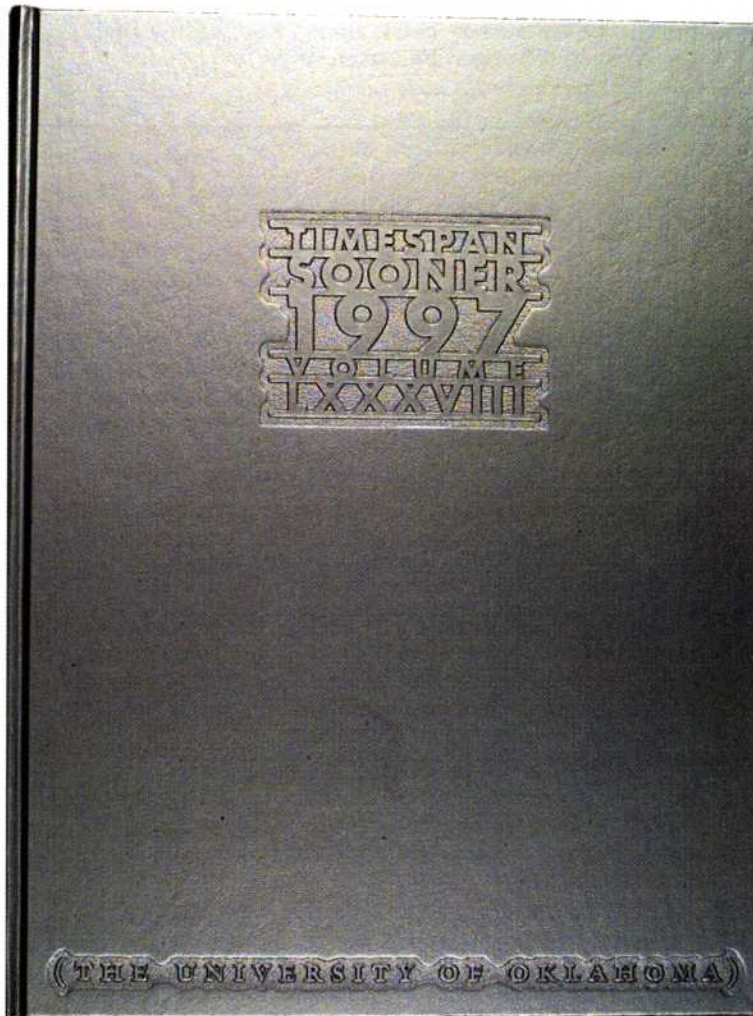


*Reports of the yearbook's death  
have been greatly exaggerated.*



## The Unsinkable **Sooner**

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

**You can't keep a good book down.**

Testament to that maxim is OU's *Sooner* yearbook, which first appeared in 1905 as *The Mistletoe* and was rechristened *Sooner* in 1910. Under that name, this picture- and story-filled archive of the University's people and events appeared annually—as a yearbook ought—for the next 81 years, preserving institutional history between embossed covers.

In April 1991, following several months of surveys and focus groups, meetings and task forces, straw polls and campuswide votes, the University closed the book on its book. Although most students polled insisted that the yearbook was an important element in university life, most did not buy it. The 1991 *Sooner* lost \$35,000, selling only 1,200 copies on a campus of nearly 20,000. The University Publications Board put the book to bed for what many thought was the last time.



Like Sleeping Beauty in her castle, however, the spirit of the yearbook did not die; it just went into deep sleep. That spirit awoke in 1997, when, after a five-year hiatus, the annual chronicle reappeared. The 1997 *Sooner*, a classic yearbook with modern written all over it, already is a state and national award-winner. The book is back, better than ever.

The prince in this classic story of reawakening is really a president: David L. Boren. In fall 1994, after settling into his new position and taking stock, Boren discovered that the *Sooner* was no more.

"My first reaction was disbelief and shock," he remembers. "My second reaction was that losing the yearbook was a terrible loss for students who in later years would not be able to experience the joy of bringing back vivid memories of very special years while looking through the yearbooks of their time at the University."

