

Although its doors closed 30 years ago,
in the hearts and minds of its alumni,
University School is a very real presence.

BY ANNE BARAJAS

More than just a Memory



You could almost see it. Gone these 30 years, University High School slowly re-emerged, like an apparition, in a ballroom full of the former students and teachers who walked its halls for half a century.

The old school was brought back to life by some 400 former students and faculty who reunited recently on the University of Oklahoma's Norman campus to remember one of the defining experiences of their lives—and one of OU's finest chapters.

University High School was an integral part of the OU campus and the College of Education from 1916 until the school's closure in 1973. Officially sanctioned in 1917 by the Oklahoma State Board of Education and the Oklahoma State Legislature to provide experimentation, observation and practice for future and current teachers, UHS began as a junior high, grades seven through nine. Three years later grades 10 through 12 were added, elementary grades in 1935 and kindergarten in 1947, the same year that University School was moved from the Carnegie Building on the main campus' Parrington Oval to several former Naval Air Station buildings on OU's North Base.

Also known as "the laboratory school," University High and



Lyndal Cole

Exchanging old war stories is standard for photojournalist C. Ned Hockman, Norman, who taught at University High before making his mark in OU's journalism classrooms. With him at the reunion are his daughter, Shiree Hockman Charles, Memphis, Tennessee, left, and Debi Faubion Attori, a TV news anchor in Charlotte, North Carolina, both UHS alumnae.

University School were examples of how major research institutions of the time tested the best practices of education and gave their education students teaching and research opportunities.

"There is no doubt that there was something unique about the laboratory schools," says Jayne Fleener, the OU College of Education's associate dean for research and graduate studies and a graduate of a laboratory school at the University of Indiana.

Those singular qualities were reflected in lab schools across the nation, where ideas once considered radical and now considered classic were fostered. OU's own former dean of education, Ellsworth Collings (for whom Collings Hall is named) came to Norman in 1924 as president of the University School, bringing with him progressive concepts about how children learn. The late OU education professor John Renner led a five-state, nine-year study on improving elementary science education from University School classrooms. And the "New Math Movement" came to University School via instructor Eunice Lewis, who was selected to participate in the groundbreaking New Mathematics Program at the University of Illinois.

"We experimented with a lot of things. That's what the laboratory school was set up for—we were trying to improve curriculum," says Lewis, who taught math to generations of UHS students from 1946 until 1973.

University School students, who paid tuition and were



OU Western History Collections



University High cheerleaders and pep club pump up school spirit in a 1967 *Schooner* yearbook photo.

selected for their academic potential, enjoyed a nearly ideal setting. Every teacher held a master's degree, and some had doctorates. At its largest, the school's student-teacher ratio was only seven to one. Entire grades frequently had fewer than 40 students.

Added to this equation was the aura of being part of something special and learning from devoted teachers who expected only the very best from their students, says UHS historian Bob Huddleston.

"I think a higher percentage of University High School students enjoyed their education than at a public school," says Huddleston, a 1951 UHS graduate who attended University School from kindergarten through 12th grade. His father, Lonnie Huddleston, had the longest UHS faculty career, teaching for a record 42 years.

"I think we had as much fun as other students, if not more, but we took our education pretty seriously—the teachers insisted on it. The atmosphere was, 'We're going to have fun doing this, but you *will* learn.' The teachers simply did not accept failure."

Because the faculty and classes were small, instructors frequently taught the same students several times during their academic careers. Students felt a very real sense of obligation and accountability to the faculty and worked for their approval.

"I cut a class once in my life," says Huddleston, who went on to earn both bachelor's and master's degrees from OU. "I wanted to go play basketball. After we were finished, we came walking in to the school. There were three faculty members walking down the sidewalk toward us. They didn't have to say anything—they knew I'd skipped. I never did it again; I was so embarrassed."

"The standards were high. There was a world-class set of educators," says 1950 UHS alumnus John Watson, who was among alumni from 25 states and Kuwait who traveled to the July reunion weekend. Watson made the trip from California to see friends and say thanks to the surviving teachers who helped him continue on to a career as the program manager for RAMOS, the Russian-American Observation Satellite.

The strength of the UHS connection is felt across generations of former students who now range in age from their late 40s to

their late 80s. Even an accident that totaled their car on the reunion's first day could not keep sisters Mary Matthews and Minnie Carson away from the party. Matthews, who graduated in 1931, was the earliest graduate present at the reunion. She says lessons learned at UHS seven decades ago are still with her today.

"It was a very interesting experience, because we were exposed to everything. I learned a way of thinking and problem solving that has lasted—it was an unconventional school for that time," says Matthews, who later served as an adjunct professor in OU's School of Social Work.

Her sister, 1935 alumna Minnie Carson, says the University played a special role in the high school's character and enriched the students' lives, even during the depths of the Great Depression.

"The campus was as much a part of our lives as anything. To grow up in a fountain of knowledge like this . . . I feel we never were deprived; although goodness knows we probably were poor, I didn't know it."

