

SOONER MEMORIES



Historian Percy Buchanan inspects a 22-piece collection of Asian weapons that he donated to the University's Stovall Museum, now Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

THE UNFORGETTABLE PERCY BUCHANAN

More often than not, the special recollection of a University of Oklahoma graduate centers on a former professor, the unforgettable one whose pronouncements both in and out of the classroom left a permanent impression. Such a man was Percy W. Buchanan, the inspiration for Eddie Frost's contribution to the series of "Sooner Memories."

When Frost came to OU as a freshman in 1957, Buchanan's style in the classroom and on the lecture circuit already had earned him the title of 1953's "Most Popular Professor" and "1954 Oklahoman of the Year." He was also a bona fide campus character. So many Percy Buchanan stories were circulated that it was difficult to know which actually had happened and which reflected what Percy would have done or said if only he had thought of it.

Fortunately, witnesses abounded for the classic Buchanan stunt in 1957. As the leadoff speaker for the second season of the OU Student Senate's "Last Lecture" series, Buchanan had attracted a sizable crowd to Meacham Auditorium to hear his answer to the question, "What might a speaker say if this were his last speech on earth?"

The audience was just settling into their seats when Buchanan began — and ended — his talk, "A Tripod to Living."

"This is my last will and testament. I can only leave you the seeds that will blossom into flowers:

"Every day, help someone.

"Every day, develop mind and body.

"Every day, contact your God."

Then he sat down.

A news account of the event continued: "Earlier in the week Buchanan had been heard to say, 'No one remembers speeches. I want to leave the audience with words it won't soon forget.'

"He did."

Born the son of missionaries in Takamatsu, Japan, Buchanan was best known as one of the country's foremost Asian scholars. But on his way to academic renown, he was also an ordained minister and missionary, judo instructor, oratorio composer, author of books on Japanese language and Far East history, an accomplished calligrapher and watercolorist and the decorated veteran of two world wars.

After his World War I service, Buchanan earned bachelor's degrees in music and history, a degree in theology and later master's and doctoral degrees in Oriental languages and literature. He was a missionary in Japan from 1925 to 1941, returning just before Pearl Harbor to direct the Intelligence Language School in Washington, D.C., then back to Japan as director of counter-intelligence training under General Douglas MacArthur.

Buchanan came to OU in 1948; his classes in Asian history were almost always packed. With his students, it amused him to play the role of the absent-minded professor; he often answered his office phone with, "Buchanan's Bar and

Grill;" and he described his unpublished autobiography as "a book about my hero."

An impressionable undergraduate, Frost enrolled in History of the Far East while pursuing a 1961 degree in journalism. He later returned to OU for a 1967 master's in Russian, but his most memorable encounter with Buchanan occurred in 1972 at the University of Illinois, where Frost and wife Lena were graduate students.

The OU-Texas game was being nationally telecast, and having no television set of their own, the Frosts had gone to the game room in the Illinois Student Union. Enthusiasm for the game was practically nil in Big Ten country, and the only viewing audience was a group of disinterested international students and, at the front of the room, one older man who looked vaguely familiar.

After a particularly thrilling play, the homesick Sooners announced their bias with appropriate whoops and hollers. The older man turned and in an exaggerated drawl asked, "Y'all from Oklahoma?" Percy Buchanan, in the Union attending a professional meeting, had sneaked away to watch the game.

Eddie and Lena introduced themselves, and Eddie reminded Buchanan that he had been in one of the professor's classes at OU several years earlier. "I knew he didn't know me from anything," Frost recalls, "but he got this impish look on his face and glancing at my wife, said, 'Oh, yes. You were the one who got the D.'"

