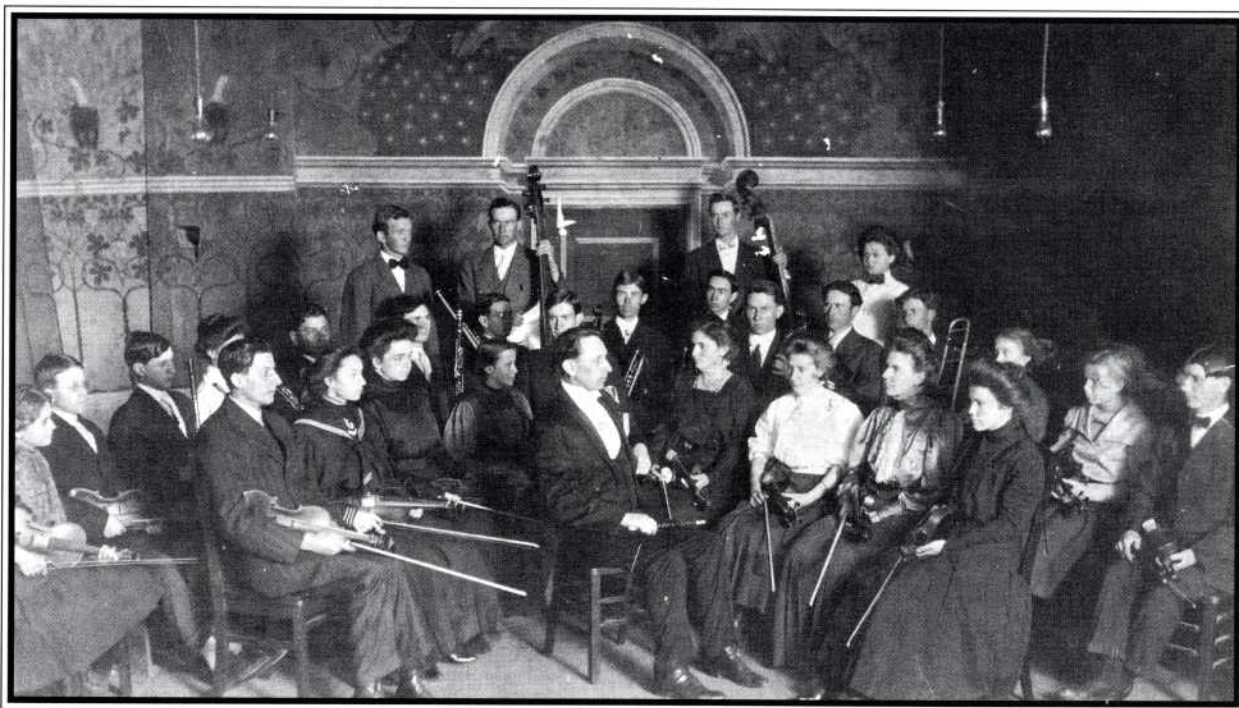


“I Had a Certain Pioneer Spirit
So I Stayed.”

Fredrik Holmberg Comes to Oklahoma

BY DAVID W. LEVY

Photos courtesy OU Western History Collections



Within six weeks of his arrival in 1903, Fredrik Holmberg had organized the University of Oklahoma's first orchestra. The ensemble, here grouped around Holmberg, is probably his second orchestra, circa 1904.

In 1934, *Sooner Magazine* resolved to run a feature story about long-time dean of the College of Fine Arts, Fredrik Holmberg. To lend the reporter a hand, Dean Holmberg went to his office and sat down at the typewriter. His mind flashed back to that time, three decades before, when he first considered tying his own future to that of the University of Oklahoma. He typed four single-spaced pages of those old memories, recalling his arrival in Norman and the conditions he found there in 1903. That document is printed on the following pages.

Gustaf Fredrik Holmberg was born on August 17, 1872, in West Gotland, Sweden. His parents were prosperous until his father's business went under, and, at the age of 15, Fredrik was cast adrift. He sought work in Scandinavia as a mechanic, but four years later, not yet 20, he arrived in the United States. He found his way to the prosperous Swedish-American community of Lindsborg, Kansas, where he worked in the wheat fields to pay his tuition at Lindsborg's Bethany College.

Even before his graduation in 1899, Holmberg was teaching the violin and harmony at the college. He stayed on the faculty at Bethany until the close of the 1902-1903 academic year. (He was a colleague of the school's respected football coach, Bennie Owen, who was destined to follow Holmberg from Lindsborg to Norman two years later.)

It was in Lindsborg that Holmberg developed his mature ideas about the importance of music to a community. Touched profoundly and permanently by the abundant communal musical activity in that small Kansas town, Holmberg came to believe that music, almost as much as religion, could provide the cultural cement that bound a citizenry together. He readily attributed "the extremely high moral standards" of Lindsborg to the town's devotion to communal music.

