

100 YEARS OF THE PRIDE OF OKLAHOMA

Random Entries from
a Century-Long Diary
of the University Band

BY MICHAEL WATERS
Historical photos courtesy OU Alumni Band Association

2004—Try to Remember

It is October 22, and OU is celebrating another centennial.

The University Marching Band, the Pride of Oklahoma, is commemorating its 100th year, bringing together band members, former directors, and faculty and alumni supporters from across the generations. These people have provided the soundtrack for many of the University of Oklahoma's most inspiring moments. And as they reunite and exult for the better part of a weekend, maybe—just maybe—they are joined by unexpected company.

Could it be that the crisp air at this long-awaited event is warmed by the spirits of those men who were on hand at the very beginning? Is it possible to catch a glimpse of them, watching the fun from a discreet distance? If so, you might discern a smile, a chuckle, a look of awe. For as these spirits stand by, garbed in simple uniforms of straight-backed coats, snap-bill hats, and uncreased pants, they marvel at how much things have changed over years and years and years . . .



By 1922, Director Oscar "Daddy" Lehrer had his bandsmen, above, outfitted in red sweaters, white duck pants and red overseas caps with "University of Oklahoma Band" emblazoned on one side and "OU" on the other. Quite a fashion leap to the modified Thrailkill-design uniforms of the contemporary Pride of Oklahoma, worn at right by OU's snare drummers, their shades in place as they stand in concert outside the stadium.



Alicia Britt



continued

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1904—*The Child Is Father . . .*

So much about the University seems so very young. Its president, David Ross Boyd, was still in his 30s when he arrived in 1892, and today its relative handful of plainly attired students stride through a building that was barely under construction when Boyd first gazed upon a treeless prairie and asked, "Where's the campus?"

But what the University of Oklahoma had from the beginning was music, and two young people helped shape a scholarly counterpart to small-town Norman's supply of square-dance callers, hymn singers and brass bandmen. In 1896, Miss Grace King, an 18-year-old whirlwind subsequently appointed by Boyd to head the music school, had hit the campus with an infectious belief in the value of her work: "Music produces a true brotherhood among men. No one can be a musician and a hypocrite." She shocked the local matrons by playing lunch-hour dance music for students at the University Chapel. She lobbied for music education throughout the Oklahoma and Indian territories and organized OU's first glee club,

which sings at early-day OU football games.

An unsanctioned "band," made up of a half-dozen students and perhaps 20 Norman residents, played at the games too. But by 1904, OU's musical offerings, like the University itself, are becoming more formalized.

OU's first band director, Lloyd Curtis, arrives at the start of the '04 fall semester. He is not hired as band director—in fact, he is not hired at all. He is a student. A former high-school trumpeter from Nebraska, his passion for music equals that of the recently retired Miss King, and very soon he asks Professor H. D. Guelich, the head of the School of Fine Arts, and Professor Fredrik Holmberg, "Do you suppose we could get together enough members to make up some sort of a band?" They give the nod, and eventually the blonde, boyish Curtis is leading weekly rehearsals of some 16 young men. By the end of the school year, they are even wearing military-style uniforms, and soon after they are a fixture in the wooden bleachers of OU's first football field, rousing the fans with school songs and light marches.

The campus newspaper, *The Umpire*, heralds Curtis' achievement: "The University Band has been organized. We are looking forward to some fine music in the future."

If only they knew.

1923—"Blow Hard!"

There is no record of OU's third band director, Oscar "Daddy" Lehrer, ever attending medical school—yet he offers what sounds like a physician's advice. On a given day, he leads the band—now over 60 strong—in rehearsal and admonishes them in his guttural voice, "Blow hard! If you blow hard you will never get consumption!" Maybe it is because of the health benefits; maybe it is because of the stern way "Daddy" waves his baton (badly nicked from the many times he has banged it emphatically against the music stand). Or, maybe it is the way he shouts when he hears a bad note. But his students do blow quite hard.

Lehrer's predecessor, James Brill, led the band as a student



The band membership had dwindled to less than 50 before William R. Wehrend's arrival in 1929, when 116 prospects turned out for practice and the new director soon ran out of uniforms. Wehrend quickly introduced new West Point-style uniforms, and by 1933 the band had grown to 178 members; by 1937 he had five different special-purpose campus bands in operation.



