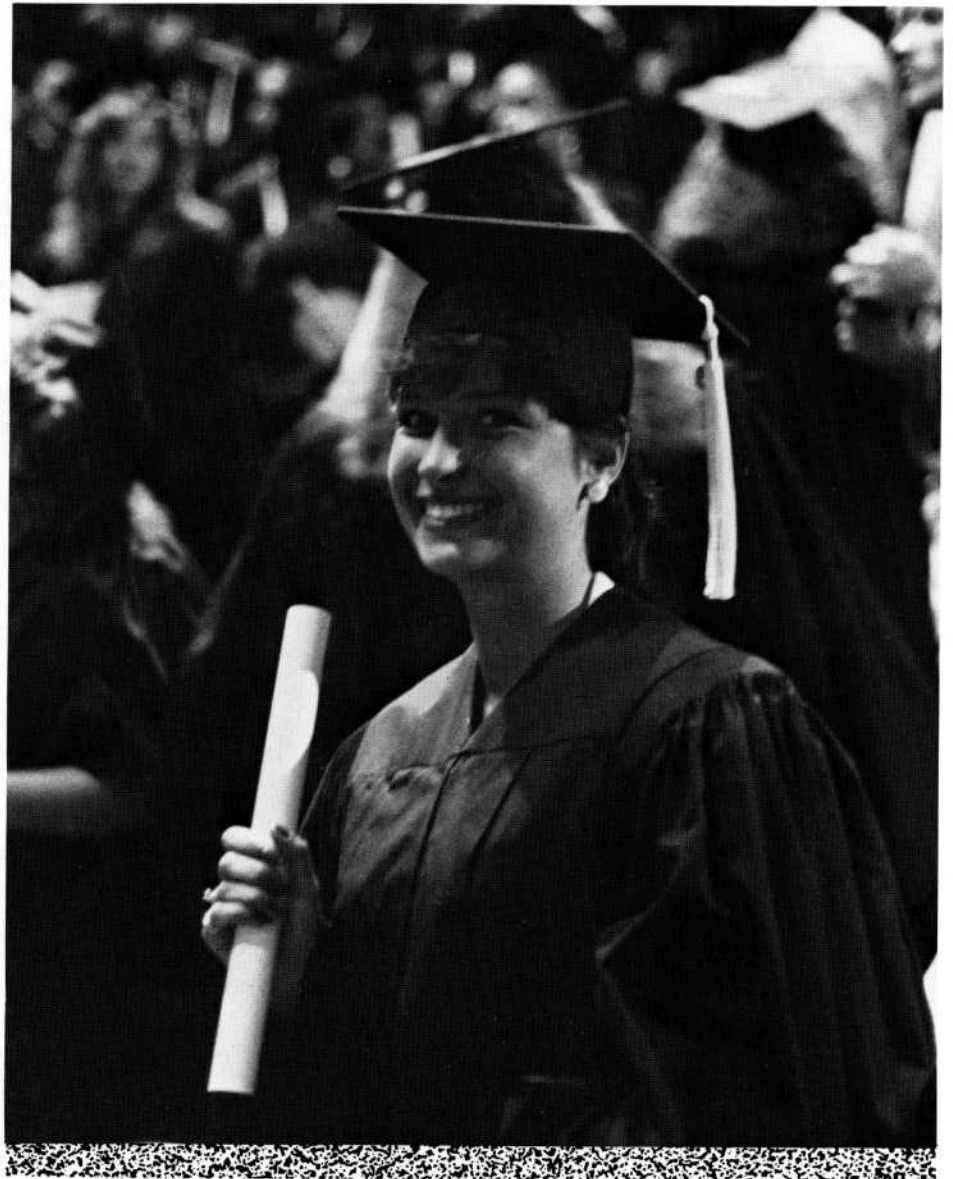


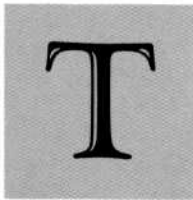
Fathers swell with pride and relief; mothers weep; younger siblings squirm. That ceremony in archaic garb called commencement goes on each spring all over the country. The fine arts dean at OU has attempted to make the occasion a party — but one with a serious purpose reflecting a basic need for public approbation and observed traditions.



