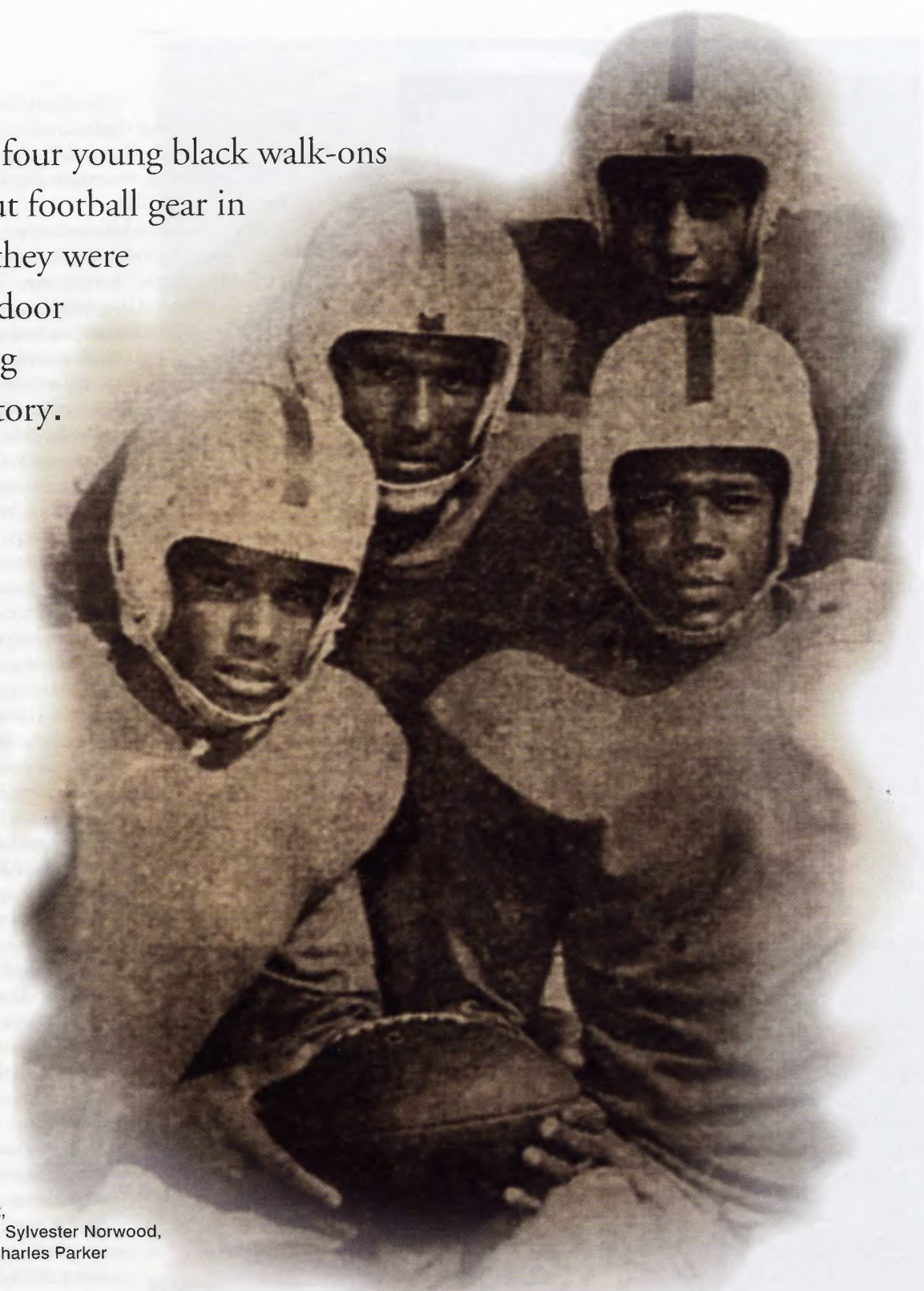


When four young black walk-ons checked out football gear in fall 1955, they were opening a door and making Sooner history.



Clockwise from left,
George Farmer Jr., Sylvester Norwood,
Frank Wilson Jr., Charles Parker
Photo provided

Uncommon

Two brothers leisurely stride along an uncrowded sidewalk, talking, laughing and soaking up the spirit of a perfect autumn afternoon. Their conversation flows easily, revolving around friends, family and simple pleasures, like the smell of mom's home cooking.