"Music is truth," he told an Oklahoma City women's club many years later. "What could be better for a community?" He went so far as to suggest that every city and town should hire a music supervisor. "The outlay for his services would be more than repaid in the morals and general pride of the citizens." Philosophy and science, he said in another speech, can create a community of ideas, and morality can create a community of will. But "art, like religion, creates a communion of sentiments in human hearts; and therefore has a marvelous power of unifying and socialising [sic], for nothing is so intrinsically our own as the voice of our feelings." Holmberg was careful to distinguish, however, between wholesome classical or folk music and the popular ragtime, which he contemptuously dismissed as "disease music."

At one point in his reminiscence, Holmberg stretched the truth a bit. In order to put the best face on his coming to Norman, he tried to create the impression that, although happy at Bethany and prepared to stay, he decided to move because of the lure of greater opportunity. In fact, he had lost his job in Lindsborg. As the president of Bethany College put it in a letter to President David Ross Boyd: "Frederick [sic] Holmberg is just the man for you. He has four years' experience as a teacher and three of them have been spent here. . . . When our regular man returned from Europe we could not use both and so we had to let Prof. Holmberg go. He is good on the Violin, as an orchestra conductor, Harmony, Music History, Piano tuning, etc. Why not use him as your musical director?"

Fortunately for the University of Oklahoma, Boyd acted on the suggestion. Holmberg came, was induced to stay and shaped the young University's instruction in music. Within a few years he was the head of the music department, and in 1910 he was appointed the first dean of the School (later

College) of Fine Arts. He served in that position with distinction for 27 years.

This little autobiographical account is the source for the wonderfully amusing story about Holmberg's mistaking the mental hospital on the east side of town for the University of Oklahoma. But Holmberg's memories, as they are recorded here, are even more notable for the description he gives of the fluid possibilities of frontier Oklahoma, a place where a determined man with energy and ideas and a pioneering spirit could make small miracles happen—in building cities and towns, in establishing farms and businesses and universities and in uniting communities and a state through music.

If the tale of Fredrik Holmberg's coming is filled with good humor, frontier optimism and inspiration, the tale of his departure is one of touching pathos and high nobility of spirit. That part of this educator's story we will consider in the next issue of *Sooner Magazine*.



Sometime late in the year of 1902 or early in the year 1903 when I was teaching at Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kansas, I happened to look over the football schedule of that college for the following year and found that the team would play the University of Oklahoma in the fall of 1903.

I held a position which was not bad at all but there were so many good men ahead of me that there was practically no hope for advancement. I was looking for a new field and up to the time I looked at the football schedule I did not know there was such a thing as a state University of Oklahoma. Later I found out that the University had been in existence for ten years but, because there had been very little done of a musical nature at the University of Oklahoma up to that date, the school had not come to my attention. I speak of this because changes seem to come about in this life sometimes accidentally.

I wrote to the President of the University of Oklahoma, no one seemed to know his name, and told him who I was, what I had been doing and what kind of work I was then doing. I was promptly engaged as instructor in violin and harmony at the munificent salary of \$600 per year, however, I managed to make \$1,000 the first year. I had not been accustomed to making much money in those times and since things were cheaper in those days I knew I could eat three times a day and secure a place to sleep with that money.

On September 1 I was on my way to Norman. I struck up acquaintance with a drummer, that is what they were called in those days, later they were traveling salesmen and now, I understand, they are business representatives. I told him [where] I was going and he promptly asked me if I intended to locate on the east or west side of Norman. I did not know the joke then, of course, but thereby hangs a little tale. Before the train

Having almost arrived at the buildings I asked a man if this was the University of Oklahoma. He immediately answered, "Hell, No! This is the bug house."

stopped at the depot, as those who have come to Norman over the railroad know, it crossed Main Street and there was a clear view of the asylum. I did not ask any questions as to what those buildings were at the time but I took for granted that they were the university buildings. I got off the train and asked the busman to take me to the best hotel and he took me to what was then called the Grand Central Hotel. I was assigned to a room. When I got in the room I did not think it was so very grand, however, there was a wash bowl and a clean towel and so I cleaned up a little and went to the dining room for lunch. It was a hot September day and there was a genuine dust storm on. After lunch I took my violin

under my arm and started east on Main Street to present myself to the President of Oklahoma University.

I did not think that the people looked much like a school crowd. I saw no one who had the ear marks of a college professor nor did I notice any one who looked like a student. Having almost arrived at the buildings I asked a man if this was the University of Oklahoma. He immediately answered, "Hell, No! This is the bug house." He pointed southwest and said that the University was about a mile and a half off and that when the dust cleared I might see it.

I walked in the heat and dust from the hospital grounds to what was called the University. My spirits were rather dampened for the job at the University of Oklahoma, especially so when I approached the place and found that there was only one building in the whole university and that only one wing had been finished in that. I resolved to leave my trunk unpacked and to tell the president that I thought I had made a mistake, however, when I arrived at the president's office, Dr. Boyd, who was then the president of the University of Oklahoma and had a way of making things seem better, of giving one an optimistic outlook, changed my mind. I compared the opportunity for advancement with other universities and too, I had a certain pioneer spirit so I stayed. *continued*



Fredrik Holmberg, center, organized his first University orchestra in 1903 with only six violinists and several music theory students. By 1906, when this photograph was taken, his orchestra was looking a bit more confident.

