



FRIENDS of the DUCK POND

For the first time in 45 years, the ponds have been drained. There are no ducks and no turtles. No kites circle high above. No sunbathers lounge on blankets. No frisbees twirl. And no exercise aficionados jog along the trails.

In fact, the Duck Pond is a mess.

But all this is temporary. Help is on the way.



Step One of the Duck Pond reclamation project was a massive cleanup which began on a misty, 30-degree Saturday in March. More than 100 volunteer Friends of the Duck Pond waded into the muddy water and scoured the shorelines for 40 truckloads of trash, fallen timber and an amazing assortment of discarded "treasures."

The first time our son, Ronald, then 13, saw OU's Duck Pond area, he wanted to explore it at once.

He returned home soaking wet. The big ducks, it seems, had "pulled me into the water."

"Pulled you in—?"

Well, he was trying to touch them, and somehow he wound up in the slick mud of the bank and—

Almost any family living in the neighborhood can tell a similar story. Indeed, so many such tales have accumulated that the pond has acquired a unique folklore.

Young parents always found the area a pleasant place to stroll with their offspring on sunny afternoons. So, it's not unusual that several generations of Norman families share Duck Pond memories.

"When my grandchildren were smaller," recalls Oliver Benson, professor emeritus of political science, "we'd go by Ken McCall's Grocery, south of Boyd on Classen, buy day-old bread and take it to feed the ducks. Those were good times — a replay of just what we'd done with our children."

A host of OU students, like Margaret Connery, now a teacher at Norman's Irving Middle School, recall the pond area as a haven for rest and relaxation. "I rode my bike to class," Connery reminisces, "and I often stopped

By **JOYE R. SWAIN**

Photos by Gil Jain

by the park to study before tests."

Several marriage ceremonies have been performed on the grounds. The Greeks hold their traditional games there, including tug-of-war contests over the "water hazard." In recent years, the Medieval Fair and open-air concerts joined other attractions.

But of late, many who came wrinkled noses in disgust at the pollution and deterioration. Silt clogged ponds, once 15 feet deep, until they contained less than a foot of water. Sludge and urban sewage coated the surface. Each year, 10 to 15 of the park's 400 mature trees were lost to age and disease. Bridges were cracking, stripping away the stone facades which fell into the water. Ducks became ill. Parents were afraid to have small children near the water for fear of disease or infection. For some 25 years, the only University groups who consistently provided maintenance for the area were the Greeks, who used their pledge days to clean the grounds. It wasn't enough.

Enter Richard Hamilton, an OU police lieutenant who is project-oriented. Hamilton was not a regular Duck Pond user. "Like most people around here, I'd go over a couple of

times a year," he says, "but last year, for some reason, I focused in on how bad it looked."

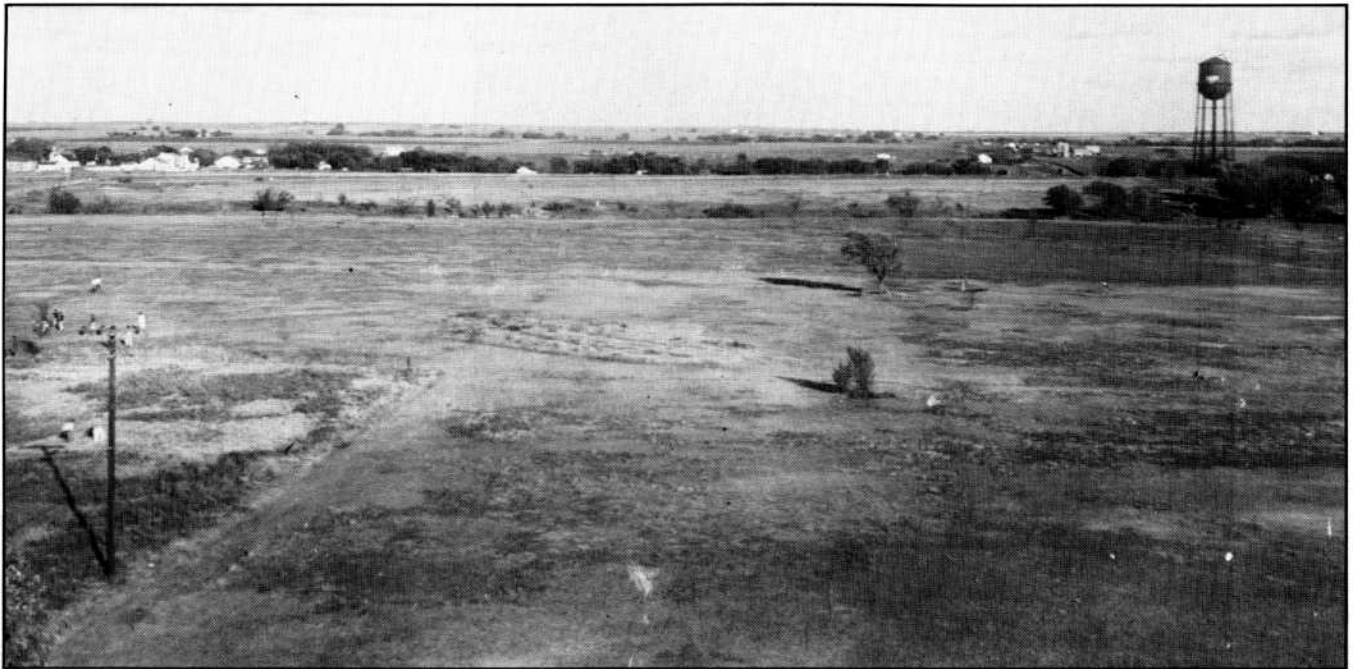
He started asking questions: What can be done? Does the University have any plans for the area? Would OU object if a volunteer group tried to reclaim the area?

