

SOONER SPOTLIGHT ● HAROLD KEITH

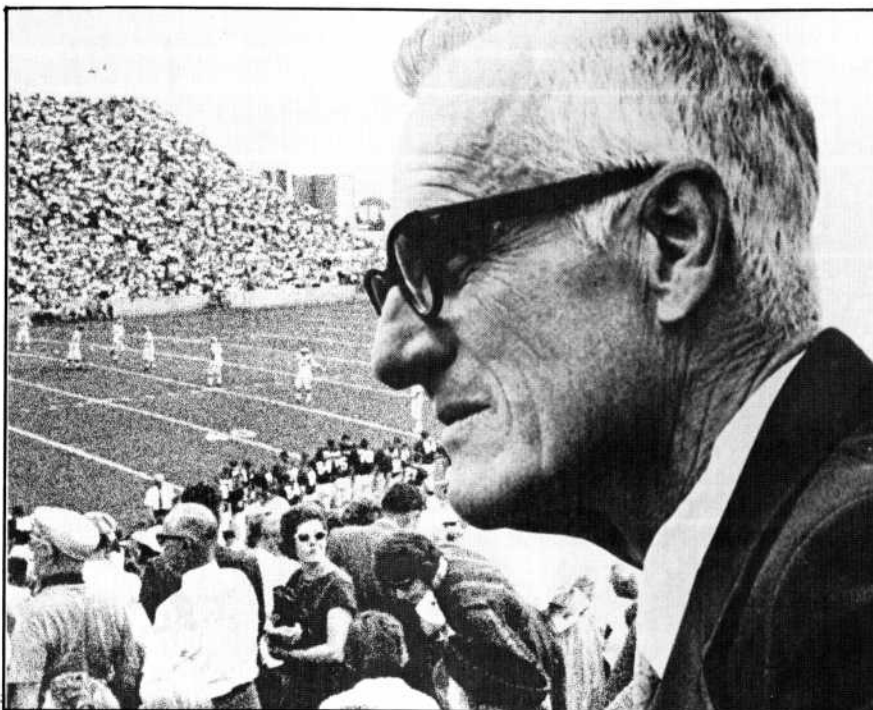
Harold Keith was once described as “the perfect publicity man — promoting his ‘product’ to the fullest and keeping himself hidden in the background.” He has spent a lifetime spinning the tales that have turned the Sooner sports greats into legends while denying that he himself had become one. No use, Mr. Keith; the truth is out.

The Oklahoma Sports Headliners let a new generation in on this worst-kept secret in February when they honored OU’s sports information director emeritus for pioneering this hitherto uncharted profession which is now nearly as essential to the news and broadcast media — and to the fans — as the game itself. Appropriately, Keith shared the spotlight with his old friend Bruce Drake, the subject of his *Sooner Magazine* article on Page 12, who received a posthumous Special Recognition Award from the Headliners.

Keith claims that he knew so little about what was expected of him when he became OU’s first sports publicist in 1930 that he would borrow a lawnmower from the grounds crew and help mow the football field just to keep busy. The uncertainty didn’t last long. When publicity-wise Lawrence “Biff” Jones arrived to coach football in 1935, the Keith machine really began to roll. The national sports writers, including the dean of them all, Grantland Rice, started to pick up on Sooner sports — so much so that OU track coach John Jacobs tagged Keith with the nickname “Grantland.”

Sports publicity was a one-man job at OU until 1946 when his first full-time assistant, Pat Davidson Simpson, came on board, succeeded in 1951 by Addie Lee Barker, who would be his right hand from then on. He also trained a succession of student assistants — his “boys” to whom he was and is “Mr. Keith.”

“The best three-boy staff I ever had,” Keith recalls proudly, “was Ross Porter of Shawnee, John Brooks of Oklahoma City and Jimmy Jones of Muskogee. Today Ross Porter is the television voice of the Los Angeles Dodgers; John Brooks does the network broadcasting of both the Sooner



What better background for a Sooner Spotlight on Harold Keith than Owen Field?

football and basketball games; and Jimmy Jones is the Honorable James Jones of Washington, D.C., the U.S. Congressman from Oklahoma. As anyone can plainly see, they have all widely outdone their boss.”

While grinding out the endless flow of press releases, statistics, press guides, photos and film clips which keep sports commentators in business, Keith also was writing a book on one of his favorite subjects. *Oklahoma Kickoff*, published in 1948, became the bible on the first 25 years of OU football.

Harold Keith didn’t invent the Wilkinson era — Bud did that — but he made certain that the world knew all about it. His masterful handling of the informational channels placed on the All-America lists scores of Sooners who might otherwise have gone unheralded. Several of them are participating once again in a Keith project with personal reminiscences for a book he is writing on Wilkinson football.

Keith didn’t wait until his retirement as SID in 1969 to begin writing his books. He always has had a book under way, often squeezing the time late at night from a seven-day work

week with a few evenings thrown in. His novels are primarily for young people, a few centered on sports, but most about the West.

Holder of both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in history from OU, Keith spends several years painstakingly researching each of his books, a diligence which has been rewarded with several prestigious library prizes, notably the John Newberry Medal in 1957 for *Rifles for Watie*, a Civil War story set in the Indian Territory.

As a result of his second career, youngsters throughout the country — who have never heard of Bud Wilkinson and who wouldn’t give a nickel for a Steve Owens autograph — know all about Harold Keith. They even send him fan mail, one of his favorites being the classic from a little girl in Arkansas: “I love your book. I’m reading it night and day. I’m on Page 6.” Another reader advised, “Next time write a half-pound book instead of a four-pounder.”

Those of Harold Keith’s faithful following who are anxiously awaiting the publication of the Wilkinson book hope he doesn’t take the kid seriously. —CJB