Johnny Farmer playfully grabs his older brother George's arm as the two further immerse themselves in their coltish exchange. It has been a few weeks since George Farmer began living his ambitious dream of playing college football, and a rare trip to Norman by his best friend and baby brother is exactly what his soul has needed to recharge itself.

Barely a block into their journey, the harmony of the moment is broken by the clamor of an approaching group of young men. Without warning, the brothers find themselves forced off the sidewalk and subjected to several racial slurs that leave them bewildered and angry.

"Can you believe they allow niggers into our school?" a voice booms above the sudden commotion.

The young black siblings bristle as they scoot to the grass and away from a possible confrontation.

"You boys must be lost. Better get on back to where you came from, you hear?" yells another voice amidst the cluster of taunting faces.

The incident lasts only seconds and unfolds without any physical contact or actual threats of violence. But the hostility filling the air is unmistakable.

George Farmer Jr. does his best to control the rage he feels growing in the pit of his stomach. He recalls the words offered by his teacher, Clara Luper, and the vow he made to her before he enrolled at the University of Oklahoma that fateful fall in 1955.

"Miss Luper knew George and his friends were going to experience situations they had never run into before. She knew about the prejudice that existed, and she made George promise not to retaliate with violence," explains Johnny Farmer, more than 50 years after the event. "George was very prideful. I know it was hard sometimes for my brother to hold some of his anger

inside, but he also knew violence was not the answer."

In reality, violence was a legitimate way of fighting back, at least where George Farmer's football fortunes were concerned. He used his muscular 6-foot-2, 183-pound frame to pound anyone who lined up across from him during practice. He was quick and instinctive, and especially hard-nosed when it came to defending what he saw as his one chance to be a part of something special.

The Sooner football program had established itself among the nation's elite during the late '40s and into the '50s, winning a national title in 1950 while earning conference titles in each of Bud Wilkinson's first eight seasons as OU's head coach.

As the 1955 season approached, the Sooners once again were expected to challenge at a championship level. OU was in the midst of a record 47-game winning streak, and players like Tommy McDonald, Jerry Tubbs, Jimmy Harris and Clendon Thomas were destined to lead Wilkinson's charges to two more national titles over the next two seasons.

Lost in the hype and excitement surrounding the varsity's ongoing success story was the fact that for the first time in 61 years of Sooner football, African-American players had decided to try out for the team. When Farmer, Charles Parker, Sylvester Norwood and Frank Wilson Jr. checked out practice gear on September 12, 1955, history was being made.

A year earlier, a young black quarterback from Oklahoma City Douglass named Andy Dement had approached Wilkinson about the possibility of joining his squad. Dement was being recruited by a number of other schools, including Indiana University, but he had always dreamed of playing for the Sooners.

"My father and I showed up at Coach Wilkinson's office one day in the summer [of 1954] and asked if we could talk to him about me coming to OU," explains Dement. "We had a very good conversation, and Coach Wilkinson was very cordial, but the bottom line was they wanted me to walk on with no guarantees. I already had some scholarship offers, and I really needed the financial help. In the end, it was an easy decision."

Dement opted to attend Maryland State College, where he

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

Courage

Photo provided



Members of the 1954 Dunjee football team pose near the school. From left, front row: John Paul Patton, Lynn Smith, Clarence Zigler, Alvin Mitchell, Buerl Swain, Joseph Carr, Donald Ray Massey; middle row: Coach Alexander Jones, Lee Daniel McCauley, Maurice Smith, Raymond Guess, **Sylvester Norwood**, **Charles Parker**, Willard Reed, Frank James, Maurice Luster, Coach Curley Sloss; back row: Norman Morton, Alan Mukes, Theodore Jones, Leroy Swain, Jake Joseph, James Guess, J.O. Joseph, Jerome Dubois, Gilbert Roberts. Not pictured: **George and Johnny Farmer**.

was a four-year starter at quarterback.

None of the four young men who came to OU the following year had talked to Wilkinson prior to the start of preseason camp. However, like all walk-ons, they had received a letter from OU stating the University was not responsible for any injuries that might occur during workouts.