He discovered that alumni, townspeople, University employees, students — everybody — cared about the Duck Pond. They just didn't know how to help.

A born organizer, Hamilton took over.

First, he contacted University officials and was told that, with the current financial crisis, the University not only had no plans for the Duck Pond, but also couldn't even afford to contribute to its renovation, except for loaning equipment and tools on weekends.

Hamilton saw the project as something that could pull the University community together. "We didn't want to infringe on anyone else's turf for funds, but we felt that some people who might not be interested in anything else at the University would help us with this project. In these hard times, everyone could understand why they were being asked to work for nothing and why we had to get contributions of time, services and materials. The University couldn't afford to con-



In 1922 OU coach Bennie Owen first proposed purchasing the treeless 60 acres with a spring-fed creek east of the football field. A self-taught landscaper, Owen laid out his intramural dream park complete with a 9-hole golf course.

tribute to the Duck Pond. And, under the circumstances, we didn't want it. We just wanted to save the Duck Pond."

Hamilton had the perfect role model in fashioning his self-help rescue operation. The Duck Pond — known variously as the Recreation Park, Old Golf Course, Intramural Field or Picnic Park — all started with Bennie Owen, OU's famed early-day football coach for whom Owen Field is named. An exercise and athletic area for students was needed, so in 1922 Owen first proposed that the University purchase the treeless 60-acre tract east of the football field. A spring-fed creek ran through the property from north to south.

The 15 years that it took Owen to accomplish his intramural dream park spanned the Great Depression. Funds were short. "Educators' salaries were reduced by the legislature in 1931, again in 1933, and some took wage cuts totaling 33 per cent," State Budget Officer R. R. Owens reported in October 1936. But, despite it all, faculty and alumni pitched in to acquire and develop the area.

WPA assistance was sought for a project "consisting of a nine (9) hole golf course with grass greens, four (4)

baseball diamonds, three (3) touch football fields, five (5) softball diamonds, water hazards and picnic parks."

Since there was no money to hire professional golf course landscapers, Owen took over. "I didn't know much about the job," he commented later, "but with the aid of golfing books and direction manuals, I laid out the nine holes."

The July 1937 issue of *Sooner Magazine* describes the completed golf course: "Rolling acres of green Bermuda grass, indented by a small, spring-fed stream and spotted with pine, cedar, elm and hackberry trees, low-growing shrubbery and all surrounded with an artistic native stone fence — provide a new beauty spot for the campus that will grow with charm every year."

With the golf course and its water hazards came ducks. An early photo shows 11 swimming in the lake during its construction period. Local legend has it that the flock was formed from abandoned Easter ducklings, augmented by wild ducks and geese during winter migrations.