Rites of Passage

Photos by OU Photo & Electronic Media

By NAT EEK



The noise welling up from every direction in Lloyd Noble Center was deafening. Families and friends chattered as they frantically hunted for seats. Announcements poured from the PA system. Loud banter bounced back and forth among the black-robed graduates as they waited in crowded lines for the ceremonial music to begin. It was the sound of thousands of people in one enclosed space.

With a fanfare of trumpets at exactly 2:30 on that Saturday afternoon, eight different double lines started down the steps of the arena onto the canvas-covered basketball floor to the seating sections reserved for them. The annual University of Oklahoma commencement exercises were under way.

Fred Wood, dean of the College of Education, was part of the president's party marching down the aisles to the appropriate raised platform on the floor. As he hit the top of the steps to start the descent, his ears were assaulted by the sounds of cheering graduates, babbling parents and friends, the band brassing John Philip Sousa, the announcer's amplified voice presenting the graduates of each college. With great delight, Wood told me later that his immediate reaction was, "This crowd is here for a party."

These commencement ceremonies, held in Lloyd Noble Center since its construction in 1975, begin with eight marching lines, six of which contain the graduate and undergraduate students from both the Norman and the Health Science Center campuses representing all the University's colleges with the exception of medicine, which holds separate ceremonies in Oklahoma City.

Usually approximately 2,700 graduates, more than 77 percent of those eligible, participate in person in the ceremonies. The faculty comprises the seventh line, and the president's platform party makes up the final queue. Fourteen minutes are required for them all to march to their assigned seats.

Those who sit on the platform include the president, the State Regents for Higher Education, the OU Regents, the University executive offic-

ers, the deans and the special guests for the occasion—recipients of the Distinguished Service Citations, the guest speaker, the Alumni Association president, the student government president and the ministers who give the invocation and the benediction—a total of 56 people.

This year all the auditorium seats were filled, and standing lines four deep encircled the upper concourse. James Dunn, manager of Lloyd Noble Center, estimated the inside crowd at 13,000; no one is sure how many outside could not get in.

Ceremonies are back. After several decades of "doing our own thing," people have decided that the time has come for rites instead of rights.

Life is filled with a series of milestones, some quite discernable, others almost invisible. A list of the major events in the average life would contain first the three times that one's name should be printed in the newspaper — when one is born, when one is married and when one dies.

Obviously, however, we must add

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other major transitional points. Certainly graduation from high school and college offer major changes in our lives, and as such, attention needs to be paid. The achiever should have a sense of completion, almost a type of finality, and this is where ceremony comes in.

My Random House Dictionary defines ceremony as "the formal activities conducted on some solemn or important public or state occasion." While our commencement hoopla may not always be solemn, it certainly has a formal structure and is most definitely public.

The '60s tried to break us away from anything traditional because it smacked of "old guard" and "establishment." Since ceremony required a gathering of crowds, it became a prime occasion for discourse, demonstration and disruption. As the dialogue became noisier, we started avoiding such

confrontations by canceling or tightly controlling attendance. Unfortunately this took all the fun, excitement and sense of achievement out of the gathering.

In the past 10 years, we have had four demonstrations at commencement time. None of them caused much obstruction, and most of the crowd present did not even know they were happening. In 1983 one indignant doctoral candidate rose and turned his back on guest speaker Jeanne Kirkpatrick, only to find himself ignored after two minutes. He then moved to the side of the arena to stand where he could hear her speech, which was appropriately non-political.