Women (clad in long skirts since pants were not acceptable attire) were admitted to band membership in 1936, but the band queens continued to be selected from campus sororities. Mary Yetman, representing Gamma Phi Beta, held the title in 1938-39, her only duty to march proudly onto the field at the side of the drum major.

from 1915 to 1916, having taken over from Lloyd Curtis, who had stayed on as the University's first paid band director after finishing his OU degree in 1910. By contrast, Lehrer was already a well-traveled, accomplished professional when he began his tenure as director in 1917.

The Hungarian-born bandsman first came to Oklahoma as a cavalry officer in 1891, and at the turn of the century directed Central State Normal's band in Edmond, which toured the nation to great acclaim a couple of years later. Subsequently he wrote sacred music as a staff member for choir journals in Chicago and Cincinnati, and through his five-decade career, he would compose some 86 musical works.

While at OU he writes an "OU Band March," which he hopes will become part of the permanent Sooner repertoire. Alas, it will not. The No. 1 tune with a bullet on the OU hit parade continues to be something called "Boomer Sooner," crafted in 1905 by



a history and physiology student named Arthur M. Alden, who lifted the tune of Yale's "Boola Boola" and later incorporated into the song a section from North Carolina's "I'm a Tar Heel Born."

Though some of his ambitions as a composer might have been thwarted, "Daddy" Lehrer can take consolation in leading a growing program. The membership trebles between 1918 and 1923. Drum majors and "band sponsors" (analogous to the latter-day band queens) are added. The band gets to play at some pretty lopsided football games too, such as the one in 1917 when the Sooners whale the tar out of Kingfisher College, 179-0. Maybe that is another reason to blow hard.

1936—Order Is Heaven's First Law

Band members must be willing to sacrifice. They practice-march outdoors on frosty Saturdays while classmates comfort themselves in snug dorm rooms or campus hangouts. They give their spare time to raise thousands of dollars so that the band can travel to Sooner football games in distant places, such as the Orange Bowl in 1938. (On a gray September morning in 1934, some of the band almost give their *lives*, when their bus crashes in Tennessee following a trip to a Thanksgiving Day game in Washington, D.C.)

The demands do not stop students from wanting to take part, and since 1929 they have clamored to join the band, which became the Pride of Oklahoma in 1936. The clamor coincides with the arrival of William R. Wehrend, who has directed a half-dozen bands around the country and looks somewhat like Woodrow Wilson. Some 50 students sign up in his first year. But by 1932, the band once again has tripled in size; Wehrend is able to divide the burgeoning program into three outfits—a 45-member WNAD Radio Band, a 75-member Concert Band and a 120-member Parade Band. Within a couple more years there will be a Military Band and an advanced "Pee Wee Band."

Students who want to join must follow the rules. "Order is Heaven's first law," proclaims an etiquette handout Wehrend gives band members one year. "Take places quietly . . . All eyes on the director . . . Sit erect . . . All members must practice at home approximately six hours weekly. . . The intermission must be restful and quiet . . . When rehearsal is over cease all playing." *continued*



William R. Wehrend was a well-traveled, experienced director of both bands and orchestras when the University of Oklahoma hired him in 1929 to revive its band program.

In 1936, women join the program—wearing long white skirts instead of the white pants worn by their male counterparts.

These presumably well-mannered musicians wrestle with a variety of innovations. In 1935, Wehrend turns the Parade Band into a singing group, equipping the members with small megaphones as they march on the field at an October football game. They are said to be one of five such bands in the nation to perform vocally. Then, in 1936, women join the program—wearing long white skirts instead of the white pants worn by their male counterparts. Flag swingers display their skills in choreographed routines. And there is one brief, shining moment this year when four band members hold the world's record for continuous beating of a snare drum (at 10 hours). Order might be Heaven's first law, but with the Pride of Oklahoma, persistence and dedication surely must rank somewhere in the top five.

