

# THE GIRLS THEY LEFT BEHIND

by David W. Levy

With the end of the Second World War in August 1945, the largest army in the history of the United States rushed to demobilize. The revolutionary G.I. Bill of Rights was offering handsome educational benefits to the former members of the armed forces, and thousands of young American men and women, eager to make up for lost time, headed for college.

The University of Oklahoma, like every other institution of higher education in the nation, suddenly faced overwhelming problems of accommodation and adjustment to the flood. In the spring semester of 1946, enrollment on the Norman campus was a record-smashing 5,254 and approximately half were returning veterans, the vast majority of them young men (about 1,000 married, 1,600 single).

The most pressing problems, of course, were the obvious ones: where to house these students and how to find enough teachers, classes and classrooms to provide them a decent education. (How OU tried to meet these challenges is addressed in President Emeritus George Lynn Cross's engag-

ing reminiscence, *The University of Oklahoma and World War II: A Personal Account, 1941-1946* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980]).

Among the other problems caused by the rapid appearance of returned male veterans was the inevitable matter of establishing social relations with the women students already present on the campus. After some women complained of what seemed like indifference, President Cross telephoned the counselor of men to ask him for his thoughts. William J. Mellor, himself a returned veteran and brand new in the counselor's position, sat down at his typewriter and quickly hammered out no fewer than 21 "reasons" for the difficulty. His letter appears on Page 17.

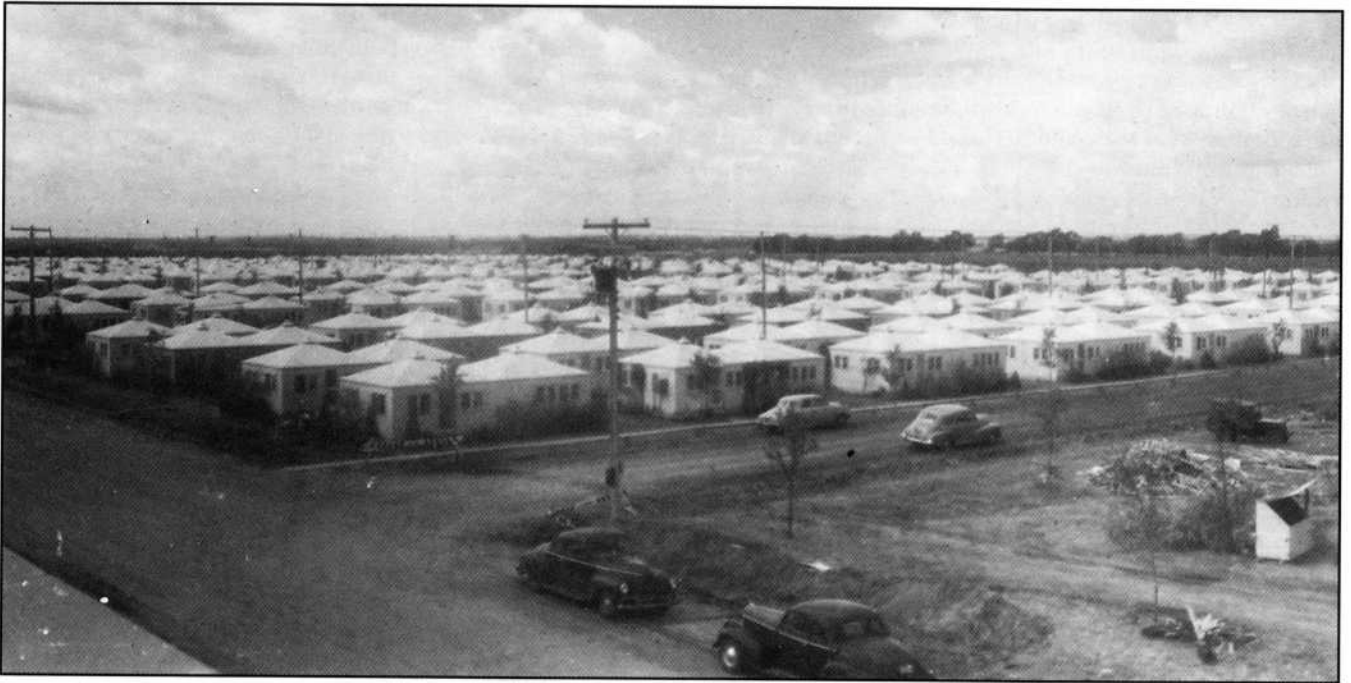
To modern readers, of course, much of Mellor's letter will seem amusing, a quaint relic of a day when relations between young men and women were far different from what they are today. Beneath the sometimes silly speculations of the counselor, however, the letter offers a unique insight into the way these young men regarded women and, no less important, the way they regarded themselves as young males.

