



# *A Word to* Worried Parents

**J**anuary 1, 1985. The Sooner kicker split the uprights for 3 points and a 20-14 fourth-quarter lead over Washington. The Orange Bowl crowd roared, the Ruf/Nek covered wagon—without the officials' permission—bolted onto the gridiron in celebration. Then a whistle, the yellow flag flew, the field goal became a 15-yard penalty, and the momentum shifted dramatically. Washington came back to win, costing the Sooners a potential national championship.

I don't know the name of the Ruf/Nek who drove the wagon onto the gridiron a millisecond too early, but if this dismal scene had occurred 40 years earlier, I guarantee that the driver would have been a fellow member of my class of '48, Lew Thompson.

Thompson's connection with the Ruf/Neks originated in his first enrollment at

**So you think  
obtaining a college  
education is difficult  
today? You should  
have been at OU in  
the topsy-turvy '40s.**

OU in 1941, and as a result of another interesting football game. On a cold, rainy October Saturday, the Sooners upset heavily favored Santa Clara, the West Coast powerhouse. Students were in a raucous mood, and the Ruf/Neks were organizing a demonstration on the North

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BY TONY HILLERMAN

Oval, encouraging a celebratory classroom walkout.

Thompson, a freshman since September, was supporting himself with various part-time jobs and passed by en route to deliver sacks of snack food to a sorority party. He stopped, told the organizers another of his part-time jobs was freelancing photographs for *The Daily Oklahoman*. If the Ruf/Neks would move their rally over to the Presidential lawn, he'd get a picture of President Joe Brandt talking to them. That certainly would make the paper.

They went for it. Thompson, camera equipment in hand, knocks on Brandt's door. Brandt is absent but expected momentarily. Thompson explains what's afoot, gets access to the balcony and leaves word that the students want Brandt to speak to them. Brandt arrives, tells the students he'll make their walkout an offi-



Recalled to active duty during the Korean conflict, Thompson goes on maneuvers in North Carolina as information officer for the aggressor forces.

cial Monday holiday. Thompson's photos make a spread in *The Oklahoman*.

If my memory serves me, it was the first sanctioned student walkout—but to get to the useful part of this tale, we must skip back a few months.

Thompson arrived at the OU campus from Shawnee with the \$50 required in those Depression times to pay his admission fee, plus \$18 to sustain him until he found work. He had helped a friend milk the family's cows, in exchange for a ride in the friend's truck to Norman for himself and a trunk containing all of his worldly belongings.

Lew left the trunk on the sidewalk near Campus Drug, went in and asked for a job. He cited experience at Coffey Drug Store in Shawnee and was hired on a trial basis. He carried his trunk to a rooming house the manager recommended. But this is not where the story started.

In Hollis in 1939, the bleak bottom of The Great Depression, Thompson's mother was losing her struggle to provide for her children, had found better paying work in California and would move the family there. Lew asked to stay behind. He felt he could find a job and support

As editor of the 1947 *Covered Wagon*, Thompson was determined to convert a stale prewar humor magazine into a postwar publication appealing to a male-dominated campus swarming with veterans. An early venture was an illustrated "shocking exposé" on Oklahoma's first strip tease joint.

himself. He found it at Tom Coffey's drug store in Shawnee.

Coffey needed a night watchman (as drug stores did even in those days). He could use Lew, 16 and big for his age, as delivery boy, janitor and helper in the photo studio Coffey also ran. Thompson enrolled at Shawnee High, slept in the drug store and began learning photography in the darkroom.

This paid off at OU.

In his search for a second job, he found that the Athletic Department could use a photographer, and Snorter Luster, then an assistant coach, provided him a free place to sleep and park his trunk (a going-away present from Coffey). The arrangement left scant time for class work, but it didn't matter. Before final exam time that winter, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

That Day of Infamy was Sunday, December 7. On Monday, December 8, Thompson enlisted. He didn't get back to the campus until 1946.

The second enrollment was totally different. Now he was a retired Army captain, having gone into the newly form-

ing Rangers, survived the bloody battle of Guadalcanal, other island campaigns and the reconquest of the Philippines, earning battlefield promotions on the way.

Now he had retirement money, his tuition and fees paid by the G.I. Bill of Rights and a monthly paycheck. He and other returning veterans took over fraternity houses and changed a lot of things about campus life. But the connections Thompson had made with OU athletics were still alive. He noticed the male pep squad that enlivened events before the war wasn't active.

The manager of Rickner's Book Store found the old Ruf/Neks records in storage there. A meeting was held, the club was revived and lives on today to help celebrate Sooner victories.

