

# Fredrik Holmberg's Legacy

When Fredrik Holmberg got off the train in Norman, Oklahoma, from Lindsborg, Kansas, in 1903, he looked around for the tallest buildings he could find and headed toward them. Not until he stopped and talked to someone on the "campus" did Holmberg realize he had mistaken the mental hospital for the University of Oklahoma. Clutching his violin under one arm, he walked a mile and a half back through town in a storm of red dust before finding the real campus, which he said later was not nearly as impressive as the first.

Discouraged by the barren plain and ready to catch the next train north, Holmberg instead kept his appointment with David Ross Boyd. The OU president "had a way of giving one an optimistic outlook," Holmberg wrote, and after their initial encounter, the music professor from Bethany College decided to stay. Within his first six weeks, he organized a men's glee club, a women's glee club, an oratoria chorus, a band and an orchestra. For the next 30 years, Holmberg never stopped working for the University and its students.

A native of Sweden who immigrated to the United States while still a teen, Holmberg worked in the wheat fields of central Kansas to pay his way through college. Even before graduating from Bethany in 1899, he was teaching violin—his favorite instrument—and harmony. According to OU historian David W. Levy, Holmberg believed that music, almost as much as religion, could provide the cultural cement that bound a citizenry together. He even credited "the extremely high moral standards" of Lindsborg to the town's devotion to communal music.

Throughout the years, Holmberg was a tireless advocate for fine arts education, not only at OU, but around the state as well. He often would take his show on the road, giving concerts and plays in out-of-town venues and always encouraging the local high school students to consider OU after graduation.

In 1918, the University built its first performing arts center, due in large part to the successful fine arts program orchestrated by Dean Holmberg. The building with its grand hall, opulent seating and dramatic domed ceiling was so magnificent by Oklahoma standards, it became the venue

for nearly every major event in the state. Poets and presidents, football legends and ballerinas all left their mark on the stage.

In 1920, a group of students circulated a petition requesting that the name of the Fine Arts Building be changed to Holmberg Hall. But Holmberg objected, saying although it was deeply touching, he felt it inappropriate to name a building after a living person. Two years after his death in 1936, the State Regents for Higher Education officially renamed the building for the man who brought his love of music to Oklahoma.



Although she never met her grandfather, who died before she was born, Jamy Coulson has very strong impressions of Fredrik Holmberg. Her mother, Louise Holmberg Coulson Taft, was Holmberg's only daughter and grew up in the house the fine arts dean and his wife, Signy, built at 766 De Barr Avenue in 1914. Coulson herself was a Norman girl, graduating from Norman High and living with her mother and grandmother within a mile of the OU campus in the Southridge Addition.

The trip from Boulder, Colorado, to Norman for the opening of the Reynolds Center was a sentimental journey for Coulson. She stayed in the family home on DeBarr, which is

now a bed and breakfast, and visited the hall unobserved in the quiet of the afternoon, not sure what she would find.

"I wanted to see it on my own," says Coulson. "I wasn't sure how I would feel. I was afraid my grandfather might somehow have been forgotten in the renovation." Throughout her private tour, she was relieved to find Fredrik Holmberg's legacy very much alive and well. In addition to being featured in the lobby's central mural, Holmberg's contributions to the University are noted on a large brass plaque just outside the main entrance, and a sculpture of the former dean, in conductor's pose, resides in a cozy niche high above the front doors.

"It was very well done," Coulson says of the new facility. "I think my grandfather would have been very pleased. I'm terribly glad I came. The performance was terrific.

"My family would have loved to have done something like this for my grandfather, but, unfortunately, we did not have the means to do so. I am so grateful that someone did. It's just beautiful."