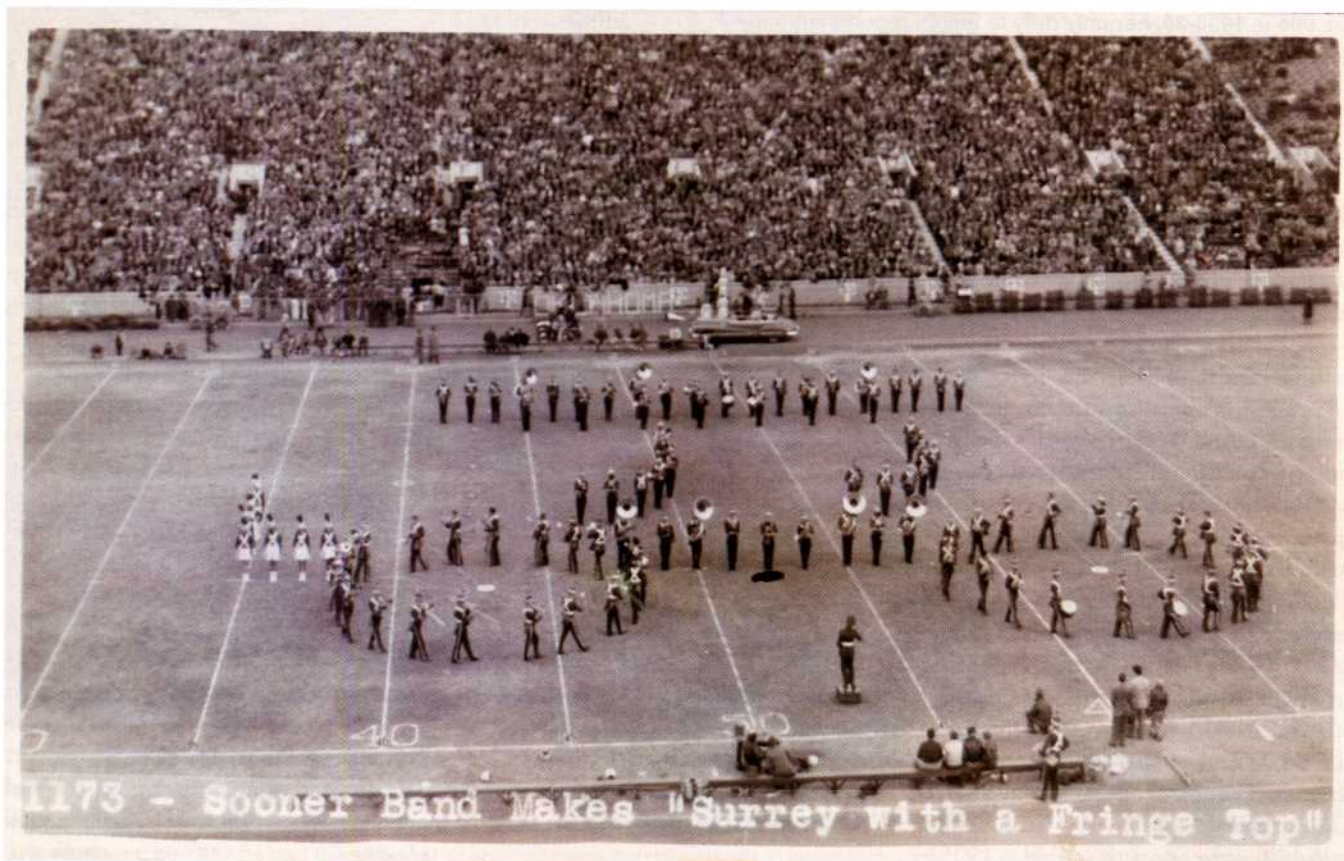
1948—Precise, Intense and Bowl-Bound

OU's current band director, Leonard Haug, plots a halftime drill the way one imagines an old-time general would plan a battle. He is at it on a Sunday night, after an entire day of toil and sweat, pacing around a four-foot-wide by eight-foot-long wooden board marked as a miniature football field. Working with assistants, he studies from varying angles the positions of



ABOVE: Director from 1945 to 1962, Leonard Haug used toy soldiers on a miniature football field to plot the Pride's shows like a general preparing for battle.

BELOW: One of Haug's innovative formations was a surrey with a fringe on top, its wheels rotating as it moved resolutely down the field.





ABOVE: A series of display cases outside the Band Practice Room in Catlett Music Center features a century's worth of Pride memorabilia, including this undated photo of drum majors, band queen and Little Red on Owen Field.