Unwilling to accept that loss, Boren took action. A story in the Monday, October 23, 1995, issue of *The Oklahoma Daily*, announced that the Publications Board had voted unanimously to revive the *Sooner*. The kiss of life for the yearbook came in the form of an infusion of funds. President Boren committed \$50,000 in one-time start up fees, and the Student Activity Fee Reserve put up an additional \$23,000 to ensure the success of the book. Lack of funding had been a large part of the problem in 1991; funding was a large part of the solution in 1997.

"To give you a perspective on how hungry we were for money during the final years of the book, in 1981 when I was editor, a national fundraising group came through town to help organizations raise money," says Twila Smith, now the manager of advertising and marketing for OU Student Publications and the staff adviser for the *Sooner* from 1983 to 1991.

"It was a marathon run, and we did what we called a 'Run for Color' to get enough money to have some color photography for the book. I ran, and we

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got enough money for color, but in a way it was pathetic: having this bake-sale mentality to raise money for a university publication."

Director of Student Publications Susan Sasso remembers the soul searching that went into the decision to discontinue the *Sooner*. Ultimately, she says, that decision was one of dollars and common sense. Student Publications, an auxiliary department that must earn the money it spends, oversees both the *Sooner* and *The Oklahoma Daily*. The department never lost money, but the revenue-generating newspaper had to take up the slack for the revenue-draining yearbook.

"When we realized we had lost about \$35,000, we started to discuss the fact that it wasn't fair to expect *The Oklahoma Daily* to cover those losses," she says. "As a self-supporting department, we always strive to show a profit, but we do that to reinvest in technology to make the students' educational experience the best possible. Taking \$30,000 every year or so and channeling it to the yearbook didn't seem in line with our mission.

"It's very difficult to sell a product to college students. Although our yearbook's selling price is on the low end of average at \$35, the *Sooner* competes against every movie, garment, textbook and entertainment experience a student might purchase."

The 1997 *Sooner* had a printing of 2,000. The printer, Taylor Publishing Company, felt the *Sooner* was an excellent example of quality yearbooks and purchased 200 books to use for its own marketing. Sales for 1997 were approximately 1,700 for a campus population of more than 20,000.

"We have come to realize that success doesn't mean selling to 50 percent of the student body," Sasso says. "When I was in high school, you'd have gone without lunch for six weeks to buy your yearbook. That's not the case today in high schools and certainly not in universities. Now, we look at the number of students actively involved in campus life. It's a relatively small number. Those who are involved are, however, very involved. They care. They're probably the same people who will be our loyal alums and, perhaps, donors. Across the nation, yearbooks are evolving to meet this new reality or they are disappearing."

Oklahoma State, the University of Nebraska, Arizona State University and the University of Arizona—all have done away with yearbooks. Kansas State University, the University of Southern California, Indiana University—all have strong yearbook programs. While money is the most obvious reason for failure, cash is not the only culprit. Dramatic changes in the composition of campus communities and social values also have played a large part.

"In fall 1990, the last year of our publication, the University held its homecoming rally with a bonfire," Smith recalls. "Fewer than 20 people attended, and many of those were yearbook staff members there to cover the event. The staff and I felt that if students weren't interested in attend-

ing these types of events, they probably wouldn't be interested in coverage of them. Student organization membership was dwindling, and major events were less well attended. Times were changing."

**T**he trend toward dissolution of the common bonds that hold the University community together has slowed and, some believe, even reversed itself since 1994 when Boren first occupied the president's chair.

"We had a very different administration in 1991," Sasso says. "The

past behind. This return to tradition is a really important part of why we've been successful."

Michelle Fielden Sutherlin, a May 1997 graduate, was witness to and participant in the process of reviving the *Sooner* when she served as the 1997 editor. Now a staff writer for *The Norman Oklahoman*, Sutherlin already had been editor of *The Oklahoma Daily* when she volunteered for yearbook duty. With three years experience as a high school yearbook editor, Sutherlin knew yearbooks.

"I believed in what the yearbook

Smith oversaw a practicum to help students begin the monumental process of creating from scratch what became a 448-page book.

"The most difficult thing was that we had no precedents," Sutherlin says. "Everything was new. We looked at the best books in the nation and modeled ourselves after some elements in some of them, and then we just did things we really liked and thought were good. I'm proud that the 1997 *Sooner* isn't a copy of any other book, but that made our task more difficult."

