

The BOQ Fire

Like so any bad memories you just put away and avoid, I hadn't thought about the BOQ fire in a long time. The story in *Sooner Magazine* (Winter 2000) brought back these few memories I still have.

Frank Berman and I were roommates on the second floor in the room next to Price Starks (one of the three fire fatalities). I woke because of shouting in the distance. I saw the fire light reflection in the outside darkness (not the fire itself) and smelled smoke. The first thing I did was go to the door. I don't think the handle was warm or I wouldn't have opened the door. The hall was full of smoke, and I could hear the fire but couldn't see anything because of the smoke. I closed the door, locked it and kept the key.

I had been yelling at Frank to wake up. But I had to go over and shake him. He worked part-time or as a stringer for the *Daily Oklahoman*, and his front-page story quoted me as saying something like, "Let's get out of here, Frank, the place is on fire." Because they couldn't print what I really said.

The building across from us was not on fire yet. By the time Frank and I pulled on some pants, shirt and shoes, that building was burning, too. Those clothes and the room key were all we got out with.

The BOQ had been recently painted. The residents had been asked to leave the screens unhooked for the painters. I guess because of the wet paint drying, the screens were stuck. I remember someone saying the painters had nailed the screens shut. Though I accepted that then, I find that hard to believe today. Anyway, I remember the screen was difficult, and we kicked it loose and climbed out onto the small ledge. We couldn't jump into the yard because there were permanent clotheslines there, so we hung down from the ledge and dropped to the ground.

There was a crank alarm on each floor. I heard no alarms at any time. Someone said the alarm cranks had been removed because of the pranks of waking students up at night with the alarms.

Someone at an inquiry I attended mentioned the nailed screens and missing alarm cranks. I never heard if those reports were true or not.

We both moved away from the burning buildings quickly. I remember some students running back in to get stuff from their rooms and thinking how dumb that was. I think Frank went to call the paper. I just wandered away from the fire. Lots of cars and people were coming, and someone asked if they could take me somewhere so I went to the PiKA house across from Rickners. I woke once during the night and started shaking from tension before I went back to sleep. I don't remember any other trauma. And, I have no memory of any of the other sounds of that night or the fear I must have felt.

Thanks to friends on campus, in Oklahoma City, my grandmother in Purcell, and the Red Cross, I soon had more clothes than I'd lost. The University replaced my books.

Frank and I ended up roommates again in a brick building on campus. I don't remember the name, but I think it had been a girls' dorm. I haven't kept up with Frank, but hopefully he will see this story and fill in things I've forgotten.

*Paul H. Mullins Jr., '51
St. Petersburg, Florida*

Bad News Travels Fast

Thank you for sending me the *Sooner Magazine* with the BOQ fire story. My major recollection of that night was joy at finding all my friends alive and well. Later I went to the main campus with a good friend to find a public phone. There was a long line, but finally he was able to call his parents in Cushing. I never felt it would be necessary to call my parents a long way off in New York, but I decided to call them anyway, mainly because we had been in line for over an hour, and I knew it would save me the trouble of calling later in the week.

When I reached them, they were both looking at the front page of the *Sunday New York Times* on which was the fire picture featured in your article.

*M. L. Brill, '53 B.S., '61 M.D.
Tulsa, Oklahoma*

A Survivor's Story

I am writing in regard to the Winter 2000 issue and the article on the "BOQ Fire of 1949."

My father, James E. Williams, Sulphur Springs, TX, was living in the BOQ and asleep in his room when the fire broke out. He attempted to help his roommate, Price Starks, escape but was unable to do so. My dad's head and face were burned in the process.

The photo on page 21 of the survivor is my dad. It is my understanding he is kneeling by a marker where his roommate, Price Starks, was found.

My dad did not finish the semester, needless to say, due to his burns and, I'm sure, the emotional trauma. He did return in the spring of 1950 and finished both 1949 and 1950 finals with flying colors. He completed his degree in petroleum engineering in 1952. He was then employed in Venezuela and later returned to OU to complete his master's.

My dad is deceased, and my mother has told the story to us on occasion. She has related my father never talked about the fire much. I had never seen this photo, but when I did in the article, I thought the survivor's hands sure looked like my dad's. My mom verified the photo was of my dad and has been used in the past several times in the student (*Oklahoma*) *Daily* when they did a story on the fire.

We have the letter dated Dec. 6, 1949, from Dr. Cross to my grandparents reporting on my dad and the fire.