Buchanan officially retired in 1971, but he remained in the classroom on a part-time basis until his death in 1977. Throughout his long and colorful teaching career, he considered it his calling in life to make a lasting impact on the lives of his students. He would be gratified but not at all surprised to find his influence evident more than 25 years later in the writings of Dr. Edgar L. Frost, now an associate professor of Russian at the University of Alabama. "When Will the Russians Be Like Us?" was prepared by Frost for presentation at a conference on international understanding through the humanities, conducted by Alabama's Capstone International Program Center.

—CJB

When Will the Russians Be Like Us?

By EDGAR L. FROST

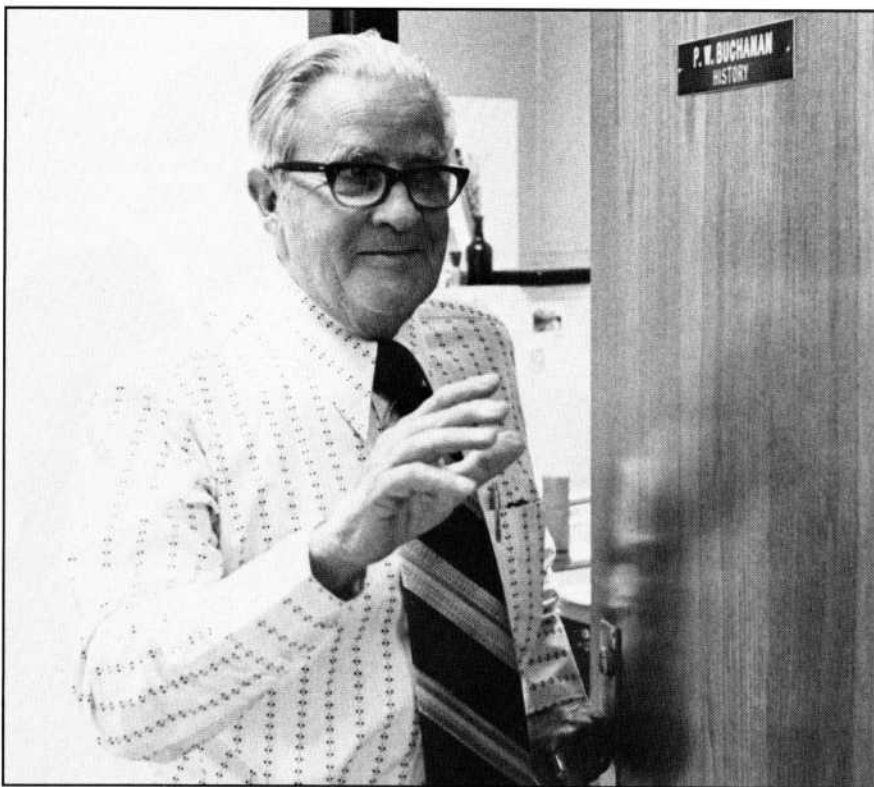
I remember meeting some Russians once when I was a lot younger than I am now and being horrified that they did not know who Marlon Brando was. How dare they—how dare *anyone*—not know who Marlon Brando was? Aside from telling you what generation I came from, that may tell you that I was a pretty typical American in that I looked on the rest of the world from our point of view. A little later I got to thinking about it and realized my judgment of these Russians was not fair. Could I name any of their movie stars? I could not name a one. Not even Innokenty Smoktunovsky, whose first name alone is still sufficient to set female Soviet hearts aflutter. He is a marvelous actor, and yet we never see him or hear anything of him.

I was reminded by the chain of my thoughts of something I had learned in college, from one of the best

teachers I ever had. What he taught me was that all cultures are different and worth knowing about. This professor knew how to get a point across, and I have remembered his lessons well.

He picked me one day to demonstrate something. He stood and held my hand while he lectured to the rest of the class. He was a man, and I was a man, and two adult males just do not hold hands in public in America, a fact of which he was well aware. So I blushed while my fellow students grinned . . . and learned that in the culture we were studying, such behavior was perfectly normal. It made us laugh (and me squirm), but it also made us understand how vastly different values can be in separate cultures.

