

# And The Band Plays On



Robert Taylor

**Wielding the baton has been just one part of Gene Thrailkill's 25-year job as leader of The Pride.**

by Michael Waters ■ OU band director Gene Thrailkill's résumé speaks for itself. Or, rather, it toots, whistles, booms, clangs and barrump-bump-bumps. Each year, on football Saturdays in Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, at a range of other sporting events and at special occasions of all kinds, Thrailkill's student musicians serve up a rousing repertoire for dozens of real-life Sooner dramas.

Now in his 25th year as director of University bands, Thrailkill still enjoys the task of shepherding the several hundred students who participate in eight marching and concert groups, including the national award-winning Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band. But at his back he sometimes hears footsteps that remind him just how long he has trod his career path wearing crimson and cream.

The avuncular director, now settled comfortably into his 50s, maintains a sense of humor and a panache that projects a forever-young image. "Coach," as he consistently has been known to his students and faculty associates, seems to bear few scars of the all-nighters he pulled while writing marching drills for his bands back in the early days.

And whenever he wants for distractions from thoughts of the perils of aging, the growth of the band program during his tenure provides him with more than enough to keep his mind occupied.

Overall that program now comprises over 600 students—more than triple the number involved in band activities when Thrailkill took up The Pride's baton in 1971.

"In addition to the marching band in the fall, we have the wind ensemble and two jazz ensembles," Thrailkill notes. "And in the spring we have three concert bands, two jazz ensembles, two basketball bands, volleyball, wrestling band and gymnastics band. We have eight bands that go year round." Besides personally directing The Pride, Thrailkill leads the 90-member OU Concert Band, which presents two campus concerts during the spring semester.

This year, Thrailkill says, The Pride boasts 290 members; 55 students compose the wind ensemble, and about 20 participate in each of the jazz ensembles. Many of the music majors, he adds, take part in two or three groups, but surprisingly music majors are in the minority. Approximately 80 percent of The Pride members are non-music majors and represent practically every field of study at the University.

Recruiting students for these aggregations is a large part of Thrailkill's job. Associates of the director cite his outgoing personality and attentive nature as a distinct recruiting advantage.

Roland Barrett, Thrailkill's assistant director the past 13 years, says, "He's one of those genuine 'people'-type persons. He wants everyone to be happy, to

enjoy what they're doing and to feel comfortable—and that's the kind of boss he is.

"It could be five minutes until rehearsal," Barrett explains, "and if a parent or a student recruit walks in, he takes the time to talk to them. If it means not going to lunch, if it means not going home at six, if it means coming up here on the weekends, he does it. And he just has that way of communicating that after [recruits] get here, that attentiveness will continue. It's honest."

Thanks to Barrett, who does much of the musical arranging and drill writing, the demands on Thrailkill's time are not quite as intense as they were in the early 1970s. That was a time when the director poured his energies into the twin challenges of revitalizing the band program and boosting student interest.

He brought his wife, Karen, and their three children to the Sooner state from a different OU—Ohio University at Athens, Ohio—where he had served as director of bands for four years (and where, by some puzzling coincidence, he also was known to everyone as "Coach").

OU's new director had earned a master of music education degree from Ohio University, after completing a bachelor of music from the University of Michigan. He was 32 years old and anxious for the opportunity to build his own program.

"In my first year," Thrailkill says, "around 168 students showed up for band. We took anything that could walk. Sometimes we even put their horns together for them."

As the new director began to make his mark on the program, however, there were a few lessons that had to be learned. One such lesson involved his first attempt to change The Pride's band uniforms.

"The uniform we had when I came in was *so* covered with braid. Plus it had something like 30 buttons—with mom not there to sew 'em back on when they came off," Thrailkill recalls.

"And the kids used to wear a tall, 12-to-14-inch shako" (the tall, cylindrical hat traditionally favored by marching bands). "The kids loved the shako because you could carry anything you wanted inside it.

"I wanted to change to a bright red and white coat, but I wanted dark pants—not black, but navy blue, because navy has some life to it. I thought it would be *gorgeous*. So I designed this uniform, took it to a committee and was informed immediately: *the Big Red Band does not wear blue*.

"So that was one of the first things I learned. Then I went back to the drawing board, and we got new uniforms."

The setting for Thrailkill's early years—in fact, the band program's headquarters until its move to Catlett Music Center in 1987—consisted of the dank and dreary underbelly of Oklahoma Memorial Stadium.

"We were underneath the stadium," Thrailkill says. "There were two columns right in the middle of the band room, and we couldn't put the whole band in the band room. It had an eight-and-a-half-foot ceiling. You had five or six window air conditioners cranking out, as noisy as they were, while you were trying to rehearse. But it was home."