Without any financial aid, Farmer, Parker and Norwood commuted each day from their homes located between Choctaw and Spencer, in the Dunjee School District. Farmer and Parker both had cars, and the three of them took turns driving and sharing gas expenses.

Wilson was the only member of the foursome who lived on campus. His father made a good living in the real estate and hotel business, allowing the younger Wilson to reside in the all-male dormitory known as Kingfisher House.

“When we talked about playing football at OU, we knew it was not going to be easy. We discussed the possibilities with our coach [Curley Sloss] and decided it was the right thing to do,” says Norwood, whose slight build (5-11, 160 pounds) and quick feet had earned him the nickname “Rabbit” during his high school days. “We had never met Frank before we all ended up at practice that first day. But we knew we had to stick together, so we became fast friends.

“Needless to say, we were not welcomed with open arms. All the prejudice was a product of the times, I suppose. Most of the guys on that [freshman] team had never played against a black player before, so they had no idea what we were about. Plus, no Negro players had ever played football at Oklahoma, and a lot of people really didn’t want that to change.”

From the moment the four young men showed up in the equipment room to be fitted for pads, a certain amount of



Norman Transcript

In 1954, Andy Dement almost became OU’s first black player. Here, the Oklahoma City Douglass star and his mother, Helen Dement, look over some of his press clippings.

tension was evident. Racial slurs were frequently tossed about during the rigors of workouts, and while not all of the white players looked at the black kids with contempt, few hands were ever extended as a show of respect or camaraderie.

Some white players thought the black players were only out for publicity, that they had no intention of actually competing for spots on the freshman roster. That theory quickly evapo-

“They said the ‘n-word’ was used quite a bit during practice, but never really to their faces—more behind their backs than anything. They probably ran into as many situations away from the field as they did on it.”

rated, as the four prospects proved their mettle during the opening days of practice.

One thing Farmer, Parker, Norwood and Wilson had in common with the rest of the walk-ons was the fact they were pushed harder and treated more harshly than those young men on scholarship.

“The coaches did their best every day to run off all the walk-ons. That was just part of the deal,” says John Ederer, a white walk-on from Oklahoma City who survived the rigors of fall practice and eventually earned football letters in 1956 and 1957. “I know it was tough for those black players because they had it even harder than the rest of us did.”

Wilkinson charged freshman coaches Port Robertson and Norman McNabb with thinning out the herd of prospects. They put the green-clad lads through some intense training routines that trimmed the initial 87-man roster to 65 in less than a week. By the end of September, the number of “survivors” was down to 46 and would continue to dwindle as the practice season progressed.

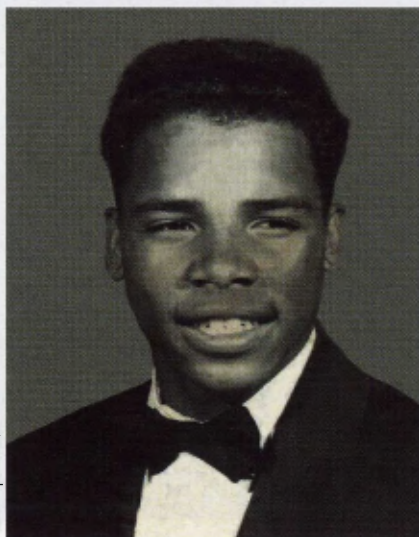
“I remember those young black kids coming out, and I know they faced some prejudice that still existed at that time,” said McNabb, now 83 and living in Atlanta. “The other thing they had going against them was the amount of talent we had on those teams. We’re talking about the mid-1950s when the competition for positions was really, really fierce. That 1955 freshman class was particularly talented.”

Despite being faced daily with what amounted to both physical and verbal abuse, Farmer, Parker, Norwood and Wilson remained committed. They stuck together on and off the field whenever possible and did their best to ignore racial slights.

On the days when the challenges seemed too much, they took solace in the presence of John E. Green, who eventually became the second African-American to graduate from the OU School of Law.

“I had been in the Army prior to my attending OU, so those guys kind of looked at me as a mentor,” explains Green. “They would come to my room at Whitehand Hall and talk about what they were going through. Even though they all were talented, none of them had been invited to come to OU, so they were not exactly embraced by the team.