Percy Buchanan, the instructor in question, was a man who had spent years in the Orient and knew several Asian languages. I do not remember



1953's "Most Popular Professor," Buchanan always was available to students and remained in the classroom part-time until 1977 following his 1971 retirement.

much about Asian history, but I am forever indebted to Dr. Buchanan for opening my eyes to how valuable insight into another culture can be.

I could tell a lot of Buchanan stories, but I'll stop here with one more. I took his *History of the Far East*, and he told us one day that what had amazed him about Americans in the Orient was that they "came always to teach and never to learn." Here were civilizations that were ancient when America was unknown, and yet we dismissed their centuries of accumulated knowledge and tradition with the greatest of ease and eagerly sought to teach them *our* way of life.

We are guilty as a people of treating ours as the only culture worth knowing, and such an attitude hurts us in many ways, not the least of which lies in our seeming so egotistical to others. And, indeed, we are egotistical, because of our material successes and prosperity. We assume that since everybody wants to buy our jeans and phonograph records, they also are dying to hear about Pete Rose's bat-



ting average and the Alabama-Auburn game. We forget that they might like to tell us about their cultures, too. We forget how thrilled they would be if we even tried to speak to them in their languages.

In the case of the Soviet Union, problems of communication and understanding are compounded, because most Americans, to say the least, are suspicious of Russians. It is, unfortunately, no exaggeration to say that Americans generally think of Russians as unsmiling robots whose athletes are all pros. This view further has it that Russians cannot grow wheat, are all atheistic Communists and are uncultured in general. The clinchers are that you cannot talk to Russians because their language is impossible, and they have always been our enemies anyhow.

"No one remembers speeches. I want to leave the audience with words it won't soon forget."



Acting as tour guide for OU students in Korea, Asian scholar Buchanan also was an ordained minister, missionary, judo instructor, oratorio composer and author.

Small wonder, if that is how we view Russians, that we know nothing about Smoktunovsky. We do not *want* to know anything about him. The political reality of our era is that Russia is considered public enemy number one, and that we are the leading villains depicted in *Pravda* on a daily basis. It is precisely because of this adversarial relationship that we lose sight of each other's humanity and fall into the trap of viewing each other in terms of clichés and myths. Thus, we are seen as rich, evil capitalists, wearing top hats and chomping big cigars and just waiting to exploit the hapless workers.

If we took the trouble to read about them, we could learn that Russians do, indeed, smile, but not always at the same times we do. They, in fact, often wonder why Americans go around so much of the time with insincere smiles plastered on their faces. The truth is that there is an explanation for each habit, but neither side is very motivated to learn about the other. That seems to be human nature. It is easier to espouse one's own viewpoint.

So we accuse Russian athletes of being "robots" because they do not

smile during competition. Has anyone calculated the number of smiles registered by Tom Landry during competition? Or we say their athletes are not imaginative like, say, Julius Erving. Has anyone watched their wrestlers or gymnasts? Would anyone seriously contend that Olga Korbut was not daring and imaginative? Was Bob Gibson a "robot" because of the efficient way he mowed down enemy batters? It all depends on the point of view.

We say, in defense of our losses, that Russian athletes are all professionals—and look the other way when Carl Lewis earns money in six figures but remains eligible for the Olympics. We say we would mop up the field with the Russians if we used *our pros* in the Olympics. And we probably would in basketball and one or two more sports, like boxing. But what then? Would we unleash hordes of professional lugers, bobsledders and kayakers and reap a vast harvest of hitherto unclaimed gold medals? It is just possible that the Russians might know some things about training that we do not know, and we might benefit from more, not less, contact with them.

