

SOONER SPOTLIGHT ● TOOTHAKER

"My wife knows American sign language of the deaf," OU psychology professor Larry Toothaker explains, "and once she showed me the sign for 'boring.' It's a single forefinger to the side of the nose, as if to dig or 'bore' a hole. So I tell all my students if the lectures get really bad, they can do that sign."

Toothaker is not indulging in self-depreciation. A nimble-minded, award-winning instructor in psychological statistics and environmental design, he readily admits some of the material he teaches is as dry as a Sooner midsummer.

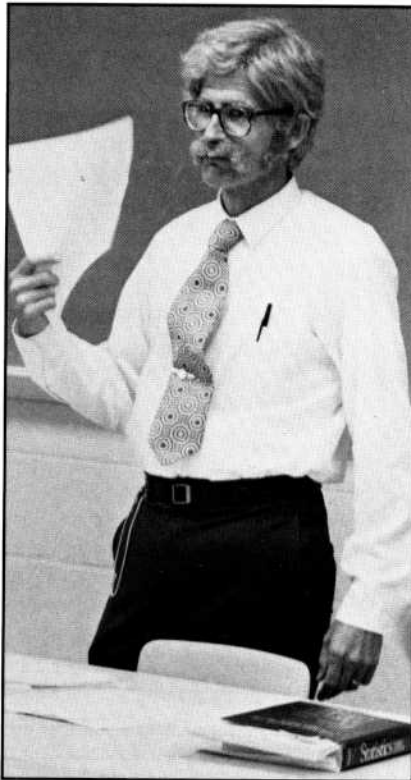
So to break the routine, three times a semester Toothaker transforms himself. A gray wig. Gray muttonchop sideburns and matching handlebar moustache. A touch of a silvery beard. Antique octagonal glasses. A rolled-up towel taped across his back. A borrowed coat. A doddering gait.

After 45 minutes to an hour of rearranging his appearance, Toothaker walks into class and introduces himself as "guest lecturer" Henry Scheffe. It so happens that Scheffe, a world-renowned statistician, has been deceased for a decade and a half, but Toothaker ably brings him back to life.

"Scheffe" gently chastizes latecomers and trudges through a lecture covering statistical concepts developed by Scheffe's real-life contemporaries — Englishman Karl Pearson, who developed the "correlation coefficient," and William Gossett, who devised the "t-statistic." Two of "Scheffe's" three appearances deal with these ideas in fanciful first-hand recollections of his encounters with the men and their work. The final lecture is devoted to a discussion of Scheffe's own studies, including his landmark *The Analysis of Variance* (1959), still considered the standard text in its field.

"The idea was to bring something unusual into the classroom that would 'mark' in their memory that particular lecture material," Toothaker explains. "Also, part of the reason was just for the fun of it—to give them a break."

Why pick Scheffe? Toothaker at first leaned toward impersonating someone like Sir Ronald Fisher, the father of modern statistics. But Fisher and many other of the leading lights of the statistics field are British, and Tooth-



Master teacher Toothaker captures his audience in "guest speaker" disguise.

aker never has mastered the accent to his satisfaction. However, he possesses an "old Jimmy Stewart voice," which seemed to fit well with Scheffe, a one-time University of Indiana professor.

"I wanted to do an old man, because I can do old men well," Toothaker says, slipping into the elderly croak. "Also, the slow . . . delivery . . . gives . . . you . . . time to think . . . while you're . . . talkin'."

Like Scheffe, Toothaker has some educational roots in the Midwest. Born in Kansas City, Kansas, he obtained a bachelor's degree from the University of Nebraska and received both his master's and Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. Entering the job market in 1968, he weighed a pair of competing offers — one from OU, the other from UCLA.

"I think I needed the smaller-town atmosphere," Toothaker says. "In retrospect I'm really glad I came here. It's been tremendous for my family. The public school system has been great for my kids . . . we've gotten involved in a local church. The overall environment has been very supportive and very good for family life."

Toothaker also found the small-is-better principle worked for him professionally as well. "The psychology department had a small and congenial faculty when I started, and that's been one of the things that's kept me here. Jack Kanak, the prior departmental chair, and Alan Nicewander, the chair now, both have been very good to work with. It's a colleague kind of relationship rather than an 'I'm-the-boss, you're-the-employee' relationship."

His teaching career now into its third decade, Toothaker has all sorts of classroom honors to his credit. Last March he received the second annual Medal for Excellence in Teaching at the college level from the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence, the first medal having gone to OU mathematics professor Tom Hill in 1987. Toothaker also has authored a textbook, *Introductory Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences*.

Toothaker credits his wife Nietzie, a medical technologist, for being a partner in his work and is quick as any proud father to list the academic achievements of daughter Lori, a sophomore at Baylor, and son Brady, a high school senior. But he also speaks unreservedly about his belief in God and worries that too often undergraduates spend their college years concentrating only on the things having to do narrowly with brain and brawn.

"I urge them not to neglect the spiritual development of their lives," he says. "I don't encourage them to become like me, or try to proselytize them, but rather encourage them to seek *whomever* they look to as a higher being."

Certainly Toothaker himself finds no conflict between religion and higher education. In fact, the voice he once used to portray King David to his Sunday school class is now the voice of Henry Scheffe.

Though his experiences as a thespian were confined almost entirely to the high school stage, Toothaker's ongoing portrayals of Scheffe are so polished that some of his students are unable to discern the real-life professor behind the makeup. Like Toothaker, "Scheffe" gets high marks from the students — and neither one draws the ASL sign for 'boring.'

—MICHAEL WATERS