell Dunham, modern languages; Dr. Jim Reese, economics; Dr. Clayton Feaver, philosophy; Dr. Gerald Porter, education; Dr. Tom Love, engineering; Dr. Robert Bird, medicine; William Whitehurst, student body, and Lou Sharpe, alumni.

Senate; a faculty member from the medical school chosen by his peers; the president of the Alumni Association, representing the alumni, and the president of the Student Senate, representing the student body. (Names of the committee members appear in the box on this page.)

For its chairman the committee elected a spectacled, 49-year-old Research professor of history, Dr. Gilbert Fite. Widely known in academic circles as an authority in agrarian history and respected by his colleagues and students as a superb teacher and scholar, Dr. Fite proved to be equally able in his new position of leadership and responsibility.

"The search for the president of the University," said Dr. Johnson, "involves the evaluation of some obstacles. Haste is one possible obstacle. The University has been victimized by haste, either real or imaginary, in

some of its earlier selections. We have deliberately decided to shield ourselves from this pressure.

"Another potential handicap could be the dearth of publicity. We are one of 15 major state-supported state institutions looking for a new chief executive. We must make enough noise to attract the kind of man we seek. And finally, an obstacle could be a demonstrated lack of confidence, a manifest disdain for the procedures which would guarantee absolute secrecy to the prospective candidates."

Dr. Fite emphasizes this last consideration. "Secrecy is imperative," he says, "if you're going to get a good man. You put a man in a terrible position if it becomes known that he is a prospect and then is not hired."

The committee met in a conference room in Bizzell Memorial Library. Initially the two-hour meetings were held once a week, but after a few weeks they were stepped up to twice weekly. "The first thing we did was define the kind of man we wanted," explains Dr. Fite. "Needless to say, we did not always agree, though generally we did. We had some interesting sessions. Two or three times the full committee met jointly with the Regents. These meetings were not characterized by total assent, but after discussion we came around to a high degree of unanimity. Both groups developed respect for the other, and both of us got a clearer understanding of each other. The procedure of having the Regents and the nominating committee working together was one of the best things that happened."

The two bodies eventually agreed that the man sought should have the following qualifications: He must be a national figure, known in his field which did not necessarily have to be higher education. ("The president's role as an administrator has changed so much," says Dr. Fite, "that it's not critical that he come from the faculty. Academic administration today is largely turned over to vice presidents and deans.") He must have a good understanding of the problems of higher education. He must have had prior administrative experience. He must have

sound standards of academic freedom. He must be a man who would find a challenge here. He must come from outside the University.

"We decided by late fall that we wanted an outside man. When a big job comes up, there's always a tendency to think it ought to go to a man from home. We had some sentiment along these lines, but we decided to go outside for a number of reasons we felt were important. A man from outside would have a fresh, objective look and be free from any constituency, opposition, or pressures that a man who is from here would bring to the job. Too, he would add to the educational strength we already have. He would bring a plus to the total picture that we couldn't add with a local man. And to focus national attention we wanted to attract a nationally prominent man."

The committee accepted names until Oct. 15. "We circulated a request to faculty members and administrators," says Dr. Fite, "for nominations. We asked alumni for suggestions. We talked with a variety of sources in business, education, and government. From September through mid-December we put in many hours in committee going over names. All in all, about 200 were submitted, and we spent time on each one. Of course, some were obviously unqualified and were discarded rather quickly. Others required careful investigation. Ordinarily we would appoint a three-man subcommittee—if the nominee were an engineer then one of the members would be an engineer—to look into someone about whom we knew little and in whom we were interested. The members would call friends and colleagues of the nominee and occasionally correspond with them by letter though we did this as little as possible because of lack of security. Something in writing is pretty official and difficult to deny."

From the subcommittee reports it was decided whether to eliminate or explore further. "We'd go around the table," says Dr. Fite, "with each man voicing his opinion until we reached an agreement."

After Oct. 15 the committee began narrowing the list. "By December we were down to twenty or thirty persons," recalls Dr. Fite, "none of whom were aware that we were interested. Neither were we certain if any of them



DR. GILBERT FITE

would be interested. We had already done considerable personal investigation on some. Two members of the committee had flown to Washington, D.C., in October to talk with some people about nominees in that area. I also traveled to Indiana, Illinois, and California, talking with sources about certain men.