We can detect in the lines of the letter the ideal of femininity they carried in their minds and the ways in which the actual women they encountered seemed to fall short of that ideal. We also can detect what they thought to be their own position in any social relationship between men and women—they were like "Great Danes," the women like "tiny Chihuahuas." And even if we are disposed to think, nearly a half century after the fact, that a lot of these attitudes were "just talk," we can still see here what the men had been willing to say to the counselor about these things, how they tried to put into words their uneasiness, what answers they believed were more or less expected of them.

Most historians regard the war years as a time of significant social and economic advancement for women as they patriotically took over men's jobs in defense industries, assumed greater cultural and familial responsibilities and emerged boldly from the confinement of traditional roles. College women in the late 1940s certainly must have felt some of this new and exciting independence. That exhilarating sense

## **Editor's Note on a New Series:**

*In 1990 the Centennial Commission authorized a formal history of the first 100 years of the University of Oklahoma, the commission going to David W. Levy, David Ross Boyd Professor of History. To a lesser scholar, the assignment could have been a daunting one, but to a man of Levy's fascination with the ironic, native wit and, most importantly, dedication to and affection for the University, the task is filled with the delight of discovery. Several of the most interesting documents he has unearthed in the OU Archives and elsewhere will be featured in future issues of Sooner Magazine.*



of fresh possibilities on the part of young women lent a special poignancy to Counselor Mellor's 18th reason, that the veterans found it "impossible to break down their smugness and self-sufficiency" or to his fourth reason, that the men "want to do the 'chasing' themselves" and want "the girl to remain on a pedestal."

Many modern readers also will feel, I suspect, that there is a good deal more honesty in Counselor Mellor's 10th reason than in many of the others he offered. No doubt the returning male veterans *did* suffer a crisis of self-confidence when it came to the rituals of dating and social intercourse. In part this stemmed from their being thrust from a rough world of all-male association into a setting that many of them must have found foreign and slightly mysterious.

However, their lack of self-assurance also might have come, in part, from a factor that Mellor failed to mention, although he hints at it in his final paragraph—the whole business of social class. While there were doubtless many exceptions to the rule, before World War II this university, like almost every other, was the preserve, on the whole, of the well-established and relatively well-to-do members of American society. What made the G.I. Bill such a landmark in the history of

*OU enrollment in the fall of 1946 stood at 10,126—6,000 of them veterans, many of them married. Sooner City sprang up overnight to ease the housing crunch—500 one-and two-bedroom "temporary" prefabs, the last of which would stand until 1966.*



*World War II veterans returning to the campus found that the girls were not quite what they remembered. OU coeds in this 1946 photo gather around the card tables in the Oklahoma Memorial Union to observe card skills perfected in army barracks.*

American higher education was that it opened the campuses of the nation to those who hitherto had felt, for one reason or another, excluded. Should we be entirely surprised that the newcomers felt a little unsure of themselves and a little hesitant when it came to approaching traditional stu-

dents of the opposite sex?

Thus, while there is plenty to chuckle over in this labored letter from the counselor of men to the president of his university, we can also see in his remarks a wonderfully human story of bewilderment, adjustment and adventure in a time of unprecedented change.

