

SOONER SONG BOOK



By MARGARET FRENCH



UNIVERSITY BOYS GLEE CLUB—1900





Fans attending sporting events at the University of Oklahoma this season might have been startled by the strains of a “new” spirit song emanating from the band. While sounding strangely like “Boomer Sooner,” a closer listen confirms that this is not the classic Big Red fight song.

Although OU’s various bands only recently have reintroduced “Fight for OKU,” the surprising truth is that the musicians could select a different OU song for just about every one of OU’s home basketball and football games without ever repeating. As it turns out, there exist not merely one or two OU fight songs, but more than two dozen, counting “yells,” those crowd cheers so popular in OU’s earlier days.

“Fight for OKU” was written by former OU band director Leonard Haug, expressly as an alternative to the popular “Boomer Sooner,” the tune borrowed from Yale University’s fight song, “Boola-Boola,” with which it has been regularly confused.

Haug remembers clearly an incident at the 1939 Orange Bowl that spurred the creation of new Sooner songs, both his own and others. During the pre-game parade, Ted Husing, the CBS radio announcer covering the game, was listening to the OU and Tennessee bands serenade each other.

“He said, ‘Why is that band playing ‘Boola Boola?’” Haug remembers. He and the OU group tried to explain to Husing the Sooner adaptation. Several years later, Haug wrote “Fight For OKU,” to satisfy, he says, “Oklahoma fans clamoring for a song they could call their own.”

Haug’s tune supplanted “Boomer Sooner” until he retired as band director in 1962, but the standard soon reclaimed its place at the top.

Over the years, several composers and frustrated pretenders have gotten into the act of immortalizing the U of O in song. Even a state governor, Roy J. Turner, tried his hand with “Oklahoma, An Anthem.” An anonymous author contributed “Fight, Fight,

Sooners Fight,” and a similarly modest composer drafted the yell, “Oklahoma Locomotive.”

The locomotive yell enjoyed a prominent role in Sooner history, as the chant—which mocked a locomotive engine chugging up a railroad track—became a fixture at Sooner pep rallies in the 1920s and ’30s. That particular spirit device was taken very seriously, complete with a “yellmaster.” Leaving nothing to chance, instructions for staging a yell properly were distributed at sporting events.

There were many yells, of course, but the most popular seem to have been the “Locomotive,” “Oklahoma Fights,” “Hit ’em High,” and “Hi Rickety,” one version of which went something like this:

Hi-Rickety-Whoop-te-do
Boomer-Sooner-Okla-U
Hi-Rickety-Whoop-te-do
Boomer-Sooner-Okla-U

Of course, each verse had to be repeated “twice slow” and then “twice fast,” the directions admonished. Unfortunately, the yell, minus the yellmaster, loses some effectiveness in print.

“Boomer Sooner Oklahoma,” an anonymous contribution, was sung to the tune of “Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, The Boys Are Marching.” It was employed at least as early as 1896 and still was popular when Haug came on board in 1938. Another composer, in an apparent attempt to attract maximum attention, ended the exhortation “Fight, Fight, Sooners Fight” with a very racy, “Zip! Bang! Sooners!”

Perhaps the fight song that has enjoyed the most fame — other than “Boomer Sooner” and, of course, the venerable “OU Chant” (discussed on Page 17) — is “O.K. Oklahoma.” Written by orchestra and choral conductor Fred Waring, the song still erupts at the point-after-touchdowns at football games and is used as a crowd motivator during basketball timeouts.

“Oklahoma, A Toast,” once known erroneously as “Oklahoma University

Song,” also celebrated scoring opportunities, as did Turner’s “Oklahoma, An Anthem.” A different salute, “A Toast to Oklahoma,” was written by OU graduate Caro Bond McDonald. Alumnus Joe W. Hicks submitted “Cheer Oklahoma,” and fellow Sooner R.W. Hippen wrote “Oklahoma Drive.” A Nebraska graduate then living in Oklahoma City, Gayle V. Grubb — or “Benedict Arnold Grubb,” as he once said he was known in Lincoln — claims one version of “Hail to Oklahoma.”

Other clever offerings poured in. Sheet music to “O-O-Oklahoma” instructed the musicians to follow a “tom-tom rhythm,” while “On! Sooners!” and “Go! Oklahoma!” both required a marching beat. All were sentenced to relative obscurity, however, in the company of such would-be college hits as “Sons of Georgetown,” “We’ll Whoop ’er Up for Princeton,” “’Bama, You’re Wonderful” and “Lehigh Echoes.”

Some tunes have been altered down through the years. For instance, “Boomer Sooner,” A.L. Hirsch’s 1919 composition, has changed in both rhythm and lyric, according to James Faulconer, OU professor of music theory.