The golf course quickly became a part of Norman life. "I lived just across the fence on Faerie Queen Lane," John

Dunn, former director of WNAD and Oklahoma Educational Television Authority, recalls. "With the course so close at hand, I decided I should learn to play golf. But this was during the Depression. Golf balls cost quite a bit. After I knocked three in a row into the water hazard, I quit."

Roma Clarke, former graduate adviser in the College of Business Administration, remembers an art class in the park in the 1940s when she was struck on the head by a ball. That ball might have been hit by Jody Martin, now a social worker at Central State Hospital, who took golf as her freshman physical education requirement. She remembers that her aim was none too good.

The golf course proved more beneficial to others. OU President George L. Cross learned the game there, under the tutelage of basketball coach Bruce Drake. Johnny Jacobs, son of track coach John Jacobs, was a frequent patron, along with such Norman luminaries at Cecil Brite, Clark Hetherington, Charlie Tant and the Amspacher boys. But probably the greatest golfer ever to play the course was Charley "Bucket" Coe, who won the National Amateur three times, the Trans Mississippi three times and



twice was low amateur in the professional National Open tournament.

The tract also took on assorted educational functions. Brandon H. Griffith, professor emeritus of civil engineering and environmental science, was a student in the 1930s: "We used the Recreation Park, as it was called then, to do elevations, triangulations and alidade map surveys. The students had a habit of throwing each other into the pond, and in those days it was deep enough to get you wet."

Harley Brown, professor emeritus of zoology, had similar problems when his students staked out their 100-square-foot research plots to study the changes and interactions of the creatures living at the "Golf Course Pond." "I remember Ruth Johnson of Oklahoma City had a plot with a slippery rock beside the pool. It seemed she was always falling in," he recalls.

In 1951, the golf course and athletic fields were moved south to land vacated by the U.S. Navy. The Student Senate sponsored construction of five stone picnic tables and cooking grills in the pond area in 1954-55, but overuse and lack of maintenance already was beginning to take its toll.

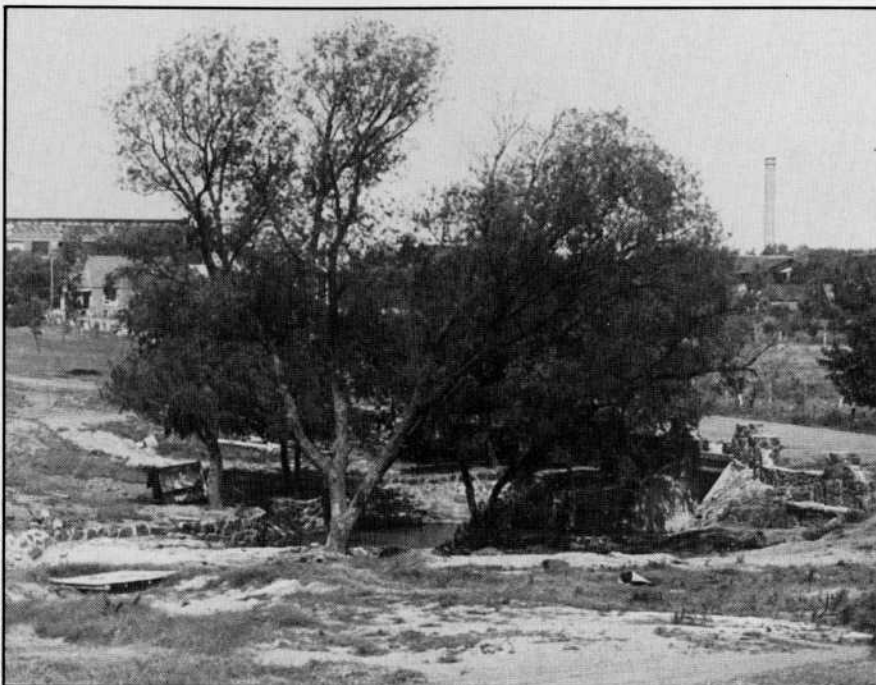
Finally, after 25 years of neglect, on March 18, 1980, President William S. Banowsky approved a student activity fee committee recommendation for the purchase and installation of an 18-station Parcourse Fitness Circuit east of the Duck Pond. But again, no provision was made for adequate maintenance, and now even that heavily used recent addition shows need of repair.