BELOW: When Stanley Kramer's "Oklahoma Crude" was released in 1973, Director Gene Thraillkill, right, invited Henry Mancini, who had written the score, to conduct the Pride in a halftime rendition of the movie's theme music.



more than a hundred lead toy soldiers who are arrayed in formation, each one representing a band member. The idea is to make sure that the fans at next weekend's home game can discern the band's formation from any place in the stands.

Haug calls these formations "simplified," but he is willing to try some tricky maneuvers, such as turning his marchers into a moving surrey, complete with fringe on top. He transfers the positionings to drill charts and rehearses the marching band for six hours over four days, in the end creating Disney-like magic—a circle of players into a turning wheel, or two sousaphones into a wiggling nose.

He has been honing his visions for OU since 1938, when he arrives from Wisconsin to serve as William Wehrend's assistant director. He then leaves the University for two years during World War II, when the shortage of collegiate young men left schools "encountering such problems as trying to spell 'Oglethorpe' with a thirteen-piece band," as one colleague puts it. But he takes the reins of OU's band program from Wehrend in 1945, just in time to see a large increase in enrollment as returning veterans go back to school. They learn Sooner innovations such as the "double header" style of march and the "company front" formation, ideas that are picked up by schools across the nation.

The reconstituted Pride of Oklahoma goes places, in more ways than one. Over the next decade, the Pride travels with the team to bowl games seven times—the Sugar Bowl in 1948-50, then the Orange Bowl in 1953, 1955, 1957 and 1958. And in 1961, the Pride wins the grand prize after marching in the annual Cherry Blossom Festival Parade in Washington, D.C.

Wherever these bandsmen travel, they are remembered—and sometimes



in ways one would not expect. One October Saturday in 1957, the OU Sooners squeak by Colorado 14-13. In the words of Colorado's coach, "I'll always remember that bass drummer in the Oklahoma band pounding harder and harder when our players pleaded for silence. That cost us a touchdown in the third period." It will not be the last time that the Pride of Oklahoma is credited with giving the Sooners a victory.

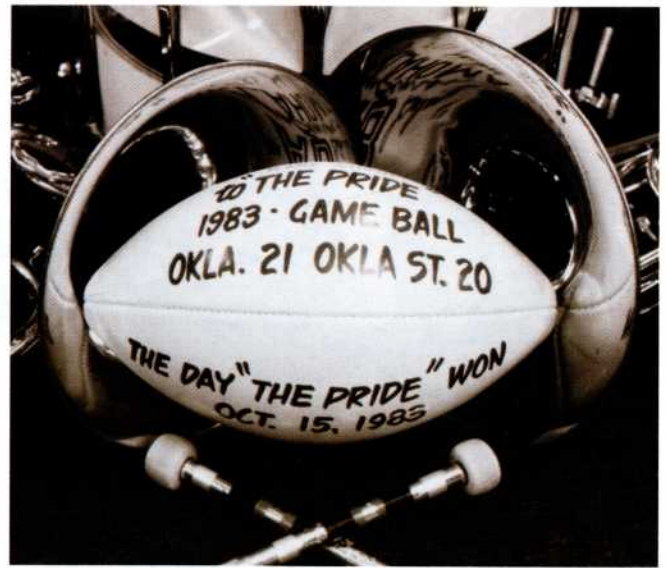
1965—A Shelter in the Storm

Nowadays, the word "Sixties" itself seems to automatically trigger in one's mind a narrow set of news film images—war, angry demonstrations, ecstatic gatherings of the counterculture. But believe it or not, the era has its share of reassuring and inspiring moments. One of them takes place at halftime of a football game at Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. It is the annual Band Day, and the Pride is marching alongside several Oklahoma high school bands. This thousand-strong corps of musicians outline a shield surrounding "USA," while performing "America the Beautiful," and "The Stars and Stripes Forever." The capacity crowd roars its approval. It looks terribly old hat—or perhaps, in light of subsequent events, far ahead of its time.

But the Pride is not old-fashioned in one sense. Their director, Gene A. Braught, has made a number of changes in the program since he arrived from Texas in 1962. He emphasizes precision marching, a faster tempo and a shorter step. Female baton twirlers bolster the band's halftime presentations. Their new West Point-style uniforms, introduced this year, garb the Pride in a brighter red, with satin capes and tall fur hats.

