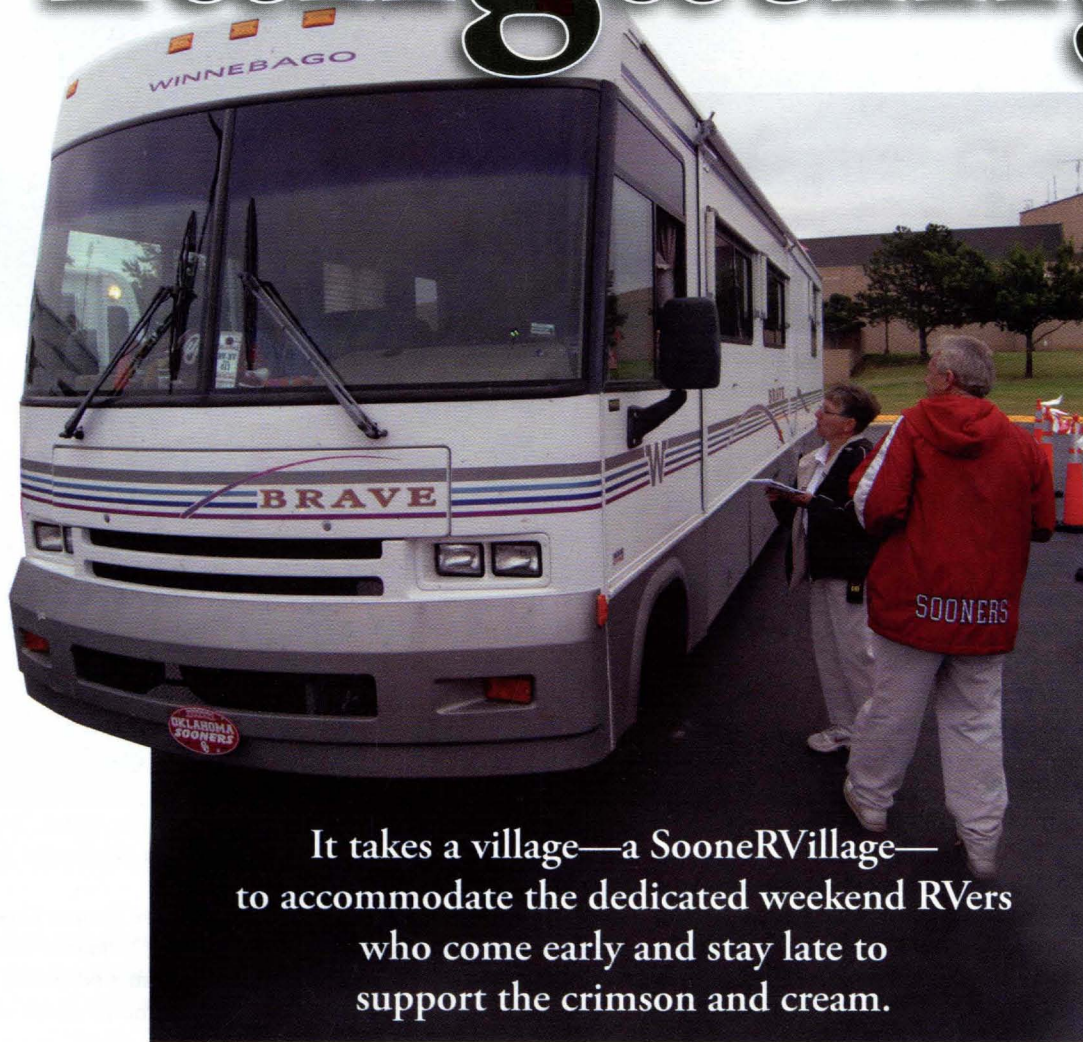


Extreme Tailgating

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR



It takes a village—a SooneRVillage—to accommodate the dedicated weekend RVers who come early and stay late to support the crimson and cream.

The rigs start rolling into Norman Thursday evening. Within 24 hours the acres of blacktop on the west side of Lloyd Noble Center are transformed into SooneRVillage, the weekend destination for hundreds of Sooner faithful. Call it the ultimate tailgate, way beyond the temporary tents pitched around campus for game day. Generators hum, flags fly, room extensions activate, ground covers roll out and grills fire up in preparation for the Saturday gridiron clash during the University of Oklahoma football season.

It is a temporary community drawn together by a common love of Sooner football and all the fan activities surrounding it. Joseph Hughes, event operations assistant for Lloyd Noble



Included in the game-day RVers regularly gathering at the LNC lot is a 50-member group of motor homes, dubbed Sooner Coaches, who are part of the Family Motor Coach Association. In addition to Norman, the coaches also hit the road to a number of away-game sites.

Center and a manager of the village, spends home game weekends orchestrating the smooth transition from basketball arena parking lot during the week to RV village by Saturday. He says the concept and the camaraderie have grown steadily since its creation.

Season passes for all of the 130 spaces in the electrical hook-up lot were sold for 2009. That is up from 84 in 2007. On the non-electrical side of the village, 48 spots were reserved this season, up from just 12 two years ago.