"Within the final group were persons we wished to contact first. I would call them and ask if they would be willing to talk. Some said no right off the bat: I'm committed, I'm happy here, and so forth. Others said, It's a shock. Let me think about it. Some knew as much about OU as a pig knows about Sunday School, and I would explain as much as I could about our university and the situation here.

"Dr. Johnson said that our main job would be to sell the man, that the man who was seeking the position wasn't qualified. And Dr. Johnson was a tremendously persuasive person, enthusiastic and articulate. I think he had a great deal to do with Dr. Hollomon's decision.

"Dr. Johnson and I then began to visit those who had agreed to talk further with us about the position. It was on one of these trips that we first met Dr. Hollomon."

The name of J. Herbert Hollomon, acting undersecretary of commerce, had been suggested early in the search by more than one person, and it had popped up again when the two committee members made their October journey to Washington. On Friday, Dec.



DR. MARK JOHNSON

23, Drs. Johnson and Fite flew into Washington for an afternoon appointment with Dr. Hollomon in his office in the Commerce Building. "He had said he'd be glad to talk with us," says Dr. Fite. "Though his name had appeared several times during our search, we had only paper information on him. We spent 45 minutes in his office that afternoon, and we were tremendously impressed. We wanted to convince him of the challenge, and we spoke honestly about higher education in Oklahoma. We told him we believed we were at a launching point in our state, and that the situation, though weak in some respects, had promise.

"His knowledge was limited, though this didn't last long. The next time we saw him a few weeks later he seemed to know as much as we did. Though we couldn't make any commitments, we invited him to fly to Oklahoma to talk with the nominating committee, and he agreed."

After a speech at Purdue University Dr. Hollomon quietly arrived at Will Rogers World Airport on Monday afternoon, Jan. 9. He was met by Dr. Fite, who took him to the Ramada Inn in Oklahoma City where a room had been reserved. That evening the men had dinner at Glen's Steak House, and Dr. Fite left some literature about OU before leaving him that evening. "I think he'd already read it," laughs Dr. Fite.

At 8 a.m. the next morning Dr. Jim Reese, a member of the committee, met

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Dr. Hollomon and drove him to Norman for his first look at OU. The men then returned to the Ramada for a meeting with the nominating committee at 10 a.m. "He made an excellent impression at the meeting," recalls Dr. Fite. "The members didn't spare the horses in their questioning. Because he is an engineer, he was subjected to extensive discussion on his views of the humanities. Academic freedom, too, was an area on which he was asked to comment at length. Throughout the very penetrating interview he was precise, decisive, non-evasive, clear. We were sold."

The committee met soon afterward and submitted a recommendation to the Regents that Dr. Hollomon be offered the position. They readily agreed.

On Sunday, January 22, Dr. Fite and the Regents flew to Washington and met Dr. Hollomon at the Cosmos Club, where Dr. Johnson asked him if he would become the next president of OU. He said that he needed time to think it over and evaluate some alternative opportunities. The group then accompanied Dr. Hollomon to his Georgetown home, where they met Mrs. Hollomon and visited for two hours before returning to Oklahoma.

"After we came home, our job was done," says Dr. Fite. "There was nothing to do but wait. Dr. Johnson kept in touch. Finally in late February, Dr. Hollomon notified Dr. Johnson that in all probability he would accept. The only thing preventing an immediate announcement were some delicate matters in connection with his office that would have to be settled. A crucial bill in Congress made such a disclosure ill timed, and another issue that was imminent would have to be cleared up."

During the wait, Dr. Johnson's seven-year term as a Regent expired, thus regrettably excluding him from being around when the announcement was finally made. Dr. Johnson's successor, Mr. Davidson, was thoroughly familiar with the operation, of course, having been a part of the search from its beginning. Now it was he who sat by the phone and waited for the word from Dr. Hollomon. It came in May, and preparations were made for a trip to Norman for the official act and an introduction to the state.

On May 22 the deed was accomplished, and on Sept. 1 the Hollomons will be at home in Norman.

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