January 30, 1946

Dr. George L. Cross  
President, University of Oklahoma  
Faculty Exchange

Dear Dr. Cross:

I deeply appreciate your calling me last night, and trust that the following information will be of some assistance to you. I do know the girls have the feeling that the veterans have not been overly friendly. The following remarks may throw some light on the subject.

(1) Many of the veterans on the campus have been caused to face the sterner realities of life, including death, and look upon the actions of some of the girls on the campus as being infantile. In other words, they have about the same attitude and feeling that a Great Dane might have for a tiny Chihuahua.

(2) The boys are chronologically, if not mentally, older than most of the girls. The girls will need to 'grow up', and I rather think this will not only be difficult, but practically impossible. By this I mean the boys are not interested in the superficial, shallow and frivolous actions of some of the girls. This might better be explained by saying the boys would not be unfriendly toward, for instance, nurses, WAVES, and WACS who had gone through the same experiences which they had been compelled to endure.

(3) The boys are not particularly interested in the 'chitter-chatter', 'bobby-sox', sloppy dress, overall clad type of girl. They want a girl to be feminine, neat, attractive, demure, and somewhat coy and shy.

(4) Most of the boys with whom I have talked feel that the girls 'chase' them. They want to feel they can select whom they choose and do the 'chasing' themselves. In other words, they want the girl to remain on a pedestal and not stoop to many of the things they, themselves, feel are their privilege and birthright.

(5) The boys will need a little more time before their physical, mental, moral, and spiritual wounds are healed. Most of them want to forget what they have been through. The time will soon come when most of them will be able to laugh and enjoy the less important things of life, and when they can enter into pleasant but nonsensical chatter, and at the same time feel they are getting a 'kick' out of it. Many of our boys have for the past two to six years been thinking about the time when they could return to the campus of the University of Oklahoma and resume their classwork. Having been out for a long period of time makes it quite important then that they expend most of their energy and time on their classwork. Some have affiliated with the American Legion and the various fraternities, and, therefore, have only their weekends for dating.

(6) Other veterans have told me they are afraid they might become too much interested in the fairer sex, and, therefore, their work will suffer, so they don't want to call on the same girl or many of the girls too often. They are here for an education which has been long anticipated and feel this is the most important thing in their life at the present time.

(7) Many of the boys are interested in quietly talking with a girl, taking an afternoon stroll, playing cards, etc. They are not interested in the noise, confusion, and action which seem to be rampant at so many of the parties arranged by the girls. Time and time again veterans have told me this.

(8) Quite a number of the veterans attending the University are married. In many instances it has been impossible for them to bring their wives and families here to Norman. It is impossible, in many cases, to tell which veterans are single and which are married. I feel keenly that something should be done to entertain these married men who do not care to date the unmarried girls. Of course we have a few who are proverbial 'wolves', and several instances have been brought to my attention where such uncouth fellows have actually become engaged to the unsuspecting girl.

(9) Many of the veterans on Public Law 346 (the G.I. Bill) do not have sufficient money to spend on the girls. Many have told me that it costs a small fortune to take a girl out for dinner, go to a show, and pay the necessary taxi fare. The only solution for this problem is to engage in less expensive courting.

(10) Many veterans have just recently returned after being away for three or four years and have lost confidence in themselves so far as the girls are concerned. They aren't sure they know all the new angles and the proper procedure in getting dates, and certainly don't want to be laughed at or embarrassed.

(11) Some feel the question should be turned around. Why aren't the girls more friendly to the veterans?

(12) The boys are anxious that the girls do not judge all boys simply because of the 'wolfish' attitude of some of the boys.

(13) There have been instances when the veterans have had a 'date' only to find when they called for the girl that an old or a new friend had arrived, or that they had gone out for dinner and had left nothing but a note stating what had happened. After being treated like this, some of the boys do not have the heart to take another 'standing up'.

(14) Some of the boys feel that provision should be made whereby older girls might be able to meet older boys. The boys feel these two groups will have much more in common.

(15) Several have stated that notices of open houses should be announced a week or more before such an event. In a number of cases, the announcement is made the day before or at least the boys do not get the announcement until the day before through the 'Oklahoma Daily', and thus do not have sufficient time to arrange their studies.