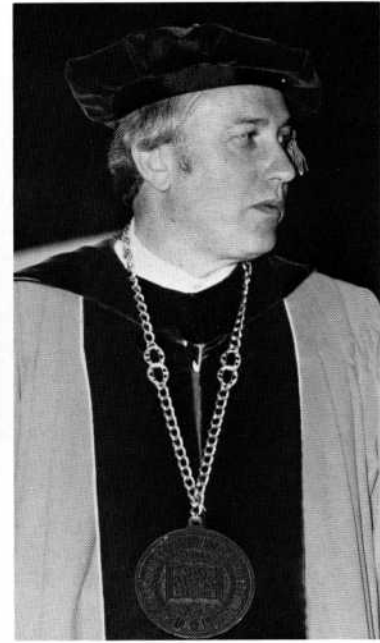
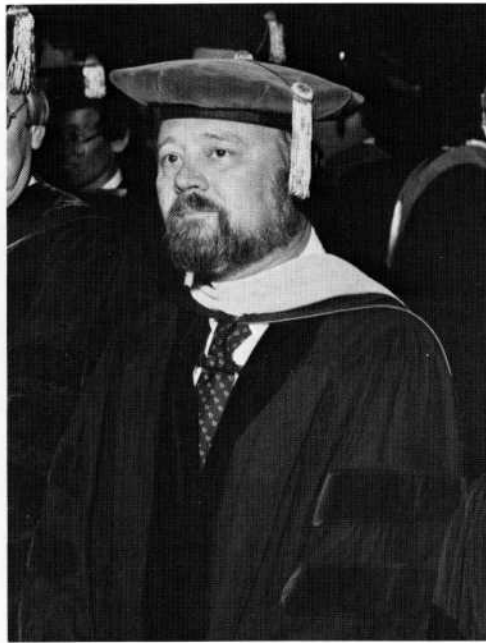
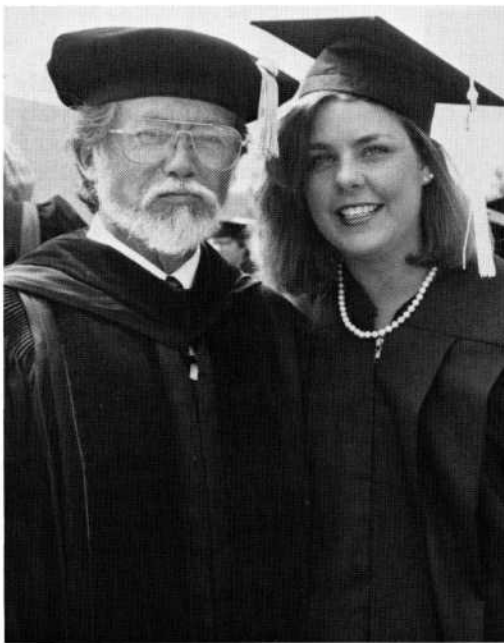
The anti-pollution demonstration in 1985 was met by a rainstorm and dissolved into disarray before the ceremonies even began. Neither the 1984 pro-gay group nor the 1980 anti-war mongers were able to amass supporter crowds larger than 10.

Emotionally during the "anti" days, we found we missed that sense of public approbation, as well as the recognition of our accomplishments, which

ceremonials provided. Most importantly, the protesters of tradition found they too missed those traditions, and they had a feeling of rootlessness and a lack of recognized accomplishment.

So pomp and circumstance crept back in. As part of any ceremony, individual recognition is extremely important. It is the most positive form of name calling. This is why those on the platform or at the head table are introduced. This is why it is important to name each graduate, if possible, and allow the graduate to walk alone across a platform. To accomplish this feat for such a large number of graduates in a reasonable time, we at OU use six different platforms for the individual colleges, all in operation at the same time.

For some strange reason we live now in a society so determined to make everyone equal that we tend to avoid



You may know them by their academic regalia, from the bachelor's candidate at left with her doctorate-holding professor to the chancellor at right with his symbol of office, each distinguished by style and color of gown and head gear.

any public recognition suggesting that one person is more unusual or achieving than the rest of us. To do otherwise smacks of ambition, which once was considered a virtue, not a vice. Today our compromise is to try to recognize everyone equally in some manner. That is what graduation ceremonies achieve. Everyone there is receiving a degree, different types to be sure, but for the moment they are all equal in similar achievement.