We know we grow more wheat than they do . . . except we do not. It is a much more complex story than that, and the Soviets produce more wheat than we do. They *buy* a lot of our wheat, but there are sound economic reasons for them to, and their people are not about to starve, with or without our wheat. They are not all Communists, either. In fact, the vast majority of them are not Communists. Most of them are politically apathetic and want merely to be left alone. They feel secure with a strong government, albeit a strict one, and most of them would not leave their country if they were offered the chance. Nor are they all atheists. Many millions of them are Eastern Orthodox, millions more are Moslems, and there is even a small number of Baptists.

One of the most amazing myths is that Russians are "uncultured." How can we think this of a people that gave us Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Ni-jinsky and Pavlova, Mendeleev and Pavlov, Chaikovsky and Glinka, Chekhov and Stanislavsky, Eisenstein and Chaliapin?

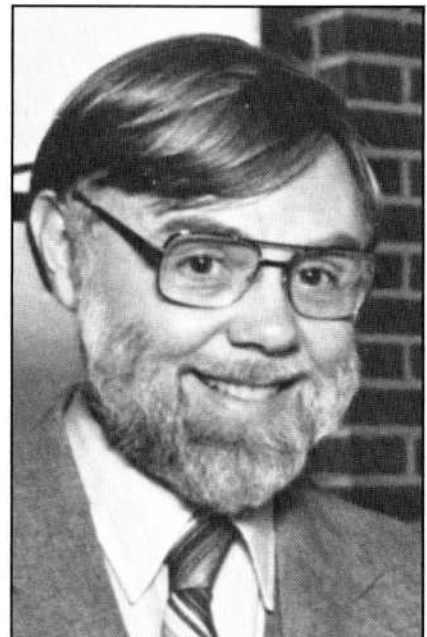
And what of that "impossible" lan-

guage they speak? It might surprise a lot of Americans to learn that Russian and English are related, since both are Indo European. All those Americans who join fraternities and sororities and are, thus, motivated to learn the Greek alphabet would have a considerable head start in learning to read Russian, since the Russians took most of their alphabet from Greek. It is something they picked up over a thousand years ago, along with the Eastern Orthodox brand of Christianity, from Greek missionaries who devised a writing system for the Slavs they were converting.

There is a comeback, too, for those who say the Russians have always been our enemies. We have fought the Russians less than we have the French, Germans and British. While we were occupied with the British in 1812, the Russians were having a death struggle with Napoleon that ended with the decimation of the Little Corporal's *Grande Armée*. While we delayed the Normandy invasion, the Russians took on Hitler's legions singlehandedly and kept them at bay, giving us valuable time we needed. There are, verily, two sides to every story, and we have seldom considered the Russian side. They are, let it be said, as guilty as we are in this respect. That, however, is no consolation to us, but a danger signal that we need to heed, as do they.

What is needed is an increase of understanding and respect on the part of both sides. We will never be like the Russians, and they will never be like us. Our heritages are far too disparate for that. Differences need not, however, translate into hostility and conflict. We need to learn about each other, and that requires a great deal of patience and motivation.

I am again reminded of Percy Buchanan, who told aspirants to the Judo Club that a lot would be required before they learned to toss people around—fundamentals, background and even philosophy. This announcement, of course, discouraged a lot of would-be judo artists. It also let the rest know that, to cope with the subject, they would need to understand it. With that in mind and for the sake of both American and Russian uniqueness, I hope there will always be a few Percy Buchanans around. □



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Both Eddie Frost of Hobart, '61 B.A. in journalism, '67 M.A. in Russian, and Lena Joan Hamrick of Ponca City, '68 B.A. in Spanish, were in OU's department of modern languages at the same time. They met, however, as graduate students in Slavic languages at the University of Illinois. "I could have been her Russian teacher at OU," Frost says, "but some other graduate assistant got that assignment. Of course, now that she sees my tests, she says that if she had had me in class, we would never have gotten married." The Frosts live in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, with their 11-year-old son and 4-month-old daughter. "I'm encouraged to go back to my high school reunion," Frost quips. "Surely I would be the graduate with the youngest child."