Ruf/Neks aside, those from the Class of '48 may recall Thompson as the fellow who revived *The Covered Wagon*—the monthly campus magazine. It lived on a subsidy from student activity funds, had a tiny readership and offered little to read except the sort of jokes that were popular with college mags in the 1940s. By now Thompson was a journalism major. The Board of Student Publications picked him as *Wagon* editor. He collected a staff of writers, cartoonists and photographers, including me as assistant editor. We were to convert a prewar magazine into a postwar magazine appealing to a campus swarming with mostly males just out of



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the Army, Navy or Marines.

The problem was to inform this new student that a new era had begun. For the magazine, we advertised that next month we would feature a shocking exposé, written by me and entitled “Culture Comes to Oklahoma.” It would be an illustrated report on Oklahoma’s first strip tease joint. The staff spread the word around campus. It reached the office of President George Cross. An inquiry came from the President’s office. Would the fellow writing this drop in for a chat? Thompson by then was campus stringer for *The Daily Oklahoman*. He tipped off his editor there. The resulting headline said “OU Magazine Editor Called on Carpet,” and the story suggested Cross was uneasy about the magazine going raunchy.

The culture story was mild, as was the chat with President Cross, but readership soared. It remained high because Thompson had collected a gang of talented workers. In fact, *The Harvard Lampoon* declared it the country’s top campus humor magazine.

Thompson is 80 now, has gone through a career as short story writer, advertising man, documentary filmmaker and consultant to two governors (one DEM, one GOP). He lives in a small adobe house he built himself in the hills outside Santa Fe and drives into town to work with a son at the agency—but no more consulting with governors nor representing oil and mining corporations. His spare time goes into a multitude of charities and his efforts to grow plants from seeds archaeologists find in prehistoric sites. But I have neglected to explain why he sleeps under the tree.

He started that while building the house, preferring his sleeping bag under the piñon to driving into Santa Fe. When the house was finished, he found his bedroom claustrophobic—missing the fresh air, the night sounds, the stars overhead. So he moved back under the tree, adding a tarp cover for nights when it snows.

I asked him what he would tell his fellow grandparents in the Class of '48 that they should tell offspring worried about financing grandkids in college. He had a short answer.

“Tell ‘em not to worry. Kids who really want an education will get one.” 🍷

# Life according to Hillerman

For more than 30 years, novelist Tony Hillerman has followed one best-selling mystery with another, taking his devoted following into the intriguing, mystifying and starkly beautiful world of the Navajo, establishing his protagonists Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee as two of the best-known contemporary detectives of the genre. With his autobiography, *Seldom Disappointed*, Hillerman steps out from behind Leaphorn and Chee to reveal a character every bit as fascinating as his fictional creations—himself.

Hillerman looks at his own life with startling clarity and warmth, turning his keen insight and wry, self-deprecating humor on a life lived with modest expectations colored by an optimism destined to carry him through life’s many challenges. Growing up in tiny, Depression-fraught Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, he never realized he was poor until he left for college, able to afford only one semester before following his brother into the Army, a teenage infantryman coming of age in the mud and madness of World War II.

Recovering from serious war wounds, he returned with the veterans to the University of Oklahoma, where he chose journalism, then became a reporter, United Press bureau chief and journalism department chair at the University of New Mexico. At OU he met and later married the girl of his dreams, Marie, with whom he had one child and adopted five more. His enormous success as a writer, while greatly satisfying, seems still to surprise him.

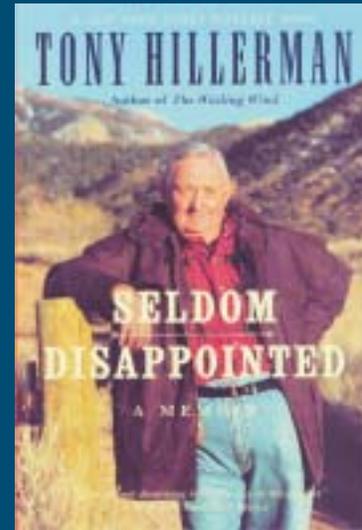
Unlike Hillerman’s carefully plotted mysteries, readers know from the beginning how this book ends; the treat is in the storytelling. Hillerman fans probably grabbed hardcover copies off the bookshelves last year. Publication of the paperback edition in October 2002 is destined to broaden the readership. For anyone who ever grew up in small-town Oklahoma, lived through a war or attended OU, this memoir should be required reading. For everyone else, to miss what the *New York Times Book Review* called a “splendid and disarming remembrance of things past,” would be a downright shame.

—Carol J. Burr

## Seldom Disappointed

By Tony Hillerman

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