They need to dress well. After all, they are in the public eye more than ever. Braught leads them in a nationally televised 1963 Orange Bowl performance, where they perform an acclaimed program called "Designs in Marching," in which they execute geometric designs while performing traditional marching tunes. Each spring, the Symphonic Band travels to high schools, teaching the new generation and, along the way, recruiting future Pride members. And on one public concert tour this spring, the symphonic bandsmen give three performances a day, each at a different venue.

It makes for a higher profile and, for the students, a lot of memories. But perhaps the best memories overall right now are the sunny and serene ones most atypical of the way this decade will be remembered. A smiling Miss America, Oklahoma's Jane Anne Jayroe, directs the band for one tune at the OU-Texas game in 1966. "Doc" Severinsen, the famed trumpet player from television's "Tonight Show," wows Memorial Stadium crowds with his soloing in 1966 and 1970. On one Orange Bowl trip, the entire 100-plus band sings a doxology prior to taking a restaurant meal, prompting admiring Florida State fans to



The game ball goes to the Pride for a non-stop "Boomer Sooner" that propelled the Sooners to victory over the Cowboys.



"Tonight Show" trumpeter "Doc" Severinsen, who soloed with the Pride in 1966 and again in 1970, was one of several celebrity performers appearing at home football games during the tenure of OU Band Director Gene A. Braught.



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1983—*Spirit, Achievement and Just Plain Fun*

A great college band can be bad for business. It happens at Oklahoma Memorial Stadium one Saturday this year, just before Halloween. Instead of filling up on hot dogs, popcorn and soft drinks at halftime, fans on hand for the OU-Kansas game are laughing good-naturedly at one of the Pride’s most entertaining shows ever. In the spirit of the holiday, director Gene Thraikill, popularly known as “Coach,” has had the 200-plus band members cook up something special for the performance.

They are in *costume*—dressed as everything from a doctor to a bathroom commode, from a pair of dice to a pair of vampires, and so on. The fans cheer, and for today’s game, the concession stands report their lowest income ever. The Pride will do several encores to this show in the years ahead. And the Illinois-born Thraikill, who was named OU’s band director in 1971 and is almost midway through a 30-year tenure unprecedented in the band’s history, beams with delight.

It is a lively time, and the Pride is getting kudos from all around. For one 1974 halftime show, the band executes some snazzy choreographed dancing while performing a contemporary soul tune. That offbeat bit of business nets them a standing ovation that delays the start of the second half. Fans also love antics like the Pride’s needling of the Sooners’ number-one gridiron enemy, by playing “The Eyes of Texas” as a funeral dirge. A lot of high schoolers, some of whom have heard the Pride perform on long-playing records and have seen them on their televised bowl-game performances, want to take part. The band grows from approximately 160 at the time of Thraikill’s hiring to around 200 five years later, and up again to 298 in 1987. That, by the way, is the year the Pride wins the national

Sudler Intercollegiate Marching Band Trophy, a marching-band equivalent of the Heisman.

The fortunes of OU’s dynamic band seem to correlate with its dynamic football team, and somewhere along the way the Pride seems to acquire a power to affect the outcome of games. Take this year’s contest with Oklahoma State. As OU falls behind 20-3 early in the fourth quarter, Director Thraikill is taken away by Stillwater police for not having a sideline pass. Outraged, he orders his musicians to “start playing and *don’t stop until the team’s ahead!*” They blow hard, like no band since the days of “Daddy” Lehrer. And after 300 choruses or so of “Boomer Sooner,” the

Sooners win in the final seconds, 21-20. The whole story’s incredible, but true—and the band is awarded a game ball,

Reunion of the Century

The “100 Years of Pride” Reunion kicks off with a 7:30-9:30 p.m. reception, Friday, October 22, 2004, in the new Kerr-McGee Stadium Club on the east side of Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. Saturday events include Alumni Band marching rehearsal, lunch and a business meeting. Exact times will be posted online at bands.ou.edu when the game time is announced, along with other reunion details and registration information—or Pride alumni may call 405/325-2731.

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About a decade later, when the football Sooners go through several wilderness years, an imaginative letter-writer posits in *The Oklahoma Daily* that the mediocre play of the team can be blamed on . . . lackluster performances by the band! Most people in the OU community do not agree to say the least. And as Thraikill announces his retirement in 2000, the Sooners fully emerge from the shadows to give him one last thrill in a three-decade career, going undefeated for the season and winning their seventh national championship.

