

Voices *of the* Sooners

Calling OU football play-by-play has been described as a dream job by dozens of sports broadcasters past and present.



OU Western History Collections

Where Maurice Prescott Waves His Radio Wand for Many Thousands of Miles

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

It began simply enough with a single strand of wire stretching from the bleachers at Boyd Field across campus for eight blocks to a rather rudimentary hand-built transmitter located in the basement of a house at 426 West Eufaula Street. The date was October 14, 1922, and the voices carried by that solitary line told the story of Oklahoma's 21-0 season-opening victory over Central State Teachers College.

This first-ever radio broadcast of a Sooner football game signaled the start of a tradition that has endured for more than 85 years.

Maurice L. Prescott, a Waurika native and 1924 graduate of OU's electrical engineering school, could not have imagined that his simple voice transmission equipment would evolve first into WNAD—which became the University's official radio station in 1923—and eventually a nationwide broadcasting network featuring dozens of radio stations that deliver OU football to the masses on fall Saturdays.

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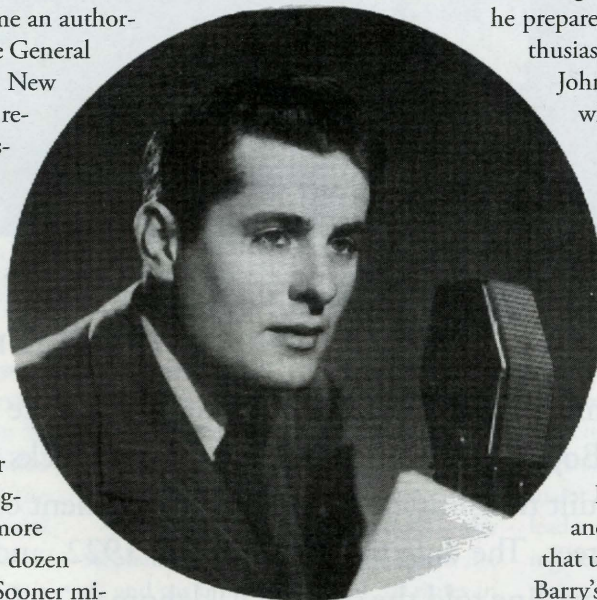


ABOVE - Fledgling sports announcer Walter Cronkite interviews Sooner quarterback Beryl Clark in 1937. **BELOW** - Curt Gowdy honed his broadcasting chops at OU for five seasons before moving on to national networks.

While Prescott went on to become an authority on shortwave propagation for the General Electric Company in Schenectady, New York, he left behind a legacy that remains alive and well today. The distinguished list of subsequent play-by-play announcers and color commentators individually and collectively has contributed to the magical aura surrounding OU football.

Over the years, names like Walter Cronkite, Curt Gowdy, John Brooks and Mike Treps have kept Sooner fans on the edge of their seats with various narrative styles ranging from animated eloquence to more calculated articulation. Of the two dozen or so men who have sat behind the Sooner microphone, no voice graced the OU radio airwaves longer than that of Bob Barry Sr.

Initially handpicked for the job by legendary OU football coach Bud Wilkinson, Barry served two stints as OU's play-by-play man—the first from 1961 to 1972 and the second from 1991 through the 2010 season. His familiar call of each Sooner touchdown—"he's at the 45, 50, 45, 40, 35, 30 . . ."—painted an oral picture that captured the listener's imagination and brought the action to life.



"It's a little intimidating when you look at that list of names. It's lofty company to be in, that's for sure," says Toby Rowland, who was named the current play-by-play voice of the Sooners when Barry announced his retirement. "To have the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of men like Bob Barry, John Brooks, Walter Cronkite and Curt Gowdy is an amazing opportunity. To say I'm honored and humbled is an understatement."

In 2009, Rowland was hired as the sideline reporter for OU broadcasts, which allowed him to work with Barry and color commentator Merv Johnson.

"That was a great experience for a number of reasons, mostly because it gave me a chance to watch Bob and how he prepared and handled everything that went into each broadcast," says Rowland.

During his 31 seasons as the voice of Oklahoma football, Barry called the action for three Heisman Trophy winners, countless All Americans and more than 260 OU victories, including every snap of the Sooners' perfect 2000 national championship run. He was there when the Sooners initially installed the Wishbone offense in 1971, and he was still calling the action some 40 years later when OU football reinvented itself under Coach Bob Stoops and a string of strong-armed quarterbacks.