“They said the ‘n-word’ was used quite a bit during practice, but never really to their faces—more behind their backs than anything. They probably ran into as many situations away from the field as they did on it.”



Photos provided

George Farmer Jr., left, led the state in scoring and earned All-State football honors his senior season at Dunjee High School. After his OU experience, Frank Wilson Jr., right, served two stints in the military, including one tour of duty in Vietnam as a communications specialist.

While the freshmen scrimmaged regularly against the varsity, their team was only allowed to play three actual games against rival freshman squads. Those games—one each against Tulsa, Oklahoma State and Air Force—were all set for November that season.

Norwood never made it that far. He became a casualty the first week of October when he injured his back making a tackle during daily drills. Since the football program was not picking up the tab for his medical expenses, Norwood had no choice but to leave the team.

“My back was so bad I couldn’t make the drive from home to Norman. I missed three weeks of practice, and by then, it was too late for me to return,” says the 70-year-old Norwood, who moved to California a month later and has lived there the past 51 years. “My injury dictated my decision, but sometimes I wonder what might have happened if I had stayed healthy.”

In the meantime, Johnny Farmer witnessed a variety of racially-motivated incidents during the handful of occasions he visited his brother on campus. It saddened him to see George constantly subjected to that type of hostility.

The older Farmer had led the state in touchdowns his senior season at Dunjee. Despite having a football scholarship waiting for him at Langston, he wanted to test himself against the best players in the country.

“George played through his share of injuries, but I could see him becoming more and more disheartened by the way they were being treated as people,” says Johnny Farmer. “George had a lot of pride, and he basically had to swallow it every single day when he was attending OU. The thing that upset him the most—he knew he was



Photo provided

Charles Parker (circa 1980s) was an All-State lineman who one former OU teammate said “could have started for any Big Seven school.”



Elisea Rea

The lone surviving member of the “first four,” Sylvester Norwood, has spent most of his post-OU life living in California. The 71-year-old Norwood, shown here admiring a picture of the four black players that ran in a fall 1955 edition of *The Oklahoma Daily*, admits he still keeps up with Sooner football even after all of these years.

as good an athlete as anyone on that freshman team, but he wasn’t allowed to show it. All he ever wanted was a fair chance.”

The final straw for Farmer came one late October evening after a scrimmage when he discovered that his car had been vandalized. The word “nigger” was painted across the door, and several of the windows had been broken out.

“George had never quit anything his entire life, but he had had enough. He was tired of the abuse and tired of walking away instead of defending himself when confronted by some of those bigots,” says his brother. “It was really hard to see him give up on his dream like that. But his heart just wasn’t in it anymore.”

Farmer left OU a few days later and never returned college.

That same week, Parker suffered a serious concussion when his head struck the steel frame of a blocking sled during practice drills. Unable to afford proper medical care, the 5-11, 200-pound guard was relegated to the sidelines for the rest of the fall. He eventually passed all 13 hours of courses he carried, but opted to transfer to Central State in Edmond the following semester.

“I lined up against Charles Parker quite a bit that fall, and I can honestly say he probably could have started for any Big Seven school. That’s how good he was,” says Ederer. “It’s unfortunate he didn’t get that chance.”

From the beginning, Frank Wilson Jr. had possessed the most unlikely story. Although extremely athletic, the 6-foot-2, 180-pound Oklahoma City Douglass product did not play high school football. While his motives for walking on at OU remain a mystery, he was the last of the four African-American players left standing.

That, however, did not last long. Without the support of the Dunjee trio, Wilson had had all he could take. He checked in his gear a few days prior to the freshman team’s first game.

Wilson’s brief football career was over, but he remained a student and a member of the Air Force ROTC program at OU through the 1956 spring semester.

“It would have been great to see one of those guys make the freshman team, but the odds were against them,” offers Green, 77, a retired judge who spent 35 years with the U.S. Attorney’s office. “I still believe that even though none of the four ended up playing for OU, they definitely helped smooth the way for other black players who came after them.”

The first of that second wave appeared on campus the following fall in the form of an 18-year-old kid named Prentice Gault, who found himself negotiating the same campus sidewalks and hurdles as his four predecessors.

