

The Sullivants: GROWING UP WITH OU

She is 90, has very little gray hair, all her own teeth and total recall. She was born in 1900 east of Norman on her '89er parents' farm. As a child in December 1907, she watched as the second OU building, University Hall, burned to the ground. She used to rollerskate around the North Oval with Dorothy Brooks—until Dorothy's father, OU President Stratton D. Brooks, banished the girls for disturbing students studying in the Carnegie Library.

Ruby Sullivant grew up with the University of Oklahoma. She attended OU off and on throughout her youth, often quitting school to go to work,

By LOUISE BEARD MOORE

then returning to college classes. This fit the pattern of many early OU students. Neither Ruby nor her younger brother, the late Otis Sullivant, ever received degrees from OU.

"We weren't obsessed with getting a degree in those days," Otis once explained, "and besides, work was hard to find."

Ruby went on to a variety of jobs throughout the United States. Otis became the most widely recognized political reporter in Oklahoma, was in-

ducted into the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame and received OU's Distinguished Service Citation in 1975.

Today Ruby lives in her own small, neat house on Keith Street near downtown Norman, where she tends her patio garden abloom with all manner of plants and flowers and enjoys her rooms furnished with family antiques. One treasured possession is the Carlisle upright piano on which she used to practice scales assigned by her early music teacher, Mrs. Alma Wilson Dowd, wife of Jerome Dowd, who joined the faculty at statehood and directed both the schools of commerce and industry and social service.



Betsy Baker

Ruby Sullivant rollerskated on the north oval with Dorothy Brooks, but President Brooks banished them for disturbing students in the library.



Ruby attended Oklahoma A&M for a year, it being cheaper with a room at \$4 a month, a meal ticket at \$5 — but she always returned to OU.



The eccentric professor of modern languages Lucile Dora boarded with Ruby's mother, taking the remnants of her meal home in a doggie bag.

In those days talented community children were allowed to study with the music faculty at the University. She also studied with Lewis Salter, later dean of fine arts, and Charles F. Giard, graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music, who came to OU to teach music in 1910. Ruby remembers being in an OU student ritual when she was 12; she wore a middy blouse and had pigtailed hair.

Ruby's cattle driver-farmer father, Jesse Sullivan, homesteaded in 1889 on a claim he bought from a Sooner, a cattle stampede in southeastern Oklahoma having caused him to miss the Run. He and his wife Sallie drove to Oklahoma from Yell County, Arkansas, in a covered wagon and a buggy. Jesse Sullivan was land hungry and was always "about to buy a new quarter section," Ruby says. Most of his land today is covered by Lake Thunderbird.

Turn-of-the-century farmers and tradesmen did most of their business with verbal rather than formal contracts. Ruby's dad, she is reminded, would go to the First National Bank to get a loan from early Norman banker E. B. Johnson, then later go across the street to Charley Bessent's Security National for a loan to pay back Mr. Johnson. Jesse's first crop after the Run was a failure, and he pieced out the family income by hauling native blackjack wood into town to sell for \$1.50 a load.

Five children were born after Jesse and Sallie came to the Norman claim: Ralph in 1891, Roy in 1895, Ruby in 1900, Otis in 1902 and Charles, who died in infancy after his birth in 1905.

The Sullivants, like many other early-day families, "moved to town" in 1905 for their children to go to school. (OU enrollment at the time was 475.) They rented a house from A. H. Van Vleet, soon to be OU's graduate dean, then bought the first of several homes in Norman. (A basic tenet of pioneers was to own the house you live in.)

The 3 o'clock train, Ruby remembers, drew half the town to the Santa Fe depot to visit and watch the locomotive passengers go south, especially on a Sunday afternoon. Another popular attraction was the old Barbour Drug Store in downtown Norman on Main at Jones Street, where football scores

and election results were posted on a brick wall.

"Some folks told of a farmer jumping up and down when a certain election vote disclosed a winner," Ruby recalls. "'Do you know this candidate?' he was asked. 'No,' he answered, 'but he's in there, ain't he? Let's get him out!'"