James E. Williams

My mom hadn't met my dad at the time of the fire. She had been on a date that night with John Strange, Hobart, OK, who lived in the BOQ at the time. Fortunately John Strange stayed in Oklahoma City that night. My mom's best friend later married Bill Johnston, Joplin, MO, who also lived in the BOQ and made it out alive but not unharmed. He had to jump out a window and broke his foot and back. He was unable to return to school until the end of the spring 1950 semester.

My family feels connected to OU by being life long residents of Norman, and graduates of OU, but also because of how this historical event of OU personally affected our family and our close friends. Thank you for remembering those young men of 1949 and telling their story.

*Amy Williams Hafner, '80
Norman, Oklahoma*

Our Good Friend Frank

I continue to enjoy the magazine—and am especially pleased when you have a sports article—like that about (Eduardo) Najera this issue (Winter 2000). How about one telling us about Stoops and the upcoming grid season?

You mentioned that Carl Albert was “next in line of succession.” I think *first* in line of succession would be more exact.

*Frank Dennis, '29 B.A.
Arlington, Virginia*

Editor's Note: I confess; retired journalist Dennis is one of my favorite readers. His blue pencil never fails; he is always right. As for additional sports articles: we visit the new wrestling facility on Page 16, and more sports stories are in the pipeline.

University's "Back Porch"

I wanted to thank you for the wonderful article on our Counseling Psychology Clinic (*Sooner Magazine*, Fall 1999). I appreciate the care and thoughtfulness put into this project. It is both accurate and interesting to read. It is gratifying to be able to share our work with the full University family. . . .

As an aside, I noted in the article on “Team Oklahoma,” where Ath-

letic Director Joe Castiglione described the athletic department as the “front porch of the institution,” which seems like an accurate analogy. At the clinic, I often feel that we are more like the “back porch of the institution.” Not many know about us, or ever step out back to visit with us, tucked away on the south campus in a temporary barracks built in 1943. To some degree that is necessary as a confidential counseling clinic. Being somewhat anonymous is comforting to many of the families and people we work with, and being off the main campus is actually a positive for us in terms of easy community access. We do not need to be in the limelight. However, it is important that the University and the community know about our programs and services and have the opportunity to help and support us in our unique mission within the University and community. The clinic article—as well as others such as the Cleft Palate-Craniofacial Clinic article (*Sooner Magazine*, Summer 1999)—provides a glimpse past the front porch of the University to one of the many places where the real work of the University is being done with commitment, compassion and excellence.

*Terry M. Pace
Associate Professor and Director
OU Counseling Psychology Clinic
Norman, Oklahoma*

Crimson Check

The “color check” letter (*Sooner Magazine*, Fall 1999) caught my eye, and I'm glad to see a campus group looking into standardizing the Crimson and Cream. It ain't Husker Red, it ain't Aggie Purple, and it sure ain't that trim color on the flag girls' outfits! One day (soon?) they'll all match.

*Chris Fling, '93 B.B.A.
Fort Worth, Texas*

Editor's Note: We can only hope.

Concern for the Refuge

Oklahoma's Crown Jewel is the Great Reading Room in Bizzell Library, which, thanks to President Boren's efforts, has been restored recently to its original elegance and splendor. I believe Oliver's Wildlife

Refuge is Oklahoma's Other Crown Jewel and perhaps its best-kept secret. Furthermore, I fear that the future of the refuge is in jeopardy.

These magnificent woods have been an important outdoor laboratory for research and study by OU students and faculty since their acquisition in 1946. They represent one of the few remaining tracts of virgin bottomland forest in the county, and their nearness to the University lends them special importance. They also represent one of the major vegetation types of the state, many of which are being restored as part of the new natural history museum landscape less than a mile to the north.

The increased traffic on highway #9, which passes across the woods' north boundary, along with urban development in neighboring areas of the forest are causes for concern. Recently completed turning lanes at the corner of Chautauqua come uncomfortably close to the tract. Pressure to widen the highway to accommodate heavier traffic may further infringe on the woods. Each of these threats remind us that the original route for highway #9 would have bisected and virtually obliterated the woods. Only the most concerted effort of many interested citizens and of the University persuaded the highway department to move the route to its location along the north boundary in order to protect the forest. I am heartened by the great many trees President and Mrs. Boren have planted on the campus. I am assured thereby that they share my concern to protect Oliver's Woods from these new threats to their existence.

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Letters to *Sooner Magazine* must be signed, contain a return address and may be edited for length. Letters can be mailed c/o Editor, 100 Timberdell Road, Norman, OK 73019-0685 or emailed to cburr@ou.edu.