"Bob brought a lot to every broadcast in the way he prepared and called the game with such enthusiasm. He was a total professional," says Johnson, the former assistant head coach who has served as OU's director of football operations since 1998. "We had a lot of fun together over the years."

A member of the OU coaching staff from 1979-97, Johnson continues to add an insider's expertise to Rowland's broadcasts. But he was only one of several color analysts who served alongside Barry over the years. Treps, Bill Bryan, Jack Ogle and Johnny Keith preceded Johnson in the booth and delivered their own perspectives that uniquely complemented Barry's work. Barry's two successful tours of duty as OU's play-by-play announcer were sandwiched around

an 18-year term in the same capacity at Oklahoma State. There he called the action for running back greats like Terry Miller, Barry Sanders and Thurman Thomas.

Jiminy Christmas!

When station KTOK outbid WKY for the OU broadcasting rights prior to the 1973 season, contract obligations with WKY ended Barry's first stint with the Sooners. While Barry wound up

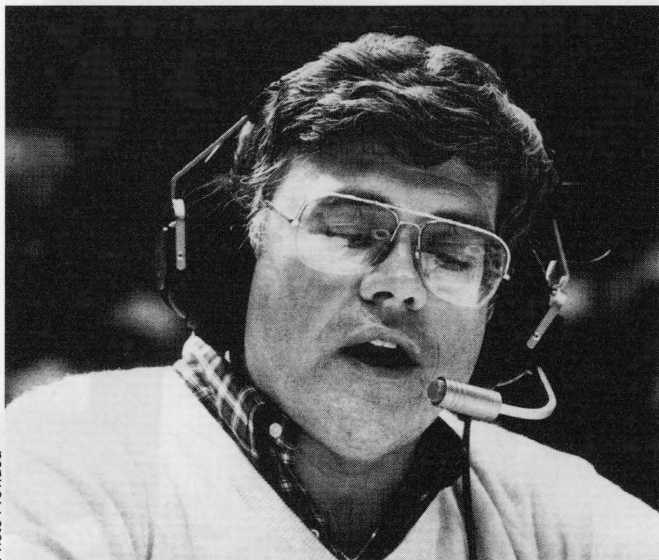


Photo Provided

John Brooks' "Jiminy Christmas" became synonymous with big gridiron plays during his 12 seasons calling play-by-play with partner and color commentator Mike Trepas.

the 1977 season, but he did not fit into KTOK's extended plans. The door was re-opened for Brooks and Trepas to start a successful 12-season run together, beginning in 1979.

"John and I worked really well together. Some people might call it chemistry, but I think we had a great camaraderie," says Trepas, who served as OU's sports information director for 13 years (1979-92). "John was a great play-by-play guy, and I was happy doing the color because I was a full-time employee at OU and didn't have the time needed for the preparation that went into every broadcast."

Known for his signature call "Jiminy Christmas!" when something big happened during the game, Brooks fondly recalls his partnership with Trepas as "an amazing period to be a Sooner."

"It's pretty safe to say that we were there at the perfect time. The football program was winning tons of games, including a national championship, and Billy Tubbs had OU basketball playing in the national spotlight," says Brooks. "Mike and I had a wonderful run together. We were very fortunate to be part of the Sooner Network at a time when radio played such a significant role in sports coverage."

During the 1980s, OU had the second-largest radio network in the country, broadcasting coast-to-coast on 70 different stations spread over 11 states. Although the evolution of cable and satellite TV networks over the past 20 years has led to an unprecedented increase of televised college football, OU games are still being broadcast on more than 30 stations across Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas and Arkansas. Additionally, satellite radio and Internet simulcasts provide access to fans around the globe.

The Golden Era

Long before the first satellite was launched into space, fans relied solely on radio broadcasts to keep up with their favorite teams on Saturdays. The vision of Maurice Prescott and others involved in OU's electrical engineering department helped deliver Sooner football to the masses dating back to the 1920s.

While many of the voices behind those early radio broadcasts were not well documented, some famous names have described OU football action—including Cronkite and Gowdy—who both went on to become legendary national television and radio personalities.

Prior to the 1937 season, WKY enthusiastically promoted its new radio broadcast team of Cronkite, Wray Dudley and for-



Photo Provided

Mike Trepas studies his notes in the press box before kick off. Trepas, who served as OU's sports information director from 1979 to 1992, doubled as color commentator for much of that time, alongside John Brooks, pictured at top.

as the radio voice on the other side of the Bedlam rivalry, it took five years for KTOK management to settle on a duo that would provide some long-term consistency for OU.