Dozens of memories of the early University crowd Ruby's recollections today. She remembers seeing Edwin C. DeBarr, early chemistry professor, walking down University Boulevard exercising his left hand, which had been injured in a chem lab mishap. Then there was "Uncle Buck," Dr. James S. Buchanan, the first dean of arts and sciences, who taught history and civics, and was OU president from 1923-25. Ruby knew the Paxtons — Joseph Francis Paxton, who came

In 1905, when the Sullivants moved to town, enrollment at OU stood at 475.

from Harvard and the University of Missouri to teach Latin and Greek and married OU's first woman graduate, Francine Samuels — and their daughters, Josephine and Adelaide.

While the Sullivan family lived in town, they kept student roomers and boarders. Ruby's mother did all the cooking. Several members of Kappa Alpha, OU's first Greek letter fraternity, lived across the street in the Cook family house, but they boarded with the Sullivants. Two Sullivan sons later became KAs.

The eccentric Miss Lucile Dora frequently ate at Mrs. Sullivan's table. She would stay to visit for a while, then take the remnants of her lunch home in what may have been OU's first doggie bag. Ruby, like many other early students, remembers the odd academic regalia Miss Dora wore at commencement in the 1910 era. A graduate of a Canadian college (not the Sorbonne as some alumni still tell the story), Miss Dora taught romance languages and was OU's

dean of women from 1908 to 1910.

Ruby had OU English classes with the department's head, Theodore H. Brewer, and with his eventual successor, L. M. "Fess" Morgan, a North Carolinian who came to teach freshman English in 1912. She laughs when telling about the English department faculty gift of a shirt pocket dictionary to her brother Otis, not noted for his spelling. Otis was told to carry the dictionary at all times, even while taking exams. Ironically, his first assignment on the *Fort Worth Press* was to run a local spelling bee and take the winner to the national competition.

Ruby remembers Errett Newby, early secretary to the president and registrar, whose sister Merle taught music at OU and later married prominent Oklahoma City oilman Frank Buttram, and education professors Ellsworth Collings, an Arbuckle Mountains rancher, and Warren W. Phelan, also the summer school director. Ruby had math under Edgar Meacham, who had degrees from OU, Harvard and the University of Chicago, and was later dean of arts and sciences. She took the first course ever offered at OU in shorthand and typing. The teacher was Ben Fleming, a Norman court reporter by profession.

After the family moved back to the farm, Ruby attended Oklahoma A&M College for a year. She recalls that it was cheaper to go to the Stillwater school than to OU, a room being \$4 a month and a meal ticket \$5. As always she eventually returned to OU.

During her intermittent college years, Ruby became variously an ace secretary, bookkeeper, secretary to a Norman city manager and one of Norman's early social workers. Two of her OU social work teachers were Dorothy Cram and Fern Boan. She was head of the Red Cross in Norman and also worked for the national office. She recalls that James W. Sturgis, an early OU teacher of Latin and Greek, "was the first welfare worker in Cleveland County. In the flu epidemic of 1918, no telling how many families he helped. Everybody said he spent all he made on the unfortunate."

At one time, between college semesters, Ruby worked for oilman W. B. Pine in Okmulgee. He later became a U.S. senator. She had a secretarial job

in Richmond, Virginia, with a firm that manufactured church envelopes. She worked in New York City for the Chase National Bank when she was 20, then she re-entered OU with a Spanish major and a minor in philosophy and a class in Chaucer. Next came a job in Vernon, Texas, as assistant bookkeeper. She worked in Chicago for Union Trust Company as a secretary, in Los Angeles as a bookkeeper, then as office manager for a large firm in DeLand, Florida.

"I had plans," she grins, "to work around the globe."