“This past summer, the Lloyd Noble Center expanded the non-electric section to assist with increased demands,” says Hughes. “Also, the athletic department is looking at the possibility of expanding again, but we do not have a time frame on it.”

Extra amenities have been added each year and now include musical entertainment on Friday evenings, appearances by the OU spirit squads, mascots Boomer and Sooner, and a pep band courtesy of the Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band. University Bookstore is on hand to sell novelties. There is an area for pets, and 24-hour security is provided.

Vehicles come in all shapes and sizes, from million-dollar motor coaches to smaller Winnebagos to fifth-wheel trailers and simple campers. Some folks haul grills and sport vehicles as well as cars to maneuver around Norman during game weekend. Big-screen televisions are set up in outdoor living areas and broadcast the day’s big match-ups for Sooner fans awaiting departure to Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium or for those who chose to enjoy the game from their parking lot “home.”

For Vernon and Rita Millspaugh, of Oklahoma City, being Sooner fans comes as naturally as breathing. Their 2007 40-foot Endeavor Holiday Rambler is parked in the middle of a group they helped form called Sooner Coaches—in reference to motor homes, not the guys wearing headsets on the sidelines during the game.

As a chapter of the Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA), the only requirement to join Sooner Coaches is to own a motor home. Of course, devotion to the crimson and cream goes without saying. As of October, the group had 50 motor coach memberships for a total of 97 members. The group is proud to claim Joe Castiglione and wife Kristen as honorary members. With his game day duties as OU vice president of intercollegiate athletics programs and director of athletics, Joe does not have the entire weekend to devote to tailgating festivities, but the Castigliones have a reserved spot in the village, and they typically bring their rig to at least one game during the season.

It was Rita Millspaugh who suggested the name “Sooner Coaches” during an initial gathering when the motor home group was forming several years ago.

“During the meeting, I suggested the name ‘Sooner Coaches’ for the club, and it won the vote,” she says. “‘Sooner’ because we support the OU Sooners and we’re from Oklahoma, and ‘Coaches’ because a member has to own a motor coach to belong to the club.”

Naturally, football season is the most active time for Sooner Coaches. The group also meets throughout the year to plan for the upcoming football season. Part of their inspiration to organize came from witnessing the 400-plus RVs that traveled to Norman in 2002 to support another crimson-clad team—the Crimson Tide from the University of Alabama.

One notable event for Sooner Coaches during the 2009 season was a large caravan that traveled to Arlington, Texas, in September when OU opened against Brigham Young University in the new Dallas Cowboy stadium. Millspaugh smiles as she reports that the group created a bit of a traffic jam in Arlington.

George Dorris, of Oklahoma City, president of Sooner



Every variety of vehicle, from million-dollar motor coaches to smaller Winnebagos to fifth-wheel trailers and simple campers, begin rolling in early on game-day weekend to claim their spot in SoonerVillage, the fully hooked-up section of the Lloyd Noble Center parking lot.



Brad Buesing, who regularly hauls his custom-fitted smoker behind his Winnebago from Dallas, prepares a pregame meal for family and friends before the OU-Tulsa kickoff.

Coaches, says RVers are friendly folks to begin with, and coming together in support of OU football brings out the best in people, even fans of the visiting team.

“It’s amazing,” he says. “I have never seen anyone here be disrespectful or rude. Last year, we had people from Texas Tech here, and they were very gracious fans.”

Adds Fred Thorwant, of Edmond, “The RV village is one of the best things OU has ever done.”

OU alumnus Tony Heaberlin, of Tulsa, notes that the OU facilities are the best in the Big 12, perhaps among the best in the country. “Other schools don’t have these kinds of facilities,” he says. “Certainly, nothing in the Big 12 is as nice as this.”

The irony of flying the bright orange flag of Auburn University in the midst of so much crimson and cream is not lost on Tim Johnson, of Tulsa. He admits getting a lot of grief about it but is quick to point out that his OU flag flies on top. To Johnson’s way

of thinking, there is a valid reason for displaying the War Eagle colors.

“My daughter goes to Auburn, and I send more money there than I spend here at OU,” he quips.

As he tends to some chicken on a bright red grill a few hours before kickoff, Johnson says he enjoys the camaraderie of his fellow RVers and notes that OU facilities are hands down the best he has experienced.

“At Auburn University, you park in a hay field,” he says. “There are no facilities to speak of. The electricity here at OU is such a great idea—it’s just like home.”

It is hard to miss the recreational vehicle of David and Megan Dunn, from Fittstown, just south of Ada. Their shiny, slate blue, 54-foot custom-built rig is connected to a Volvo semi tractor-trailer cab. The Dunns and their four children are enjoying their first season

as SoonerVillage members.

“We talked about it last year and decided this was the year to try it out,” David Dunn says. “We are big Sooner fans and enjoy being around like-minded people. We have met a lot of people and have a lot of good times here. We definitely plan to come back next year.”

That said, he smiles and adds that the couple will likely paint their stand-out vehicle crimson and cream during the off-season.

Come Sunday afternoon, the tents have come down, the grills extinguished and the rigs roll on out of town. The southeast corner of the Lloyd Noble Center parking lot is once again a sea of black with white stripes. But just until the next home football game.

Susan Grossman is a Norman-based freelance writer.