Trepas took over Sooner broadcasts in 1973 and teamed with local TV personalities Brooks and Ted Leitner for one season each, and with John Snyder for two seasons. Gary Johnson arrived from Houston and was given the Sooner microphone for

mer OU all-sports star Tom Churchill. While Cronkite, just 21 at the time, lasted only one season, he established a foundation for a career as the most distinguished news anchorman in television—even if he did not realize it then.

“I enjoyed that year at OU a great deal. It was just the beginning of Oklahoma’s surge into national prominence. It was a very exciting season,” Cronkite said in a 2003 interview. “But it never occurred to me to make a career out of sports reporting.”

Another fledgling journalist on his way to fame, Gowdy was hired in 1945 by station KOMA to call OU football and Oklahoma A&M basketball for five seasons, making him the voice of the Sooners when they burst into the national spotlight under Wilkinson.

“Oklahoma meant everything to me in my career. I can’t tell you how important those days were. They really set a great foundation for me,” said Gowdy in a 2004 interview.

When Gowdy took the job as the New York Yankees radio announcer after the 1949 season, he left behind an OU football program that was one season away from its first national championship. Even bigger and better things were ahead for OU radio broadcasts as Sooner fever extended well beyond Oklahoma’s borders.

Wilkinson Got It Right

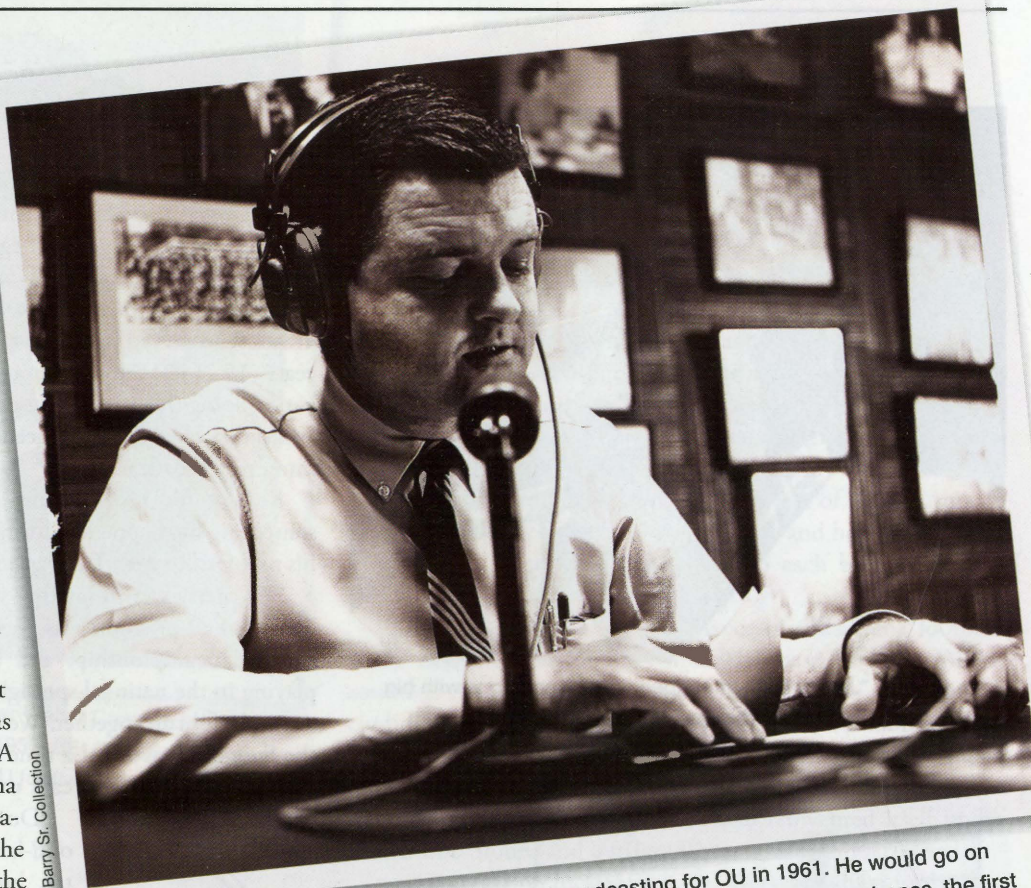
A handful of voices helped deliver the action of OU games during the 1950s, including Hal O’Halloran, John Henry and Tony George. Bill Bryan was the play-by-play man for both of the Sooners’ national title seasons in 1955-56, and he remained in that position through the 1960 campaign when Wilkinson opted to go a different direction.