A Douglass grad who worked summers with the Farmer brothers at Twin Hills Golf Club in Oklahoma City, Gault knew he was not the first black kid to go out for football at OU. He once expressed surprise that a player with George Farmer’s talent was not able to make the team.

Fortunately for Gault, his bid to earn a spot on OU’s freshman roster in 1956 was bolstered by a scholarship package financed by a group of local black physicians. His support network also included Wilkinson, who realized the time had come to integrate his program.

Gault’s well-documented display of spirit and courage helped lay the foundation for future generations of African-American students. Gault, who died in 2005 at the age of 67, was a

"I still believe that even though none of the four ended up playing for OU, they definitely helped smooth the way for other black players who came after them."

tremendous success on the gridiron and later in life. The athletics academic center at OU bears his name.

In 1957, Wallace Johnson became the second black player to make OU's freshman squad. He had been Gaut's teammate at Douglass, and he received a similar scholarship deal as his best friend upon his arrival in Norman. Although injuries plagued his collegiate career, he went on to letter for the Sooners in 1961.

Looking back, Johnson does not hesitate to express his gratitude for the courageous efforts of Farmer, Parker, Norwood and Wilson.

"There is little doubt those guys raised awareness. I don't think they had any notion of becoming heroes, but they faced some real challenges and helped break down some barriers," explains Johnson, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army. "Prentice obviously opened the door for a lot of people behind him, but I think he would be the first to acknowledge the importance of the four young black men who preceded him in the program." ■

Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator and writes freelance OU sports articles for Sooner Magazine.

Epilogue

George Farmer Jr.
Born: 3/29/1937
Choctaw
Died: 10/10/1997
Los Angeles, California

An All-State selection at Dunjee in both football and basketball, George Farmer's post-high school athletic career never panned out like he had hoped. After serving a stint in the U.S. Army, he returned to Oklahoma to play semi-pro football before devoting much of his off time to officiating both high school and college football and basketball. Farmer eventually moved to California. Two of his sons played major college sports. His oldest, George Farmer III, was a star receiver at Southern University before spending six seasons with the Los Angeles Rams, while Tony Farmer played basketball at Nebraska. A grandson, Terrance Crawford, played basketball at Oklahoma State, and another grandson, Daniel Orton, is a 6-11 sophomore star at Oklahoma City Bishop McGuinness High School. Farmer died of cancer at age 60.

Frank W. Wilson Jr.
Born: 2/16/1937
Oklahoma City
Died: 12/27/2004
Fort Worth, Texas

After leaving OU in 1956, Frank Wilson earned a degree in electrical engineering. He moved to Texas, served two years in the U.S. Air Force and worked for the U.S. Department of Defense. He spent a year overseas during the Vietnam War as a communications specialist. Wilson spent his spare time as a ham radio operator, while remaining a big OU football fan over the years. Besides working as an electrical engineer at Love Field in Dallas, he was an avid reader, collected electronic gadgets and was a

talented saxophonist. His childhood friend, Roosevelt Heath, says of Wilson: "Frank was very bright and very determined. When he set his mind to something, he'd go do it." Wilson died of a heart attack at age 67.

Charles Edward Parker
Born: 5/15/1937
Died: 1/31/1994
Oklahoma City

Described by former Dunjee teammate Willard Reed as "a player good enough to play for any college program during his prime," Charles Parker saw his playing career end after one season at Central State University in Edmond. An artist at heart, he put his vision and design skills to the test during a lengthy career in the floral arrangement business, including a long stint at Capitol Hill Florist. Parker was also a master barbecue chef. He had two children, Steven and Gail. Despite his experiences while at OU, he remained a loyal Sooner fan.

Sylvester Richard Norwood
Born: 6/22/1936
Kingfisher
Age: 71
Resides: Panorama City, California

After moving to California in December 1955 to assist his parents, who were in failing health, Norwood opted to stay on the West Coast. He earned his degree from Southern Cal and worked in the aerospace industry with rubber products. He eventually retired in 2000 after spending several years as the manager of a chemical engineering plant. As a young man, he spent two years in the U.S. Army at Fort Carson, Colorado, returning to California upon his discharge. He and his family have been living in Panorama City for the last 20 years. Norwood has three children.