(16) Some have felt there should be a thirty minute period three or four times weekly at which time the boys may call at the girls' houses immediately after dinner, and have a few minutes in which to get acquainted. It seems most of the men feel this time would be profitably given to dancing and short introductions, and, therefore, they have asked that victrolas or nickelodeons be on hand for such occasions.

(17) Several boys have stated they have walked up to girls on the campus or in the Union and asked for a coke date or have invited them in for a cup of coffee. In several instances the girls have rather coldly informed them they had not



been properly introduced. This is probably another reason why certain students on the campus are said to be 'snobbish.'

(18) Some of the fellows feel the girls have formed a 'clique', and it is impossible to break down their smugness and self-sufficiency.

(19) The boys themselves say that they are not hard to meet. They are anxious to meet the girls, and if given a break, will do all that is expected of them.

(20) The statement was made that facilities for meeting the girls are poor. Further, the girls should make it more convenient for the boys to meet them. Many of the better type girls never go to the Union cafeteria. The boys are anxious to meet and know those who stay away. Those who do frequent the Union cafeteria usually have five or six boys waiting on them.

(21) One of the more mature veterans, who wears a Phi Beta Kappa key, said the veterans are interested in three things: (a) Quiet talk, (b) Fundamentals, and (c) Marriage. If the girls are not interested in one or more of these three things, then why go out with them?

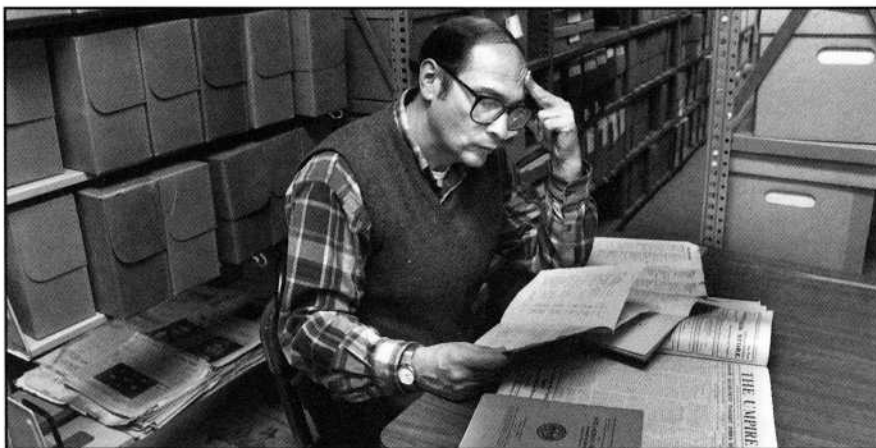
It is my sincere wish, Dr. Cross, you will be able to use some of the above suggestions. The University of Oklahoma does have the charge lodged against it of being 'snobbish'. With the return of the fraternities, it will be rather difficult to change the attitude of many who still look upon the University of Oklahoma as a school for the sons and daughters of the rich, unless all of us do all we can to break down some of the barriers that might exist between the students. I have started the breakdown of the clash that sometimes occurs between fraternities and independent groups by establishing desks in the same office for representatives of the IFC and the IMA. One of these days I should like to talk this matter over with you at greater length, and trust the University will be financially able to pay from \$25 to \$50 per month to student representatives (preferably graduate students) who will assist this office in liaison work with their respective organizations.

Cordially yours,

William J. Mellor  
Counselor of Men

WJM:bm

[Source: President Emeritus Papers of George Lynn Cross, Box 4; Folder 3, University of Oklahoma Archives, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries.]



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** In 26 years on the history faculty, David W. Levy has swept OU's awards for superior teaching, received prestigious research grants and published profusely. His most recent books are *FDR's Fireside Chats* (OU Press 1992, Penguin Paperback 1993) and *The Debate Over Vietnam* (John Hopkins University Press 1991). He has co-edited six published volumes of the letters of U.S. Justice Louis D. Brandeis, with a seventh in process, along with *The University of Oklahoma: A Centennial History*. @