From its earliest days, UHS students benefited from access to the University's library, its faculty and ideas that were not contained by classroom walls. Matthews remembers a field trip to a dairy, where students learned about the revolutionary process of pasteurization. WSOC-TV evening anchor Debi Faubion Attori, of Charlotte, North Carolina, who left UHS in 1968 after completing her freshman year, first was exposed to the world of television during an outing to Oklahoma City's PBS affiliate, OETA.

Hundreds of students were influenced by UHS's School Out of Doors. From 1956 until 1973, School Out of Doors took students to OU's Biological Station at Lake Texoma, where some of the University's finest educators—including internationally renowned ornithologist and bird artist George Miksch Sutton—helped children apply the inspiration of the natural world to art, creative writing, physical education, astronomy and natural science.

"We were continually part of experiments. We didn't know that, but we were," Huddleston says.

The experiments evidently worked. An extremely high percentage of UHS alumni earned advanced degrees, and four of OU's 24 Rhodes Scholars were UHS alumni.

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“It was a small school that focused on education and excellence. We learned to have a lot of confidence in trying anything and succeeding,” Attori recalls.

UHS’s small size may have been the key to that confidence, says Ruth Fell, who taught business education at the high school from 1946 until 1973.

“Children need space, and they need to get acquainted with the world gradually. Of course, I thought it was ideal. I knew the students, and they had to know their lessons, because I would know if they didn’t.

“It was just a pleasant, lovely place to be. Everyone seemed glad to be there. They just liked to come to school.”

Ironically, the University School became a victim of the same drive for educational innovation that made it so successful. As the times changed, so did the focus of educational research, which shifted from college campuses toward rural areas and the inner city, Fleener says. Laboratory schools across the nation closed their doors.

Many of UHS’s faculty were tenured and took teaching positions at OU. English teachers Martha Mills and Frances Dunham established the Oklahoma Writing Project in the College of Education, a project still helping teachers and children across Oklahoma today.

Back in the ballroom of Oklahoma Memorial Union, Fell had one more lesson to teach. Unable to attend the luncheon in person, she sent her daughter, Margaret Fell Thurston, with a letter that proved to be one of the highlights of the reunion.

The 97-year-old educator recalled the two years her nephew, Bob Dilworth, lived with her family and attended UHS while his parents were stationed in Japan. When his parents returned, Dilworth was sent to Lawrenceville Academy, a prestigious Ivy League preparatory school in New Jersey. He graduated with highest honors and won a scholarship to Harvard. Dilworth soon returned to Norman, where he was quizzed by his aunt.

“One afternoon I said, ‘Bob, how did you really get along at Lawrenceville?’ His answer was, ‘Oh, fine.’ Then I persisted: ‘But I mean scholastically. How did you get along in English?’ His answer was, ‘Oh, fine, I’d already had it all in Mrs. Dunham’s class’ . . . And as I continued my list of his subjects, his answer was always the same: he had had them all in our small, country day school at UHS. This highly regarded Lawrenceville’s curriculum had just been a review!”

Dilworth still makes a habit of visiting UHS’s former site on North Base whenever he is in town, even though the building where he attended school is long since gone.

“And so today,” Fell’s letter to the reunion crowd concluded, “you have come from north, south, east and west so that we may remember together that University School was not a building; it was much more.”

And that is when it happened. Suddenly, in the middle of the vast ballroom, the University School ceased being simply a memory. It was as alive and present as any person there, resurrected by the love and pride of 400 beaming former students and faculty members.

Later that same evening, a steady stream of nearly 30 UHS alumni squeezed into Fell’s apartment near the campus to share their

affection for their teachers, their school and one another.

“There was something about University High School that was almost intangible,” Fell admits. “There was a spirit to that school.”

Huddleston and his fellow alumni could not agree more. But to them, the

answer is not so intangible.

“I think what made University High different was the attitude of wanting to learn and working hard to do it,” Huddleston sums up. “The teachers gave us that attitude, and it was there all the years the school existed.”



Lynndal Cole

Sheryl Clevenger Pollard, Bastrop, Texas, left, had four years at University High, 1958-61, to develop a sense of deep respect and affection for the eminent mathematics teacher, Eunice Lewis, Norman.

BUILDING AN ARCHIVE

Sadly, most of the official records regarding University High School and University School were destroyed sometime in the past three decades. UHS historian Bob Huddleston is putting out a call for memorabilia, stories and photos from alumni and former faculty and staff. Donated items will be placed in a new archive established in OU’s Western History Collections.

Among items already in place is Norman Euclid, a toy cat students sewed from an abandoned fur stole. The cat, which is named for UHS’s hometown and antiquity’s most prominent mathematician, was sent as a companion to UHS math instructor Eunice Lewis at the University of Illinois, where she had grown homesick while participating in the national New Math Program. After Lewis returned home, Norman Euclid was frequently kidnapped or sent home on vacation with students. His exploits were a regular feature of the *Sooner Cub* newspaper. To donate items to the UHS archive, contact Bob Huddleston at 580/762-4015.