Smith was the logical choice to resume her old job as yearbook adviser, but replacing her as advertising and marketing manager proved a problem. "We decided I should stay in advertising and look for another yearbook adviser," she recalls. "Then you came along."

This is my favorite part of this story because the "you" Smith refers to is actually "I," Kathryn Jenson White, writer of this story and adviser of *Sooner* yearbook since August 1996. Before accepting the position, I was associate professor of mass communications at Oklahoma City University and adviser to OCU's student newspaper. In that capacity, I had worked with Jack Willis, adviser of *The Oklahoma Daily*, who recommended me for the OU job.

**W**hen I arrived in Student Publications, I found myself surrounded by students with a purpose. Almost all were willing to work many more hours than they were being paid for to produce a book that would show the world—or at least the University—just how good a yearbook could be.

Sutherlin found stalwart staffers in a few upperclassmen, like Lisa Potts, J. J. Dukes and Bill Brookshire, who has moved up to edit the 1998 *Sooner*, but her most fertile field for recruits was among freshmen with enthusiasm for yearbooks left over from high school. Heather Brumley, Brenda Hayman and Brandi Henderson stayed with the book through the de-



Robert Taylor

Michelle Fielden Sutherlin, right, editor of the first revived *Sooner* in 1997, revisits the yearbook office with the 1998 editor, Bill Brookshire, left, yearbook adviser Kathryn Jenson White and Lisa Potts, who will edit the 1999 publication.

budgetary mentality was survival of the fittest. No one saw the value of the yearbook in terms of alumni development, enriching the student experience or preserving the history of the University community. Community was not a value word then as it is now, and I don't think we realized how much the intangibles contributed.

"Today, the University is moving forward more rapidly than we ever have, but we aren't willing to leave the

had to offer and its purpose, and I knew how much the University needed it," she says.

Starting in spring 1996, Sutherlin worked with Sasso and Smith to construct a system in which to create a yearbook. Marketing Professor Jim Kenderdine, who was chair of the Publications Board at the time, offered a class to help potential staff members generate ideas for successful reintroduction and marketing of the book.



Robert Taylor

The staffers on the "new" *Sooner* yearbook—Lori Sims and Aesha Rasheed, left, and Nick Key, far right—have the full support of professionals from OU Student Publications, Twila Smith, the advertising and marketing manager, and Director Susan Sasso.

manding first year; others realized the difficulty of their undertaking and faded away. Writers from *The Oklahoma Daily* worked as free-lancers to provide stories, as did students in the yearbook practicums I taught fall and spring semesters.

To make the 1997 *Sooner* represent more accurately the reality of 1997 life on campus, the staff took several different routes. First, the book was presented chronologically rather than in the outdated, conventional sections like "Student Life" or "Academics," which the editors saw as arbitrary and artificial.

Second, staff members decided to make the theme, another yearbook convention, slightly more subtle than usual. At the center of their theme, "Time," was a section called "Timelapse," which summarized the major events and spotlighted the significant people in University history during the five years the *Sooner* was

not in publication.

Third, and most importantly, the staff changed the way it thought about who and what deserved space in the book.

"The yearbook's most obvious value is as a historical document," Sasso says. "It documents a defined period of time in the University from the students' perspective. We weren't doing a very good job of representing the students' point of view.

"We were selling space for a group to be represented. That was—and continues to be in many places—the model. Rather than representing what the campus looked like and was, yearbooks represented what the groups with money to buy space for coverage looked like and were. The Greeks were most able to participate, and the athletic department was fairly well represented. From a journalistic standpoint, however, coverage wasn't really fair or balanced."

Sutherlin and her staff changed

their approach. Boren's funds gave them some breathing room, enabling the yearbook staff to replace that commercial model with the journalistic one. The result—as evidenced in *Sooner* 1997—is a more accurate picture of what many now call the "University."

Even with continued funding, the staff still must focus much time and effort on selling the book. Editors, writers and photographers working for *The Oklahoma Daily* edit, write and photograph. *Sooner* staff members perform those same tasks, but they also market, market, market their product. In the last two years they have enhanced sales by creating yearbook/T-shirt or sweatshirt packages, corporate and departmental sales, holiday gift packages marketed to seniors and their parents, and a *New Sooner Salute*/yearbook package marketed to freshmen and their parents.