George Ryan

*From his ladder-top perch high above the assembled Pride of Oklahoma, band director Gene Thrailkill, shown here in the late '70s, has observed nearly a quarter century of Sooner football Saturdays.*

**H**e adds, "The first three or four years here all we had was a partition in my office. So if I wanted to have a private conversation with a student who had a problem, I'd tell my secretary to keep everybody in the outer office talking, so that nobody could hear what was going on at my desk."

Barrett remembers, "The old steam radiators would sit dormant all winter—you'd have to wear a coat to work. And then, sure enough, about April they'd fire up and flood the whole place. Then they'd crank on, and it'd be like 105 degrees back there. That was just a rite of spring."

## **B**efore I left, I stood up in front of the band and said,

Inside the “hothouse” atmosphere, new ideas germinated and grew. Thrailkill had promised to make the band program “exciting” and “different” on his arrival, and he was true to his word.

Sooner fans who were used to precision drill and traditional marches from The Pride saw unusual formations and numbers such as a peace-sign formation at a Nebraska football game. A band salute to “Infamous Women” included a performance of “Can’t Take My Eyes off of You”—in honor of Lady Godiva.

Following the general trend around the nation, the geometric-block half time formations of old became anything from French curves to asymmetrical lineups. And the music? It evolved into a wide variety of contemporary radio hits, rock oldies such as “Hound Dog” and “Wipe Out,” selections from the Beatles catalogue, classical works by composers such as Shostakovich, plus tunes from great Broadway musicals such as “West Side Story” and hit films such as “Batman.”

One popular innovation in particular has been The Pride’s memorable Halloween half time shows—a performance by band members dressed in a wild array of bizarre and imaginative costumes. Four such extravaganzas have been staged since the idea was first tried in 1983, but the first one was met with some skepticism from associates and band members.

“The first time we did a Halloween show,” Thrailkill says, “I told the kids everybody would be responsible for their own costumes, and we wouldn’t even see them till Saturday when we were out on the field.”

“We started working on the show Monday, and by Wednesday I’m getting this feedback from the kids, ‘The old man’s serious—we’re actually gonna do this!’ They thought they were going to absolutely make fools of themselves.”

Barrett recalls, “Coach just pops out with that kind of creativity. And we just looked at him, like ‘okay, sounds kinda . . . lame. But we’ll do it.’”

But when the band took the field that afternoon, Barrett says, “the place went crazy.” Fans on the way to the concession stands for some half time refreshment stopped in their tracks and crowded the aisles in near-pandemonium as they saw a marching band as they had never seen one before.

“A trombone player was made up as a giant satellite dish. One kid was a pay telephone,” Barrett says. “Four kids built a canoe around themselves and dressed up as the Lewis and

Clarke expedition. There were kids who had gotten foam rubber and had made themselves into giant soda cans. Another one came as a Christmas tree and pulled a generator in a little red wagon behind him to power the tree lights.”

“And now,” Thrailkill says, “everyone says to us, ‘Why don’t you do another Halloween show?’”

**F**ans not only remember The Pride for colorful costumes, but for the way the band can rouse the Sooners on the gridiron and in the stands. Probably the best-remembered example came in the famous OU-OSU game of October 15, 1983, when, according to some, the band actually turned the team’s fortunes around on the field.

The game, played in Stillwater, went badly for the mistake-prone Sooners, and they trailed early in the fourth quarter 20-3. Things began to go badly for Thrailkill, too. As he watched from the sidelines, a policeman came up and told him to get the band staff off the field because they did not have sideline passes.

“Well, I stood there and argued with him. I said, ‘You didn’t say we had to have passes, you didn’t na-na-na on-and-on.’ And I finally said, ‘If you want us out, you’re gonna have to bodily remove us.’”

“So they removed eight of us—bodily—and we ended up standing outside the stadium. We could have gone back in the stands, but I was just too stubborn.”

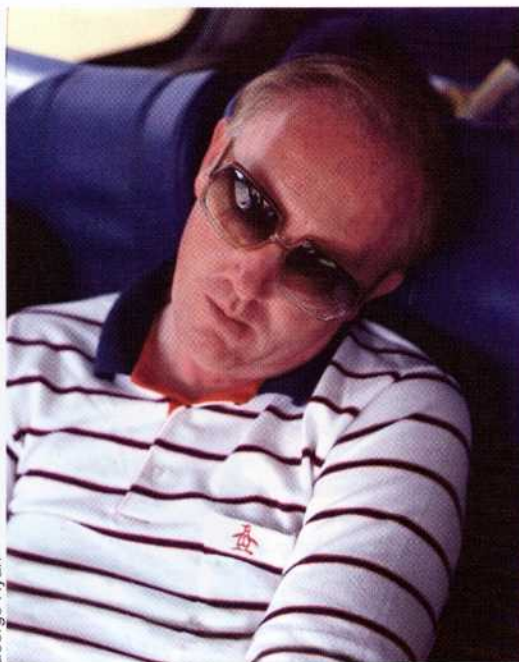
“But before I left, I stood up in front of the band and said, ‘I want you to start playing—and *don’t stop ’til the team’s ahead.*’”

The band played their hearts out, and, just like in an old-time movie, the team played their hearts out as well. OU narrowed the gap to 20-18 with 1:17 left to go—and recovered a fumble on a one-in-a-million fluke kick to set

up a heart-stopping last-minute field goal. Final score: Sooners 21, OSU 20.

