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## PROLOGUE

# History often turns on having the right people in place at the right time

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**W**ith the notable exception of OU President David and Molly Shi Boren, Norman's most readily recognizable couple are a president emeritus, who has been out of office for more than two decades, and a former first lady, who in another era might well have been a university president herself.

Paul and Rose Sharp are remarkable people. Bright, witty, learned, interested in everything. Now into their eighties, they probably hold the modern attendance record for fine arts performances, campus and civic benefits, lectures and conferences, to say nothing of football and basketball games, and all the other special events peculiar to this University community. They have survived more banquet food than anyone on the planet. They love to dress up and go places, not just locally but anywhere that airplanes fly.

The impression lingers that the Sharps love the life they have lived—in office and out, good times and, yes, the hard ones, too—for there have been many challenges to test their mettle.

If timing is everything, Paul Sharp's could not have been worse. By 1971 when he arrived at OU, higher education had experienced eviction from the ivory tower, evaporation of the post-WWII euphoria and abdication of the divine right of universities and their presidents. He found a Norman campus populated by civil rights protesters, disgruntled faculty and hostile students. The Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City was in a serious funding, management and political crisis, and a number of unattended fences remained from the administration of Sharp's controversial predecessor, J. Herbert Hollomon—with the public, state officials, and even his own regents.

The wonder is that Sharp wanted this job. Thankfully, he did.

The '70s era was not a period for on-the-job training; universities needed experienced hands at the wheel. Sharp came to OU with 14 years as an academic C.E.O.—at Hiram College in Ohio; the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; and Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. A respected historian, he also had been on the faculty at the University of Minnesota, where he earned his Ph.D.; Iowa State University; and the University of Wisconsin, where he was also department chair.

The new president brought his administrative skill, his national reputation and his wife to OU; he insists that the wife was his greatest asset. Rose Sharp was the traditional president's wife, in the mode of Cleo Cross before her and Molly Boren since. She was so skilled in the art that for nearly 20 years she taught an American Council on Education course for the wives of new presidents.

At home, she practiced what she preached. While her husband wrestled the legislature for increased state funding, Rose tackled faculty-student morale problems with inclusion techniques. She entertained; she organized; she involved everyone in University activities.

Nearly as much in demand as her husband, OU's first lady was an accomplished public speaker, a reflection of her undergraduate days at Enid's Phillips University, where she and Paul had met and she had been the 1936 Oklahoma State Debate Champion. Together and separately, they stumped the state to restore confidence and garner support.

On the campus, a few civil rights disturbances turned violent, including

fire-bombing the president's home. But eventually activist tempers cooled under Sharp's steady leadership. He worked systematically through problems he had inherited and launched important initiatives for the University's future.

Sharp was the first OU president both experienced and comfortable with the concept of private fund raising. In 1977, his Gift of Quality Campaign established endowed chairs and professorships as a major tool in faculty recruitment and retention, and his discretionary annual fund, the President's Council, was the blueprint for today's highly successful President's Associates.

A few months later, however, just when life at OU was looking up, Paul Sharp suffered a stroke. Eventually Rose convinced him that his full recovery would require more attention than the president's office would allow. It would remain for other presidents to capitalize on the foundation Sharp had repaired.

But this is a story with a happy ending. For the next decade, as Regents' Professor of History and Higher Education, Sharp was able to give to individual students the same dedication he had given their institution. He was—and still is—a wonderful teacher and mentor. Even his retirement in 1988 was something of a misnomer, as he has continued to teach, to consult with higher education entities nationwide, and to volunteer his leadership to a wide array of causes within the city of Norman.

When the Sharps returned to Oklahoma in 1971, they were looking for a place where life could be rich and fulfilling even after the presidency. Perhaps their timing was not so bad after all.

—CJB