*New Sooner Salute* is a softcover publication containing pictures of freshmen only, providing insights into campus life and introducing the new students to their peers through the format of a mini-yearbook. 1998 *Sooner* Business Manager Lisa Potts edited the first *New Sooner Salute*.

With the efforts of talented staff members and the continued support of administration and students, the reawakened *Sooner* will function as the annual record of life in the University community for many years to come.

"As our society becomes less rooted with fewer anchors, I find that our students hunger for the traditions that give them a sense of community and belonging," Boren says. "The desire to bring back the yearbook reflects the desire to re-establish a sense of community and respect for tradition in our society."

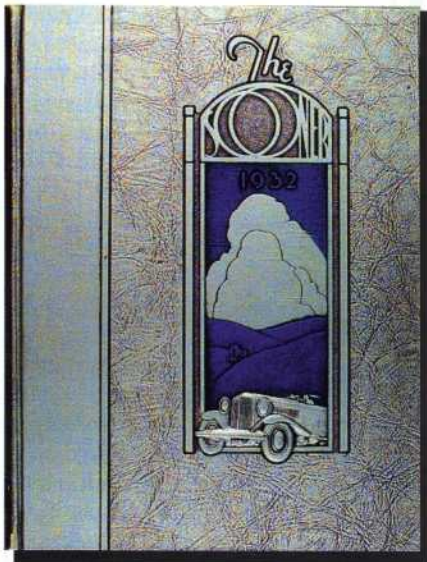
The 1998 *Sooner* will have 512 pages—some in full color—and picture even more individuals, groups and events than in 1997. The book is back, and it has OU covered. *Sooner* red? In this case, maybe that should be spelled *Sooner* read.

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# EVOLUTION OF A YEARBOOK

Since 1905, when the junior class published the first *Mistletoe*, the yearbook of the University of Oklahoma has evolved along with the community whose life and lives it records.

The words of the "Greeting" found at the beginning of that first attempt



Yearbooks of the '20s and '30s were truly works of art with their intricately engraved borders and artwork and highly detailed embossed covers.

at an annual publication are a bit more ornate than those uttered by the staffs of 1997 and 1998, but their substance is remarkably similar: "This volume claims the distinction of coming to you as the college annual of The University of Oklahoma," the 1905 text reads. "Thus another simple line is added to the short but splendid history of our Alma Mater. . . . Its aim is to picture life in the University as it is, to present its past in a general way and, if possible, to suggest what may be expected from it in the future. . . . To the stranger and to the future college youths and maidens it would desire to show the real spirit of college life to be

found within the walls of this, the youngest state or territorial University in the Union."

That year's "Faculty Roll" listed 24 names and its "Senior Roll," eight. The lead story detailed the fire that destroyed Science Hall in 1903. Other stories presented the founding of the University and profiled its most interesting students and faculty. The simple but appealing illustrations in the book were made by the Electric City Engraving Company of Buffalo, N.Y. Ads for businesses ranging from Kingkade Book and News Co. and McCall's clothing store to Fred Reed Medicines and Chemicals often locate the firms in "Norman, O.T."

The first *Sooner*, bound in buttery soft red suede, appeared in 1910. Charles Haskell was governor, and names that would one day become buildings abounded on administration and faculty pages: President A. Grant Evans, Edwin DeBarr, James Shannon Buchanan, Albert Heald Van Vleet, Charles Newton Gould, Roy Gittinger, Frederick Holmberg, James Huston Felgar. All were destined for brick and mortar, except for Van Vleet, of course, who became an oval.

