

CONFESSIONS OF AN OU EXILE

BY RAY WADDLE, 78 *ba* *journalist*

Mythology and literature sing of the arts and agony of exile. I read about the world's great exiles—James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Ovid—at the University of Oklahoma, in classrooms along the South Oval. Soon I embarked on a post-OU exile of my own.

It was the late 1970s, the era of Paul Sharp and Billy Sims, CB radios and stagflation. I took my Sooner identity with me when it was time to move on a journalistic career in a foreign country—that is, Nashville, Tennessee, home of country music, religious publishing and the Southeastern Conference.

Life outside the OU orbit took getting used to. Loyalties were different. Here, people prayed against Alabama, not Nebraska. UT meant the University of Tennessee, not you-know-who. The papers were full of news about tobacco crops and Albert Gore, not wheat prices and Carl Albert.

I pined for the Bizzell Library reading room, Oklahoma wind and the wishbone T. I missed OU's theater productions, campus corner and big sky. Nobody here had any feel for anything west of the Mississippi. That includes the Big 12. When Tennessee played Nebraska in the Orange Bowl in January 1998, I warned everybody that the SEC representative had no chance. My warnings went unheeded. The Southern squad was destroyed.

Exile meant, of course, no direct access to campus news. Mailbox arrivals of alumni publications were like priceless messages in a bottle washed up on shore. I noted the latest eye-widening statistics about National Merit Scholars, Rhodes Scholars and the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, readying myself for any Tennessee inquiries about OU life and learning.

Exile meant going years without OU sports on TV. Here, regional telecasts thrill to the likes of Murray State or East Carolina, not the latest Big 12 epic battle. There was no alumni club, no place to buy a T-shirt or bag of Schooner-shaped pasta. A Sooner alum carried his passion anonymously.



Unlikely encounters ensued. At my first visit to a church, an usher hospitably asked where I was from. When I said the University of Oklahoma, his face went stern.

"We won that game, you know," he said. He didn't have to explain. He meant, of course, the Vanderbilt-OU football game of September 1977. It was still a raw wound in Nashville years later. The Sooners, ranked #1, won a close one—too close, 25-23—after a ref ruled that Vanderbilt had not recovered that fumble in the end zone. The gentlemanly Methodist usher didn't meet many OU alumni. He was eager to engage. Once I convinced him I wasn't personally responsible for the Commodores' loss, he handed me a church bulletin and let me through.

Exile makes for strange companionship. Here it's possible to become fast friends with other Big 12 alums, even Nebraska graduates, in a show of Great Plains solidarity. When some local Husker friends had their first-born daughter, we came to the babyshower with a mail-order gift of Sooner infant PJs. High fives all around.

My dear Connecticut wife eventually came to understand my sense of deficit as a Sooner product far from his spiritual

home. She did what she could. When the Internet arrived, she found artifacts on e-Bay. Suddenly things were showing up at the doorstep—an OU serving tray, a string of Sooner Christmas lights, a scratchy LP of fight songs by the Pride of Oklahoma, circa 1956, a very good year.

Feeling more at ease in Middle Tennessee, I attended a Tennessee-Vanderbilt football game. Sitting next to me was an older woman, a Volunteers fan decked out in bright orange. Did I go to UT, she asked? Well no, actually the University of Oklahoma, I had to reply.

Her eyes narrowed.

"We made that field goal, you know," she said. She didn't have to explain. She meant, of course, the 1968 Orange Bowl, where OU narrowly defeated Tennessee after a late Vol three-point attempt went wide right (or did it?). The game was as vivid to her as a Smokey Mountain autumn scene, and now the memory was ruining her day. I was an emissary from the dark gridiron past.

This exile has lasted nearly 25 years. I have dual citizenship by now, as Southerner and Plainsman. It has meant learning two tongues, two cultures, two sets of unpredictable weather patterns. But things are looking up. A Nashville OU alumni club is getting started. The sports bars air Sooner games off the satellite.

Indeed, during the football season of wonder, fall 2000, people around here finally got it. OU's championship season put all things OU on the national radar. Stores stocked the racks with OU sweatshirts. Wearing a crisp new one, I was getting the thumbs up at Home Depot and even among Tennessee loyalists in the newsroom. After the magnificent Orange Bowl victory over Florida State, I called everybody I knew in the state of Oklahoma. We talked till early morning. I had no sensible long-distance phone rate plan at the time—the calls cost as much as a flight to Miami. It didn't matter. Making connection with the Sooner Nation, it felt good to be home.

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