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continued

2004—Live On!

The Pride's centennial celebration dies down among hugs and soft farewells. Then on a invigorating late October afternoon, the band is on its south campus practice field again, its home now for the past three decades. (A restructuring of responsibilities in 2001 has placed band alumnus Brian Britt in the Pride director's role and promoted former Thrailkill assistant William Wakefield to director of bands.) On the field this day, Britt leads the Pride, now a record 320 members strong, through several numbers for Saturday's home game. His students still draw ovations from the crowds at the newly expanded Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. But in this nationally troubled time, the praise sometimes comes for more serious work—a heartfelt rendition of "Amazing Grace" or a performance salute to American veterans. The Pride is always in tune, and in tune with the times.

Yet at a university that in many ways still seems so young—and looks so young, with all its new construction and landscaping—OU's marching band could be said to convey to this new century the same values of the bandmen who took the field a century ago. Fun co-mingled with innocence, team effort, good sportsmanship, creativity, and hard work in pursuit of a worthy goal. Whatever the style of the uniform or the name of the bandmaster, the Pride continues to absorb and transmit these values. And without a doubt the students practicing this day will carry them into the years ahead, both on the home field and at the away games and bowl games, into so many different towns, cities and states. There they will leave impressions of fondness and respect, just as their thousands of predecessors once did. They will serve as fitting ambassadors for the University and the state.

For they are exactly what their name says—the *pride* of Oklahoma. For the last hundred years. For the next hundred.

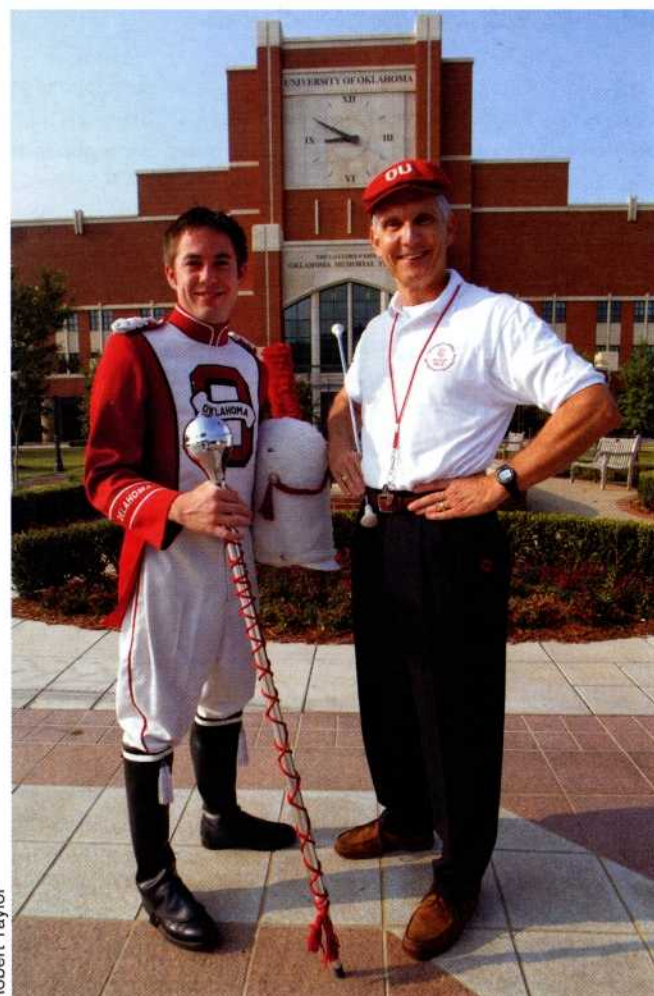
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The Pride's drum majors kick off the fan frenzy before each game by leading the band onto the field with the "Oklahoma Strut," a trademark back-bend maneuver originated by Mel Penn, right, drum major from 1969 to 1972 and now on the staff of OU's Price College of Business. Clint Williams, left, had the honored position in 2002 and 2003.



Alicia Britt

When ESPN Game Day's Kirk Herbstreit and Lee Corso, center, came for the 2003 OU-OSU football game, they stopped by to visit the Pride and were surrounded, on the left, by Assistant Director Michael Boone, Pride Director Brian Britt and Director of Bands William Wakefield, and on the right by the band's graduate assistants.



Robert Taylor