The new man’s name was Bob Barry.

During the spring of 1961, Barry and 13 other candidates auditioned for the play-by-play job during the Sooners Varsity-Alumni game, each hopeful calling several series.

“To be honest, I didn’t think I had a chance,” says Barry. “I applied because I wanted that experience, and I thought it might help me later on.”

But after evaluating the recorded broadcast, Wilkinson called Barry to tell him the good news.



Bob Barry Sr. Collection

Handpicked by Bud Wilkinson, Bob Barry began broadcasting for OU in 1961. He would go on to establish himself as “the voice” of the Sooners, serving two terms at the microphones, the first from 1961 to 1972, then again from 1991 through the 2010 season.

“Outside of OU winning the 2000 national championship, that’s probably my biggest thrill professionally. To have Bud tell me that I was the man is pretty hard to top,” says Barry.

All told, Barry would hold the position for more than three decades. Along the way, he was named Oklahoma Sportscaster of the Year 15 times for his work as sports anchor at KFOR-TV 4 and was inducted into the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame and the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame.

“Bob Barry is an Oklahoma treasure,” says OU Director of Athletics Joe Castiglione. “Over this extraordinary era, millions of people have become familiar with our program and grown to love it more because of Bob’s work and his fan-friendly style of describing the action.”

After serving a combined total of 51 years as the radio voice for the state’s two major universities, Barry turned over the microphone to someone else for the 2011 season.

“It’s been my dream job and my life for more than 50 years, and I wouldn’t change a thing,” says Barry, who turned 80 earlier this year. “Not very many people get the chance to truly do exactly what they want to do in life—and get paid for it. Of course, there have been ups and downs, but I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

There were, of course, some OU fans who found it difficult to “forgive” Barry for the time he spent at Oklahoma State. And



Ty Russell

Although the equipment has changed since the days of Maurice Prescott, the challenge of quickly and accurately bringing a live game to listeners remains the same. Toby Rowland, left, is the latest broadcaster to take up the mantle of delivering play-by-play to Sooner fans unable to attend in person.

like all radio play-by-play personalities, Barry had his critics. But through it all, there was one opinion that mattered the most—that of OU president David Boren.

“In my mind, there is no more outstanding broadcast journalist and sportscaster in the country,” says Boren. “No one rep-

resents the Sooner spirit better than Bob Barry. He has always had a unique ability to transmit excitement and enthusiasm to his listeners, and we are all grateful to Bob for his many years of dedicated service to this University and its supporters.”

hosts his own sport talk radio show on KREF in Norman. And while his previous play-by-play experience has been limited mostly to SNU sporting events, Rowland has thus far made a smooth transition into his new role, a fact that does not surprise Barry.

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Toby Time

Now the torch has been passed to Rowland, and while his hiring may have come as a surprise to some Sooner followers, OU officials have made it clear they believe

he is the right man for the job.

“Toby’s spirit and enthusiasm for Oklahoma will make him an ideal successor to the legendary Bob Barry,” says Boren. “He understands our state, our fan base and our tradition of excellence, and I have confidence that he will uphold the values that make Oklahoma, our university and our athletics program so great.”

Castiglione also is confident of Rowland’s abilities.

“He is a talented broadcaster with a creative flare, and he has flourished in multiple media settings,” says Castiglione. “We expect him to flourish in this role as well.”

Rowland earned a scholarship to play basketball at Southern Nazarene, graduating in 1995. He has spent the past dozen years as a sportscaster at Oklahoma City’s KWTU-9 and

“Honestly, Toby was my choice all along. He’s a professional, and he’s talented, and I think he’s going to do a great job,” says Barry.

The biggest hurdle for Rowland as he further immerses himself in the play-by-play duties may be staying focused on the task at hand and not getting caught up in all the history and hoopla surrounding his new job.

“This has always been the No. 1 dream job for me. It’s the pinnacle, and that’s how I’m going to treat it,” says Rowland, a two-time Emmy Award-winner for his work in TV broadcasting. “I’m going to enjoy myself and do my absolute best to make Joe Castiglione, President Boren and all of the people who have put faith in me proud.”

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