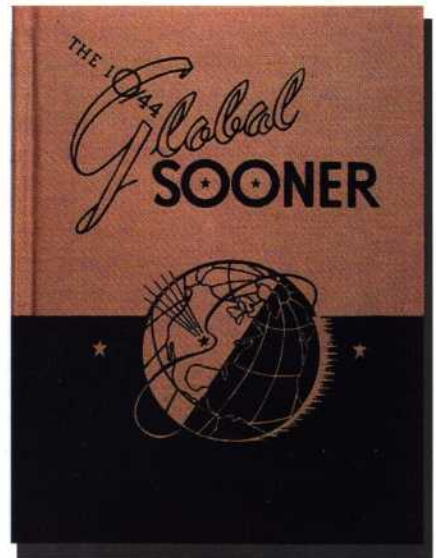
At the edge of the Roaring '20s, the 1919 yearbook was titled *The Victory Sooner*. It began with a touching sentiment: "To the Sooners whose faces are missing among our returned heroes, and whose devotion and supreme sacrifice have graven their names and that of their Alma Mater high among those who have served mankind, we dedicate this book."

A black-bordered list of 24 faculty and students is printed on the page facing the dedication. Some died while serving in Europe as a result of the 1918 influenza; more lost their lives on the battlefields of WWI. Next to a picture of fresh-faced Sergeant Fred L. Allen, '08, appears the following: "Sergeant Allen was badly gassed, October 2nd and on October 15, 1918, died from the effects of the poison."

During the '20s and '30s, the *Sooner* became a stunningly beautiful book, as a result of the work of artisans found at printing and engraving companies. These talented individuals provided lovely, intricately engraved borders and artwork. Clothbound, with highly detailed embossing and hand-rubbed stains on their covers, these books were truly works of art. As the '40s and '50s passed, that artisanship lessened. The books, while still attractive, began to resemble the conventional yearbooks of today.

As a reflector of changing times, the *Sooner* took on many different looks. In the turbulent late '60s and cool and groovy '70s, the University's memories were archived in everything from burlap covers to boxed sets of softcover, magazine-like publications.

The 1971 book holds a special place in history, a place won by creating one



In the '40s and '50s, the artisanship of earlier yearbooks lessened, and the publications, while still attractive, began to resemble the conventional publications of today.

of the biggest flapdoodles over a student publication before or since. A *Tulsa Tribune* article dated June 23, 1971, begins with this lead: "State Sen. Phil Smalley of Norman told O.U. journalism students last week that dirty words and bad taste in the first 33 pages of the 1971 *Sooner* yearbook may have cost higher education in Oklahoma \$1 million."

Smalley was referring to a motion to reallocate \$1 million in highway funds to higher education. While the motion was being debated, a copy of the infamous



The 1971 *Sooner* yearbook's attempt to reflect the turbulent atmosphere on campus was a hit with students and a big miss with the state legislature, whose members responded with a resounding "No!" to a higher education appropriation.



The OU yearbook continued to win awards from national associations, even after the much-maligned 1971 book nearly sank the *Sooner*.

*Sooner* was passed around the floor of the legislature. Smalley said the legislature's "no" vote was influenced by the yearbook. The Office of School Relations, which had purchased 200 of the books, decided not to send them unsolicited to state high schools as in the past and to remove the first 33 pages from those that were requested. An *Oklahoma Daily* article of July 7 states that only two books had been requested by that

**T**he 1971 book holds a special place in history, a place won by creating one of the biggest flapdoodles over a student publication before or since.

date. Student Publications bought back 20 of the books to meet student demand, and the remaining 178 gathered dust in the School Relations office.

**M**edia outlets around not just the state, but the world, buzzed with discussions of "objectionable" language and two photographs in "Renaissance," the theme name of the yearbook. One photo was a murky shot of a nude woman, and the second pictured a man supposedly smoking marijuana. A file on reaction to "Renaissance" contains a note reading: "The *Sooner* finally made international news. This attached clipping was sent from Swinefurt, Germany, and was published in *Stars and Stripes*, the official U.S. Army publication sent to Army personnel around the

world." The clipping details the controversy.

Even so, the much-maligned 1971 *Sooner* won All-American honors. For the remaining years of its publication, the yearbook continued to win awards: Gold Crowns from the Columbia Student Press Association and Pacemakers and All American honors from the Associated Collegiate Press. The office walls of Student Publications contain more than 20 framed certificates lauding the accomplishments of the *Sooner*.

In 1991, the *Sooner* went out a winner, and it has come back the same way. The 1997 book won the coveted Gold Crown and 18 individual Gold Circle Awards for writing and design. The staff also has been notified that the *Sooner* will be a Pacemaker finalist at the fall ACP/CMA National College Media Convention. —KJW