Differentiation and individualization then settle in. Those graduating with distinction wear gold satin bachelor hoods over their black gowns. The Honors College graduates have crimson hoods. The 4.0 grade-point-average graduates have medallions on red and white ribbons around their necks. The master's and doctoral students wear more elaborate hoods about their necks with a tailored fall of colored satin and velvet down their backs.

As a theatre professor, I am conscious of the importance of costuming and clothing in our lives. We are what we wear, although many times we are not aware of the signals and symbols being noticed by the outside observer. The stage actor is always conscious of the scenery which surrounds him, but what he wears is the most personal of all spotlights. Consequently every actor becomes almost paranoid about his attire on stage. Even if he is playing nothing but a beggar, his rags

must be authentic and becoming in their own sordid way. Members of the general public feel exactly the same way about what they wear.

Graduation gowns are a form of uniform which began in the middle ages in Europe. The cap or mortarboard comes to us from Italy, but the hood as an academic vestment is distinctly British. The original bearers were the teachers who wore them as a uniform in which to teach a class, a practice which still is followed in England. The hoods we now wear to signify our degree and university were originally utilitarian, designed to keep rain and drafts off the wearer as he sat in the stone-cold cloisters of learning.

When not needed, the hood was pulled off and allowed to hang down over the tippet, or short cape that was layered over the gown for additional warmth. Later the hood and tippet were joined into a single piece, but the hood had become merely decorative. Today the banding around the edge of the hood designates the field of study — purple for law, green for medicine, white for the liberal arts, yellow for the sciences, or even as specific as bronze for the newcomer — business administration. The lining designates the institution granting the degree, so all OU degree hoods boast our crimson and cream in satin.

The gowns are cut fuller as one progresses from the undergraduate to the master to the doctor. Perhaps this is

paying attention not so much to the importance of the degree but to the aging amplexness of the figure being clothed. The undergraduate sleeve is cut on the diagonal, while the master's sleeve stops at the elbow and has a long drape hanging below in the form of a pocket. Originally these pockets were used to carry scrolls, books and even lunches at times. Doctors' gowns boast quite full balloon sleeves with bars of velvet in the color of the field of study. Some universities have adopted gowns in their own school colors, such as the Harvard crimson and the Northwestern purple.

The mortarboard comes from the Italian biretta, worn by the Venetian doges during the Renaissance. We have modified it to a skullcap with a square board on top. The colored tassels, like the colored velvet bandings on the gowns, designate the field of study. It has become a custom for the un-graduated to wear the tassel on the right side and then switch it to the left side once the degree has been conferred.

Never to be outdone, students have begun decorating their mortarboards rather elaborately. One architecture graduate had a small building constructed of pieces of lego on her mortarboard; another had a pink duck; and there have been many words and phrases, both sacred and profane, taped on top of the square surfaces.

All these colors and stylish fabrics,



silhouettes and hoods give variety and individuality to the graduate as well as the professor. While we welcome the sense of uniform which we all wear, we still like the fact that each costume is a little bit different from that of the person next to us.

This brings us to the ceremony itself. Having just attended my niece's graduation at George Mason University in Virginia, I found myself comparing programs. What seem to be the required elements?