And she might have achieved it, but her father had a stroke, and she was needed back home on the Norman farm. So she went to work for the state highway department as secretary to the chief engineer. She was in the insurance business in Oklahoma City at the First National Bank, then went to work for the state welfare department. As administrator for Cleveland County, she instigated the food stamp office in Norman; then along came World War II, and she ran the stamp ration board in the county. This required stamps for everything from auto tires to typewriters, even shoes, except for

sneaker-type footwear. After managing the Norman Red Cross office, she worked for the state crippled children's commission. She remembers working with Dr. John Keys in speech and hearing at the OU medical center. Asked to wrap up her business career in a phrase, she says, "Well, call it secretary-typist-bookkeeper-social worker, I guess."


After holding jobs in various cities all over the country and a marriage that ended in divorce, Ruby came back one final time to the homestead east of Norman in 1964. "I went to the farm as a healing place, a so-close-to-God place," she says in her frank, low-key manner. She moved a tenant house onto the acreage and began living among the blackjack oaks where she was born.

Interspersed with the stubborn hardy native blackjacks on Ruby's land, is a stand of pine trees, grown from seedlings she got from the U.S. Forestry Service, 100 at a time, and planted herself. Today the Sullivant land is one of the most forested areas of Cleveland County.

Ruby decided to share the peace she found in the land. "Let's see what we

can do for the elderly," was her first thought. "I found that no retirees wanted to come out there," she says in characteristically direct words. "They wanted to be in town near their doctors. But I found young people loved it there." Ruby is a Methodist, but she found Max Barnett, Baptist Student Union director at OU, most empathetic regarding a young people's camp retreat. "He brought some students out. They loved the rural atmosphere."

Thus the idea of giving her farm to a nondenominational youth foundation burgeoned. Ruby is loath to discuss her own generosity in donating the Sullivant Retreat, where young people could attend workshops, retreats and seminars. It is managed by a Baptist organization that books attendance and maintains the buildings and land.

As Ruby wanted, the rustically lettered sign at the gate contains no attribution to her as the donor but dedicates the land to be used for the glory of God and in memory of her beloved pioneer parents, Jesse and Sallie Sullivant. She says simply, "I felt they should have a memorial for all their hard work." 

A WORD ABOUT BROTHER OTIS

No story about the Sullivants is complete without more mention of Ruby's late brother Otis. We take the liberty here to quote from colleague newsman Ray Parr's eulogy when Otis Sullivant died.

"Otis wrote the political news of the day before radio and television took the edge off of a newsbreak. The public got its first word of many of Oklahoma's startling news developments when the newsboys raced down Broadway crying out the headlines that were Otis Sullivant's exclusive stories.

"He was fortunate to have been in on Oklahoma's most exciting political times. He became a political reporter when the state was only 20 years old . . . he could have been a great newspaper editor. He could have had just about any job he wanted in state government. At least a half dozen governors tried to lure him into their administrations. They probably figured it would be better to have Otis on the

inside looking out than on the outside looking in on all the activities.

"He was such a fixture at the state capitol that it came as a surprise to many politicians to learn he didn't actually arrive out there until 1927. They were under the impression he was there first, and they just built the capitol around him . . . without Otis keeping an eye on activities, I am convinced things would have been a lot worse out at the capitol today . . . if you can imagine such a thing. It wasn't so much what he wrote in the paper as what politicians feared he might write if they got caught by him."

Every living governor of Oklahoma showed up when they gave a tribute dinner to Otis upon his retirement from "Fourth and Broadway." Eight governors were on hand. He had covered 15 national political conventions and 10 campaigns for president, governor and the U.S. Senate. At his own retirement dinner, Otis phrased it

"political reporting is hard work though I'd just as soon sell bibles as take polls." Governor Raymond Gary ribbed him for falling off a horse at the Sullivant farm east of Norman in 1953 when he broke a leg. Gary noted the state senate became the only legislative body that ever adopted a resolution commending a horse. It became a capitol myth that one senator dissented, saying, "The horse erred in not breaking Sullivant's writing arm."

Sooner Magazine editor Paul Gallo way in the 1967 issue called Otis "a peerless political scribe. The state's best political writer uncannily able to gauge the mood of voters at election time. His heroes were, by and large, the People, not the candidates for office."

And a quote from Otis: "I have no illusion about the capacity of men for smallness and wickedness. I'm a realist."

—LBM