Clearly, by the time Richard Hamilton made his providential visit to the area last year, the Duck Pond was in desperate need of some dedicated, hard-working friends. Hamilton signed up more than 400 volunteers, appropriately tagged "Friends of the Duck Pond," and targeted completion of the cleanup and restoration project for August 15, 1985, the 50th anniversary of the original WPA project.

One group of "Friends" spent six months designing a master plan which was then drafted by Norman architect Bill Mathes. In addition to general cleanup, that plan called for widening and deepening the ponds and installing three fountains in the main channel. The natural spring flow, although

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OU Western History Collections



The reinforced concrete which underlies the native stonework facade of the WPA-built Brooks Street bridge extends below the waterline to form the dam and spillway. The bridge, shown here as it neared completion in 1936, now has collapsed and lies submerged beneath the swampy waters of the north pond.



Tuckpointers from the OU physical plant, Stan Airington, left, and Ron Kinnard, turn volunteer stone masons on weekends to repair the stonework on the bridges, much of which has been stripped away by cracks in the concrete and erosion.



TALE OF THE BALD CYPRESS: *The drainage of the Duck Pond has produced an unusual and potentially profitable crop in the form of 4,500 bald cypress seedlings. Harvested by the "Friends," led by OU landscape chief Randy Lacewell, above, the forest of tiny trees sprang up in the muddy bottom from seeds dropped into the water by parent bald cypresses planted in the late '30s and now standing 60-70 feet tall. In its native swamps, the bald cypress routinely reproduces in this manner with the ebb and flow of the water, but not in dry land Oklahoma. Transplanted to the OU nursery, the seedlings are expected to survive the winter and be available for replanting at the Duck Pond and elsewhere on campus, for sale as saplings or as trading stock for other landscaping materials for the Duck Pond project.*



The entire membership of a new OU fraternity, Delta Chi, turned out for a work day in March. An unidentified Delta Chi, left, joins assistant professor of botany Linda Wallace in raking small limbs and trash from the edge of the ponds.

enough to fill the ponds, is not strong enough to keep them alive. The fountains will add beauty, but the jets of water also will provide aeration and movement of water to help prevent stagnation and combat algae.

A new stone fence is planned for three sides of the 40-acre park area, while earth berms planted with wild flowers and native grasses will block the view of the railroad tracks on the east. Between 600 and 800 shade trees will be planted in the park, plus a large number of flowering trees, shrubs and bulbs.

The three bridges are being repaired and restored. The jogging trails, widened to nine feet to accommodate three runners abreast, will be surfaced with decomposed granite and bounded by concrete curbs.

For the first time, the ducks will have their own island where they can nest and escape predators. The south pond island and nearby terraces were built in July by Coot Simpson Construction Company of Norman, which contributed both heavy equipment and operators for the 1½-week job.

General cleanup started in early March 1984, prior to the annual Medieval Fair. On a misty weekend of 30-degree temperatures, 110 people turned out on Saturday and 175 on Sunday. They hauled 40 truckloads of dead limbs, trees and other trash from

the ponds and the nearby land. On the following weekend, 110 members of the Greek organizations joined the regulars.

Every weekend since and on many weeknights, "Friends" can be found covered with mud, wading in the drained areas, or dripping with sweat, chopping and hauling away dead timber and other debris. Some operate backhoes, track loaders or dump trucks. It's hard, physical labor.

Joan Goth, manager of OU machine rental, has been there since the beginning. The first cleanup day found her wading in mud to clear away dead and decomposed cattails so the water could flow more freely through the ponds. She took home a bad case of poison ivy.

"Probably the worst part of all this," she jokes, "was coming in the next Monday morning and seeing my picture in the *Oklahoma Daily*. It was a candid shot and not very flattering.

"Lately, I've been driving a dump truck," she continues. "So far, I'm the only driver who's gotten stuck. But Harmon Bloye (OU superintendent of roads and roofs), the man in charge of the heavy equipment, still claims he'll make a backhoe operator out of me before the summer's over."

Bloye is another of the dedicated core of workers. The first day the heavy equipment was used, he and his crew were out by 4 a.m. to make sure it



would be ready. He is one of the people who is there every Saturday by 7:30 a.m., along with Les Coggins and Sidney Demun, both equipment operators from OU's landscaping department.