Did The Pride’s effort make the difference between winning and losing? One person *very* close to the action seemed to think so.

“The next Monday Barry Switzer walked into band rehearsal and gave us the game ball,” Thrailkill remembers proudly. “So that was a real big day for the kids.” The ball, cream with crimson lettering that reads, “The Day The Pride Won,” holds a place of honor today in the director’s office.



George Ryan

*In 25 years of long bus trips to away games, band director Gene Thrailkill has learned to catch his rest where he can.*

**“I want you to start playing—and don’t stop ’til the team’s ahead.”**



Robert Taylor



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*A successful redesign of The Pride’s uniforms accomplished Thrailkill’s early desire to eliminate the excessive braid and buttons—and the tall shakos—but as a rookie director, he first had to learn that “the Big Red Band does not wear blue.”*

*The Pride of Oklahoma, above, salutes “Coach” Gene Thrailkill during halftime of the OU-Kansas game on October 21, 1995.*

*Continued*

## This world's in good shape with kids like we have in The Pride of Oklahoma.

Thraikill and his “kids” have collected quite a slew of honors over the years. The director beams when he mentions The Pride’s 1987 receipt of the coveted Sudler Trophy, given to the nation’s outstanding college and university marching band.

Thraikill himself was inducted into the Oklahoma Bandmasters Hall of Fame in 1991 and received the Associates Distinguished Lectureship from the OU Board of Regents. OU’s student government presented him with the Walter Neustadt Award as OU’s outstanding administrator.

His alma mater—the other OU—bestowed on him its 1990 Outstanding Alumni Award. He also is renowned for establishing the Oklahoma All-Star Marching Band, now in its 15th year, which brings together each summer 300 high school students from approximately 150 schools in the state.

The director seems to take the most pride in honors given to him by students—starting three decades ago when students in the New Lebanon, Ohio, public schools dedicated the yearbook to their first-year instrumental music teacher. And he never passes up a chance to brag on the students who look to him today.

“These kids do care about society. Kids in this band will take dinner to a family at Thanksgiving, they’ll adopt a family at Christmas. Every year they go to the J. D. McCarty Center [for Children with Developmental Disabilities] and bring over a busload of children in their wheelchairs, so they can listen to the band, pound on the drums and blow the tubas.

“This world’s in good shape with kids like we have in The Pride of Oklahoma.”

Thraikill’s bands will have plenty of opportunities in the years to come to prove their dedication on the field and in the bandstand. The director reports that, under President Boren, The Pride played at 14 special events this past September alone—compared to only four such events during the entire fall semester last year. In addition, this year The Pride joined in the new ritual home-game walks from Sooner House to the stadium with head football coach Howard Schnellenberger and the team.

Thraikill has had to divide The Pride into *four* bands to satisfy the demand for support appearances. And there is more to come. The Pride traditionally has gone to few out-of-town games besides Texas and OSU. However, Thraikill predicts, “with the Big 12 Conference coming, and so many alumni south of the Red River, we will possibly be making trips to Texas A&M, Texas Tech and Baylor.”

Plus, the band has high hopes in future years for continuing The Pride’s tradition of representing the University and the state before a national audience at events such as the Orange Bowl and the Fiesta Bowl.

There will be plenty to keep the ever-youthful director busy. For the members of his bands and the growing audiences of students and alumni, Thraikill has become as much an irreplaceable part of the University as the turrets on the halls that surround the North Oval.

Only the fourth full-time band director in OU’s history, Thraikill’s goals have remained the same for a quarter of a century now. “We’ve tried to reach that level where you keep the audience happy, you keep the students happy, and you keep your own sanity.”

So far, his merry and well-organized succession of toots, whistles, clangs and booms have succeeded on all three counts. Thraikill’s musical résumé has grown long, but there does not seem to be a Sooner who ever wants to reach the last page.



George Ryan



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*TOP: On their way to the 1980 Orange Bowl game, Thraikill and The Pride stopped at Disney World to serenade visitors to the Magic Kingdom.*

*BOTTOM: In past years, The Pride’s parade to the stadium ended with a brief but spirited concert for early arriving fans.*