Within six weeks I had organized a men's glee club, a women's glee club, an oratoria chorus, a band, and an orchestra. There were only six violin students who expressed a desire to become fiddlers and a few students who were studying theory of music. . . .

I do not remember the exact number of students on the campus at that time but I know there were only about eighty students of college grade; the rest were boys and girls who had had no opportunity for high school work in their new communities which had been formed all over Oklahoma and so the university was conducting a preparatory school and most of our students were beyond preparatory students. I believe most of them were high school age, having come in with their parents when they made the run in 1889 but they had not had any opportunity to attend high school.

I found the population of Oklahoma altogether different from any other I had ever known anything about. Other states were somewhat colonized, that is the people came in groups either from older states or foreign countries and in the new state would form communities of the same nationality with the same interests, as well as the same ideas. In Oklahoma this was not true at all. On a certain day at a set time Uncle Sam shot off a pistol and the preacher, salesman, carpenter, college graduate, illiterate, the lawyer, horse thief, everyone, just made a run and staked down lots or farms side by side and out of that conglomeration Oklahoma was formed.

I soon found that one could start anything in Oklahoma and there would be no particular opposition towards it, but once a thing was started it was almost suicide not to be able to carry on.

It stands to reason, therefore, that in the matter of fine arts there would be a small sprinkling of people who were genuinely interested but the majority had never, seemingly, cared or had any inclination to look for the beautiful things in life. There was, of course, no fine arts center developed at that time and so the door for a missionary was wide open and it was merely a question of taking advantage of this situation. I soon found that one could start anything in Oklahoma and there would be no particular opposition towards it, but once a thing was started it was almost suicide not to be able to carry on.

I mention these things because I feel that the younger generation can hardly realize what the University of Oklahoma was at this early date. It does not seem possible that the university could have made the strides that it has in the short time it has been operating. It had been going for eleven years when I came here; I hate to think what it was when President Boyd, together with two or three associates organized it in 1892.

I seem to have been somewhat of a novelty on the campus when I first came here, mostly, I believe, on account of my limited knowledge of English and my heavy foreign accent. I am told that I still have plenty of accent but at that time, as I look back, I see why I could not always make myself clearly understood. The people of Oklahoma



The first University building having burned to the ground before his arrival in fall 1903, Fredrik Holmberg found University Hall standing alone on the campus—but it too was destroyed by fire in 1907.



After a hot, dusty walk from town, Fredrik Holmberg arrived at the president's office, above, unimpressed and discouraged. A talk with the ever-optimistic David Ross Boyd, however, revived Holmberg's pioneer spirit.

were not much accustomed to foreign accents, seemingly, at that time and are not even now and as ridiculous as this may seem I believe this accent was a help rather than a handicap in my particular work. Naturally I tried to get away from this accent but I never fully succeeded in this. But in my case it does not seem to have hindered, at any rate. . . .

In the fall of 1907 as everyone knows Oklahoma became a state and the people of Oklahoma had an opportunity to vote for whom they pleased; they started to run their own state. So by the nature of things in the spring of 1908 the first political cyclone struck the University campus. How it all happened is ancient history and I only mention it because I happened to be one of the splinters left by the storm who still hung on to the prairie with the very ugly administration building. During that year, however, what is now the Old Science Hall and the Education Building were finished. It so happened that I was appointed director of the newly organized school of Fine Arts and later, in 1910,

there ten years too. These people could not help looking back to their home states. . . .

In older states some community which happened to be interested in fine arts would form its own school and there were private schools thus located over the entire states but in Oklahoma there were none of these. As it is here the College of Fine Arts has grown up with the University as a whole and because of the early start it has had an opportunity to make itself felt both on the campus and throughout the state to an extent that with one or two exceptions has not been possible in other states. In other words, we were naturally given a certain amount of leadership without so much as asking or having to struggle for it.

(Fredrik)
F. Holmberg, Dean
College of Fine Arts

(be sure not to spell Fredrik any other way than as I have it here)

[Source: Fredrik Holmberg manuscript collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Folder #2.]

I became dean of the same school. . . .

Over a period of years beginning with 1904, we did all we could in the way of giving concerts and plays, etc., over the state, urging students to attend their own university and there are very few villages, towns and cities in the state that we did not make ourselves felt in at some time. In those days we were urging students to come to the University of Oklahoma. The parents who were interested in education had received their education somewhere else and it was natural for them to think of their sons and daughters going back to the old universities from which they had come. As late as 1911, when I had a university orchestra on a trip, I stayed at the home of a doctor in one of our largest towns on the MK&T line in eastern Oklahoma. The doctor's wife told me that she had not realized there was a state university in Oklahoma. She had lived