The volunteers are intrigued by the "treasures" they are finding in the muck of the drained pools. Although the 1957 Chevy which reportedly had rolled into the pond in 1959 has never surfaced, the workers did salvage a dozen bicycles, a child's scooter, a little red wagon, assorted hub caps, car wheels, stereo units, a parking meter complete with post, a 200-pound tool chest, a number of traffic barricades and signs, a horseshoe complete with nails, vintage soft drink bottles from the '40s and '50s and, naturally, hundreds of golf balls.

Perhaps the most remarkable item to emerge was a concrete canoe.

"The American Society of Civil Engineers was organizing concrete canoe races in the early '70s," recalls Wayne Barton, one of the craft's designers. "A group of OU engineering students read about it and decided we should challenge OSU. In order to make a lighter canoe, instead of using rock, we used styrofoam balls, with chicken wire substituting for reinforcing steel. The day of the big race the OSU boys showed up with a fancy canoe with wheat scoops for paddles. We had a good laugh at that.

"Then the race began. We were to circle around the Duck Pond. We were winning, but we had one design problem. Our freeboard was about one and one-half inch. We didn't count on the fact that when the canoe made the turn it would tilt slightly. When it did, water came over the side. It sank immediately, and our men were left standing with their heads just above water. OSU completed the circuit and won."

Other designers and builders of the ill-fated canoe were Jerry Fulkerson, James Shackelford, Dan Rinehart and Rod Browning. Guy Keith, Clay McAlpine and Nelson Day paddled the vessel. Faculty adviser was Thomas Murray.

A major problem during the cleanup has been caring for the pond's aging permanent resident fowl — some 26 ducks and 6 geese. (During the winter migratory ducks may raise the popula-

"The OSU boys showed up with a fancy canoe with wheat scoops for paddles."



The fabled concrete canoe, mute testimony that nothing was learned from the unsinkability of the Titanic, is raised from the murky depths of the Duck Pond.



OU's Bill Jordan, left, is something of an expert on our little feathered friends, which is probably why the temporary home for the ducks and geese was built on Don Chesser's land. Chesser, right, who corralled his boarders with chain link from Acme Fence and feeds them courtesy of McMar General Stores, reportedly prays daily for the Duck Pond project to be completed on schedule.



With OU's chief equipment operator Harmon Bloye at the controls, the mud removal process begins at the south pond. Bloye spends each weekend being a "Friend."



While his equipment operators, Roy Anderson, left, and Travis Simpson, get their assignments straight, Theron Simpson of Coot Simpson Construction Co., second from right with OUPD Lt. Richard Hamilton, prepares to shoot the elevation for terracing along the edge of the channel which they have just dug to create the new duck island. In real life, Travis is a member of the Big Red offensive line.

tion to as many as 80.) Without water, the ducks would have no way to escape capture by dogs and other predators, so it was necessary to find a place to protect them while the pond was drained.

The birds first were housed for six weeks at the Norman Animal Shelter where they were given medical checks and treatment. Then they were moved to the farm home of OU physical plant employee Don Chesser, where their feed is being supplied by McMar General Stores. Chesser, Hamilton and Brad Hawkins dug a temporary waterhole and surrounded the whole area with chain link fencing donated by Acme Fence Company.

To hold the water, the bottom of the waterhole was lined with plastic, which the ducks quickly tore up, requiring Chesser to add water daily. Only after getting the ducks settled did he realize how much solid waste ducks deposit. "Every week I have to clean the water," he laughs. Chesser is one volunteer who sincerely hopes work will be completed on schedule.

Originally Ken Watson, Hamilton's OUPD colleague who handles the budget, estimated the Duck Pond renovation at about \$500,000 in goods and services. Thanks to donations of materials, equipment and manhours already received and conservation efforts, that estimate has been cut in half.

A track loader supplied by Boecking Machinery, Inc., and a bulldozer from OCT Equipment Company, powered with diesel fuel from a 300-gallon tank placed on the site by Martin Oil Company, have been worth thousands of dollars to the project.

Providing shelter for the work weekends has been the familiar tent from O'Connell's Irish Pub and Grill, who along with Pepsi Cola of Oklahoma City also supplies free soft drinks for the volunteers. Supplies from TG&Y Family Center, Larry's Hobbies and Gazeline Graphics Systems, Inc., have helped cut costs.