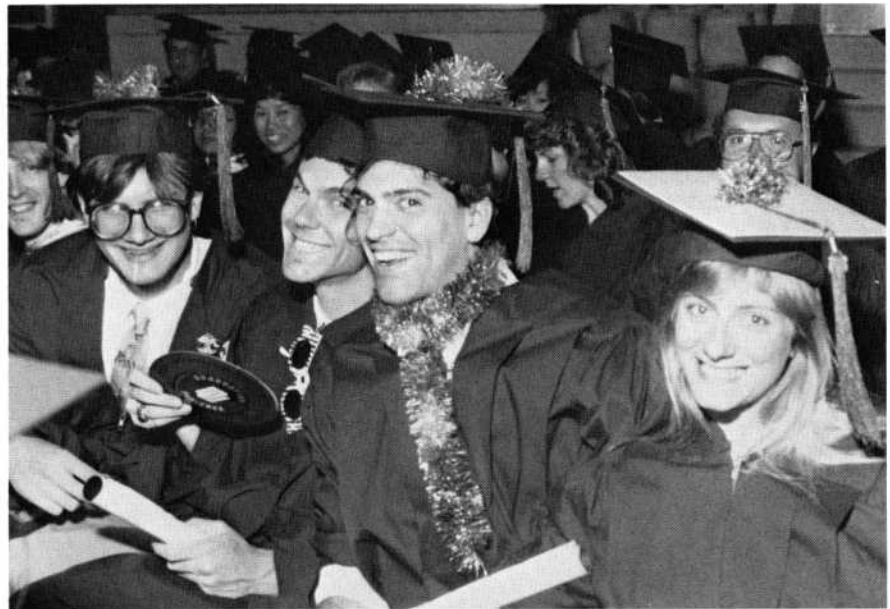
Certainly the processional is one, giving everyone a chance to parade his graduation finery. Grouping members in the march is by reverse order rank of importance, starting with the undergraduates and ending with the president and his party.

The program always opens with a religious invocation by a minister, but in these days of many cultures, it is important that this be non-sectarian rather than just Christian in approach, unless the institution has a specific religious affiliation.

There is a welcome by an official and the introduction of the featured speaker. While the degree awarding is of more interest to the graduates, the speaker sometimes is of great importance to the faculty and audience, many times causing a run on seats. This year, Boston University's tickets to the George Bush-François Mitterand commencement reportedly were scalped for \$1,000 each.

In just about every ceremony, some kind of honorary medal or degree is awarded to one or more individuals who have benefited that particular institution, state, or society in general, or who by their good works have brought fame to their alma mater. Then follows the conferring of degrees, which is why everyone really is there.

In these days of big commence-



ABOVE: You can line them up and dress them alike, but the effervescent spirit of the American college student will emerge in one last blow for individualism, as these tinsel-adorned members of the University's Class of 1989 demonstrate.

TOP LEFT: Graduates of the Naval ROTC program in their dress whites add a dash of variety to a crowd of somberly clad academics in gowns and mortar boards.

ments, the degrees usually are conferred officially on the graduates by their standing up as a body, while the president anoints them with the appropriate words of achievement and responsibility. The doctoral candidates still march across the main platform as their names are called and are hooded in place. The ceremonies close with a benediction, followed by a recessional of the new graduates out of the auditorium.

Variations, which have particular meaning, have been added by some institutions. My mother was horrified to discover that the practice, which she started at Randolph Macon College as senior class president in 1908, was still being done—that of wearing a woven daisy chain over the right shoulder linking all the graduates in procession, only now the chain is artificial and commercially made.

At Harvard the graduates are picked up in groups in front of their individual colleges, then marched in a body to the assembly hall. At the University of Kansas, the graduates enter between two lines of faculty wishing them well on their way. At West Point and Annapolis, the graduating cadets and midshipmen throw their hats in the air never to be worn again, since

their next uniform will be a commissioned one.

Once the ceremonies are concluded, the cameras take over, and it has been delightful to observe the extended families grouped together with their graduates for a "flashed" photographic remembrance. At the same time, the age of the recipients has been extended, and nowadays there are quite a few returning grandmothers and grandfathers earning degrees. Of particular importance to the growth and maturity of our country are the number of ethnic graduates we now have, and exuberant African and Asian families provide some of our most colorful family groups.

Finally the evening is given over to celebration and festivity among family and friends. One graduate wore his wetsuit under his gown, obviously headed for Lake Thunderbird and skiing afterward.

But most importantly, all the graduates carried away a sense of accomplishment, of achievement, of finality, the knowledge that they had been given proper public recognition. An important rite of passage had been negotiated successfully, and they had looked the part every step of that final way. 