“Even the meter was played differently, with what is now the traditional pickup of ‘Boomer Sooner’ being performed on the beat,” Faulconer says, adding that an extra “Rah, Rah!” necessitated a slower performance of the song.

“And,” Faulconer laughs, “in place of ‘OKU,’ as we end it, they used ‘Oh, by gum!’” The present version, he believes, evolved sometime during the 1930s and 1940s.

Faulconer’s interest in the old Sooner songs eventually inspired an audio tape featuring several of them. Already hard at work on an OU Centennial film score, Faulconer discovered a cache of Sooner songs. With Steve Curtis, associate professor of music education, he conducted OU



OKLAHOMA HAIL! Welsh air
Arranged by R.H. Richards

LOUISE B. ADAMS
In march time, with spirit

From the hill-sides, from the prairies, Comes a song that never wears
From thy gracious font of learning We will quench our thirst so burning

Loy-al-ty that nev-er va-ries Oh-la - ho - ma, hail!
Wise-ly that nev-er turns Oh-la - ho - ma, hail!

I - vied with the low-ers, Corn-put fair 'neath sun and show-ers,
Wis-dom brought from out the a-ges, Truth of saints and laws of sa-ges

All the low-ers we bear these flow-ers - And will nev-er fail
Ours to take from all - ing - as, Nev-er grow - ing old

Louise B. Adams, wife of the OU business dean, borrowed a Welsh air and added her own lyrics for "Oklahoma Hail!," a predecessor of "OU Chant" as the University's alma mater.

music students in "glee club" style to produce "OU Spirit Songs of the Last 100 Years," a cassette which was marketed last fall.

"The tape achieved what I had wanted to do anyway," Faulconer notes. "It is important that this music is still being carried on, because it is an integral part of our heritage."

The professor chose to weave Turner's "Oklahoma, An Anthem" into the Centennial film's theme, he

says, "because it is just beautiful."

Borrowing another school's song and writing different lyrics was not at all unusual in those early days, Faulconer says; many songs in addition to "Boomer Sooner" were born in just that manner. "Oklahoma U." was adapted from an old Harvard song, while "Oklahoma First," another appropriated college song, begins with a claim that "Oklahoma gets there first," and the lyrics somehow answer

the question of how the whale "did swallow Jonah up!"

Then there was "Fight on, Oklahoma," sung to the tune of "In Ole Oklahoma," by pop vocalist Pinky Tomlin. Tomlin's song actually drew some support as a possible state song.

Haug's lyrics to "Hail to Oklahoma!" were set to a melody written by Louis Spohr, a contemporary of Mozart. Haug, who had first heard the glee club standard while attending the University of Wisconsin, adapted lyrics for OU and used it throughout his tenure as band director.

"It was typical of the glee club type songs popular then," Haug says. "It had a certain flavor of those songs, like the ones fraternities sang. They had pretty good glee clubs."

"Oklahoma Hail!" was based on a Welsh air with lyrics by Louise B. Adams, wife of business dean Arthur B. Adams, for whom the business administration building is named. Adams' song predated the "OU Chant" as the more stately, reverent "alma mater."

Whatever the reasons, interest in OU music always has been high. None of the songs ever was commissioned; each was presented as a free-will offering. The subject even has lent itself to scholarly study as the topic of one ongoing dissertation on the history of the OU bands, while another researched the influence of OU bands on the history of music education in Oklahoma.

Why some songs last and others fade remains a mystery. But to many Sooner bandmen, as important as who wins the game is what tune the crowd walks away humming.

Copies of "OU Spirit Songs of the Last 100 Years" are available from the OU School of Music, 560 Parrington Oval, Norman, OK 73019. Make checks payable to the OU Foundation for \$8.95 plus \$1.50 for postage and handling. All proceeds go toward instructional equipment for the school.



“... Beautiful by Day and Night...”

Every Sooner fan knows “Boomer Sooner” by heart. After all, the words aren’t difficult. But those same folks are not so familiar with the lyrics to OU’s “other” song, which, by the way, is actually a chant. When the crowd joins in the “OU Chant” before each home football game, the words are flashed across the scoreboard chiefly out of necessity.

*O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A
Our chant rolls on and on!
Thousands strong
Join heart and song
In Alma Mater’s praise —
Of campus beautiful by day
and night,
Of colors proudly gleaming Red
and White,
’Neath a western sky
OU’s chant will never die.
Live on, University.*

Written by a Sooner alumna more than half a century ago as a common bond for all OU graduates, the “OU Chant” has stood the test of time. Its author, Jessie Lone Clarkson Gilkey, wrote the words and music as an expression of her own deep feelings of loyalty for her alma mater.