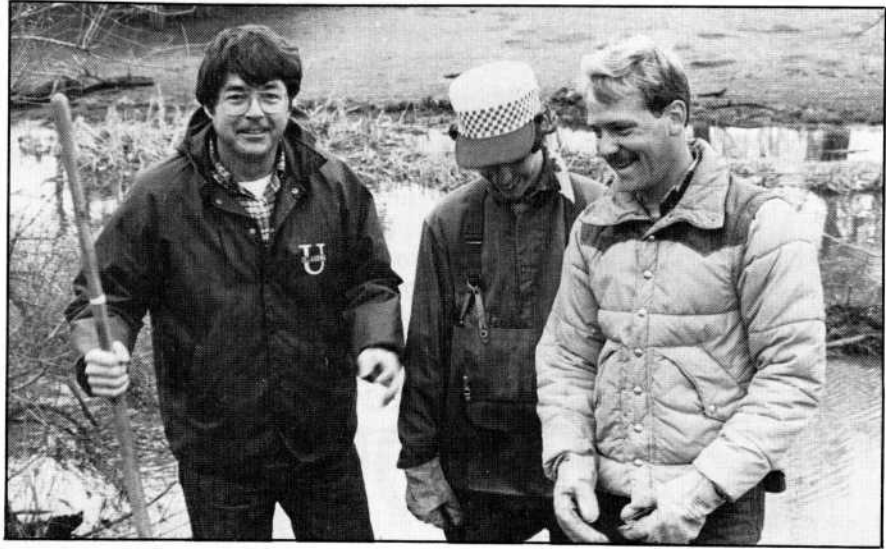
"We're to the point where we are going to have to find some cash contributions for things that can't be donated," Hamilton admits, "but so far everyone has been remarkably generous."

Optimistically, Hamilton believes

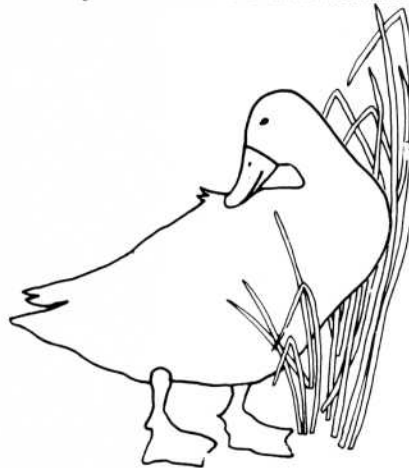


After 50 years the oak plug is knocked out of the dam to drain the ponds.

"We don't want to take ourselves too seriously . . . The job has to be fun."



Volunteers Trey Chesser, center, and James Hood, right, take a break during the first Friends work day to talk with OU administrative vice president Art Elbert.



Drainage of the south pond revealed a section of 60-inch concrete pipe which was rolled into the water by pranksters 10 or 15 years ago during construction of the storm sewer along Lindsey Street.

that almost anything can be accomplished if you try hard enough, although, he jokes, "On this project, I may be reaching my limits."

But he is a realist also. "A year and a half is about as long as you can maintain enthusiasm for this kind of thing," he contends. "We don't want to take ourselves too seriously. The Friends of the Duck Pond isn't incorporated; we don't have officers. We don't plan to work past the August 15, 1985, deadline.

"The job has to be fun," he continues. "That's why we chose the titles

we did." The volunteers are organized into subgroups, each headed by a "Duck Baron," enlisted from the OU staff. "Lake Rangers," under Don Nist, are concerned with the watercourse. While "Forest Rangers," guided by landscape chief Randy Lacewell, study flora needs, Don Chesser's "Duck Herders" deal with the fauna. The "Duck Dodgers," coordinated by Paul Wilson, examine fitness and recreation facilities. "Rock Rollers," headed by Mark Burnett, concentrate on renovating stonework. Neal Stone and the "Park Rangers" provide sup-

port services, while Bill Jordan acts as liaison with the University through Vice President Arthur J. Elbert. Jim Mustoe helps coordinate the pond's restoration.

While these "Friends" have been carrying out their assignments, community interest has remained high, and despite the disruption during renovation, the reaction to the Duck Pond project has been overwhelmingly positive, both on and off campus.

Indeed, most students, alumni, faculty, staff and townspeople seem to feel that it's — just ducky! 