
PROLOGUE

Before networking was a word, Sooner alumni were practicing the art

All right. I confess. Somewhere on the journey to AARP, my taste for creature comforts overwhelmed my spirit of adventure. Never am I more aware of this phenomenon than when reading an article like “Wandering the Old Silk Road” on page 26 of this issue of *Sooner Magazine*.

There are many fascinating aspects to Lynn Grigsby Frieda’s off-beat travel tale, but perhaps the most intriguing is the most incidental. Halfway around the world, in places where only the intrepid dare go, the Friedas came upon very few American tourists—yet several of those chance encounters were with other OU graduates.

We all have had similar experiences, though undoubtedly under much less dramatic circumstances. Whenever these coincidences occur, I always am struck by the reassurance that comes from meeting perfect strangers who share one’s affiliations and loyalties. Just ask anyone who has ever moved into a new community.

The more fortunate displaced Sooners find nearby one of the 23 in-state, 30 out-of-state and four international alumni clubs, as my daughter did a couple of years ago in Charlotte, North Carolina. A call to longtime OU alumni stalwart Bob Brady was sufficient to establish the connection—a welcoming voice, helpful advice, an invitation to make new friends—all while supporting the alma mater.

This desire to maintain OU ties has been going on for a hundred years. The current University of Oklahoma Association dates its beginning from the signing of a four-page, handwritten constitution on June 9, 1899. The first alumni were a very close-knit group.

“There were just five of us who organized that first association . . .,” recalled C. Ross Hume, holder of both OU’s first bachelor’s and first master’s degrees, “just five, and just enough to

fill the various offices. The two graduates of the Class of ’98 and the three members of the Class of ’99 were the charter members. When we met, we found afterwards that all of us had an office.”

The Alumni Association of the University of Oklahoma, as it was formerly known, had as its first president Lawrence W. Cole, ’99, with Roy P. Stoops, ’98, as vice president; Hume as secretary; Roscoe S. Helvie, ’99, treasurer; and Jesse L. Hefley, ’99, orator.

“Every graduate of the University was a member of the association, and every member was an officer, an ideal way to start things,” Hume continued. “When the constitution was drafted and put into the first minute book, the members began the custom of securing the signature of each graduate as he left school.”

In addition to the five graduates, the inaugural membership optimistically included nine who expected their degrees in 1900 and 1901. Their stated mission was to “promote through union the interest of our Alma Mater, to create and perpetuate good fellowship among ourselves and to renew our past pleasant relationships.”

Keeping up with OU’s graduates over the past century has become increasingly complex. From the initial 14 and their immediate successors whose personal signatures formed the roll, the alumni computerized database has grown to more than 192,860 names. Of that number an estimated 50,000—one-third of the living graduates—annually change their addresses, names, marital status or all of the above.

While early active members paid dues to an independently incorporated alumni association, today’s graduates need only a current address on file to remain active in an association that operates under the University’s administrative umbrella. [*Sooner*

Magazine, now published by the University of Oklahoma Foundation for private donors to OU, began as the alumni magazine of the old, dues-paying association.]

The alumni association’s mission has expanded—but remains based in the original desire to promote the interests of the University while maintaining educational and social ties. Alumni support is most evident in the area of student recruitment. In the OU Association’s centennial year, 82 students received \$95,250 in scholarships funded by alumni clubs and matched by the University.

Passing on the Sooner tradition became easier in 1991, when at the urging of out-of-state alumni representatives, the University established Generations Scholarships. These tuition waivers of \$3,000 per year are available to non-resident, first-time undergraduate students who are the children or grandchildren of OU graduates.

As they leave the University, new graduates often find unexpected professional benefits from their alumni status. What today we call “networking” is simply the old alumni custom of “helping hands,” dressed up for the ’90s. Sometimes the individual colleges formalize the process, and sometimes it is a grassroots effort, like the willingness of the young filmmakers featured in “Possums” (see page 16) to assist Sooners heading west to break into the entertainment industry.

The principal task embraced by that first alumni group in 1899 was organization of an annual alumni banquet, which they all could attend to renew their Sooner allegiance. Even Oklahoma Memorial Stadium could not hold such a gathering today. But the spirit they sought to preserve still is present wherever alumni congregate, whether in Norman, Charlotte or a desert oasis along the Old Silk Road. —CJB