



prologue.

The passing of OU's ninth president recalls challenging times met with courage and grace.

When prominent persons reach their senior years, the common practice for media outlets is to have on file a fall-back obituary, complete with photograph. An account of President Emeritus Paul F. Sharp's achievements was prepared a number of years ago as he faced the illness that would take his life on February 19, 2009, at the age of 91. The file photograph was very nice—a dignified, elder-statesman pose in full color, taken for the annual report of one of the foundation boards he had served in retirement.

The image was the Paul Sharp that sprang to mind for many colleagues—local, state and national—who had known him in the decades since he left the OU presidency to turn his talents to philanthropic causes, professional consulting, civic betterment. It was not the pictorial choice of the person who knew him best.

Rose Sharp's selection of a black-and-white, slightly shopworn, candid photo from the mid-1970s came with a rush of memories. Here was an active, vital man at the height of his career, faced with all the problems and turmoil of higher education's most daunting days—confident, eager, ready to face down campus demonstrators, cool student outrage, encourage disheartened faculty, answer critics, search for solutions. How could we have forgotten? It was such a long time ago.

Sharp's Oklahoma background consisted of undergraduate years spent at Phillips University in Enid, chosen for its affiliation with the Disciples of Christ (Christian) Church, where he met and married Rose Anderson. Born in Missouri and reared in Minnesota, the son of two medical doctors, he was destined for academia, but his graduate studies were interrupted by World War II service as U.S. Navy liaison officer to the Royal Australian Navy aboard the HMAS *Hobart*. His resulting affection for the Navy and Australia would be lifelong.

By the time he accepted the University of Oklahoma presidency in 1971, he had been president of Hiram College in Ohio, chancellor of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and president of Drake University in Iowa—this after faculty appointments at the Univer-



Paul F. Sharp

sity of Minnesota, Iowa State University and the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He needed all that experience to deal with Oklahoma.

Detractors abounded. The preceding Hollomon administration had left funding, management and political issues at crisis level. Dissatisfaction with the University bordered on hostility among segments of the public and on the campus. Civil rights protests were ongoing; someone even lobbed a fire bomb at the president's home.

Sharp spent the next six-and-a-half years righting the ship. He restored confidence and heightened morale. He pushed for increased legislative funding and was the first OU president to embrace private funding as a major facet of his administration. He transformed the

OU Medical Center in Oklahoma City into the OU Health Sciences Center with a broadened educational mission. He brought University faculty and staff into a viable, portable retirement system.

Then in 1978, when life at OU was looking up, a mild stroke brought Sharp's tenure as president to an end—but not his service to the institution. After taking some time to regain his health, he returned to the classroom, spending 10 years as Regents professor of history and higher education, then several more as distinguished professor of history at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma in Chickasha.

Nationally he was a major consultant for higher educational institutions and systems and served on boards of numerous education-related associations, twice chairing the Educational Testing Service. He was a member of the governing boards of organizations both local and statewide—medical, historical, cultural and philanthropic in nature. He was inducted into the Oklahoma Education Hall of Fame and designated one of Oklahoma's Living Treasures in 2003 by the Oklahoma Health Center. The Paul F. Sharp Concert Hall in OU's Catlett Music Center bears his name. When he finally closed his office in Monnet Hall in 2001, transferring to his home a lifetime of awards and gifts honoring his service was a major moving event.

Paul Sharp's memorial service filled to capacity the First Christian Church he had attended for nearly 40 years. For all the glowing tributes spoken that day, perhaps the hymns best reflected the guideposts of the life being celebrated: "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," "Eternal Father, Strong to Save (The Navy Hymn)" and "Amazing Grace."

Then the organist recessed the congregation to the soaring strains of "Boomer Sooner."
—CJB