Now a Colorado resident, Gilkey earned a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from OU in 1927 and returned nearly 10 years later to join the faculty after teaching at Southwestern State College at Weatherford. In those days, singing was in vogue and school spirit sky-high.

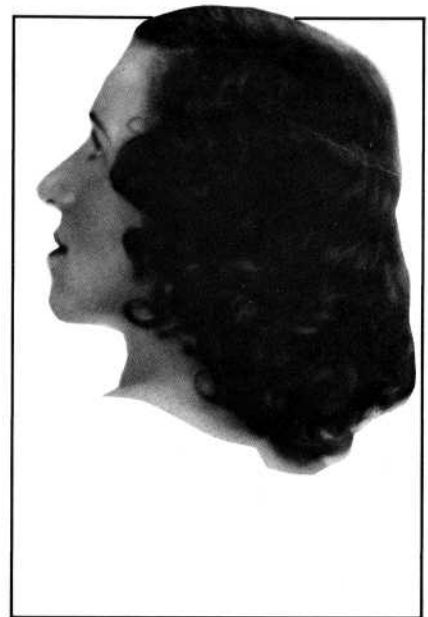
Enthusiastic members of OU’s Women’s Choral Club petitioned her to pen a school song for them — not a fight song — but “one that would make them starry-eyed,” she remembers of the request. In the wee hours of a certain crisp, fall night, she obliged them.

The evening had been one of musical fete, ripe with the carefree happiness that was a trademark of that era. Pontiac’s “Big Broadcast,” a highly popular radio program, was originating from Holmberg Hall. Members of the dance and varsity bands had joined the

Rufneks, Jazz Hounds, Ladies’ Quartette, Sooner Ladies’ Trio and other students for the celebration. After the hour-long show, the revelers relocated off campus to the Monterey.

“... The Mont, they call it now,” notes Gilkey, in Norman last fall for a reunion with her Chi Omega sorority sisters. “We were there until all hours, just singing and eating. Then I went home, sat down half asleep at the piano and scratched the words down. Not in a minute, but just leisurely sitting there.”

Straight from a Norman Rockwell or Currier and Ives canvas, the night had set the stage. Gilkey, who was named outstanding faculty woman during her two-year tenure at OU, had



Jessie Lone Clarkson at OU, 1937-39.

no trouble expressing her feelings of pride in and love for the University in that quiet time. *Continued*



Jessie Lone Clarkson directs the Women’s Choral Club, for whom she wrote “OU Chant.”



The airing of “The Pontiac Big Broadcast” from Holmberg Hall was a major event.

The resulting song captured the feeling of exuberance pervading the OU campus. More importantly, the lyrics defined Gilkey's personal vision of what it meant to be a Sooner, to which many Sooners since could relate.

The words, she recalls, "made me feel like I was just standing out there looking into the night. I can remember we came out of Holmberg Hall, and there were the maple trees, and the coloring on the campus, beautiful by day and night . . ."

However, after she had shared the tune with her circle of friends, the chant was forgotten until the following autumn when alumni secretary Ted Beard needed a spirit song for an Oklahoma City radio station. Gilkey offered her composition, which Beard

readily predicted would be "all over the state by tomorrow."

The chant indeed caught on and has been interwoven in OU history ever since. Gilkey, who never received any payment for the song, considers it a gift from her heart.

"I had it copyrighted and gave it to OU; that was the only thing I could do for OU," she says modestly. Before then, however, Gilkey had granted orchestra and choral conductor Fred Waring permission over the telephone to perform the chant on his weekly radio show.


The diminutive Gilkey has not experienced many opportunities to hear her composition performed through the years. And, as luck would have it, the very first time she heard the chant in Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, a

mixup seated her with the opponents from Southern Methodist University.

"They all stood up, and I said, 'That's my song . . .'"

Gilkey quickly recovered and applauded with the good-hearted visiting Mustangs and later laughed off her uncanny knack of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Recently, however, she savored a similar performance, complete with a bonus as guest conductor at a Pride of Oklahoma marching band rehearsal before a football game. Gilkey's chant stirred her own feelings of nostalgia as she perched high atop the band director's ladder.

"I still get goosebumps," she giggles. "Especially when they asked me to conduct it. It was thrilling to see the expression on the young people's faces." 



The 1937-38 Sooner Ladies Quartette (from left, Mary Anita Browner of Hooker, Oklahoma; the Davis sisters of Seminole, Elnora and Ruth Verne; and Martha Ruth Jarrell of Norman) was one of several OU choral groups directed by Jessie Lone Clarkson.