

# Lest We Forget...

BY DAVID W. LEVY

## Mildred Andrews Boggess: an organist worthy of note

Let us begin by noting an injustice. Wikipedia's article on "Hominy, Oklahoma" includes a list of "Notable People" who came from that small town in Osage County. Five persons are named. Four of them are men and three of those played football. The female, Mavis Doering, was a celebrated Cherokee basket maker. But Hominy was also the birthplace, in 1915, of an extraordinary woman who was, in her field, perhaps the most "notable" practitioner in the United States and one of the very best in the world.

Mildred Andrews started playing the piano at six, thanks to heroic efforts by her parents to pay for lessons. By junior high, she herself was giving lessons to Hominy children. It was only when she entered Bethany College in Kansas that she saw and heard an organ for the first time in her life. After a year, she transferred to the University of Oklahoma where she earned a degree in piano in 1937. Her teachers, recognizing her gifts, hired her, as a junior, to assist in teaching piano and organ. After acquiring a master's degree from the University of Michigan, she returned to Norman and began her thirty-eight-year career as the preeminent teacher of the organ in the country.

She was to train at least fourteen Fulbright scholars and twenty winners of important national competitions—more of each than anyone else. Her students occupied prominent positions as teachers, performers and church organists everywhere.

A youngster from Idaho, who was to win a prestigious national competition in 1971, was asked why in the world he had come all the way to Norman for his education. "To take lessons from Miss Andrews," he said. "I have known who she is since I was fourteen and never imagined I was good enough to take from her."

Another remembered that "she believed in her students and she believed they could do much more than they believed they could . . . We never dreamed we could be what she knew we could be."

The famed French organist and composer, Marcel Dupre urged her to renounce teaching and take up a career in performance—and he was not alone. But although she made frequent concert appearances and conducted numerous workshops across the country, she never gave up her calling as a teacher.

She was showered with honors. In 1959, the American



Guild of Organists named her the Outstanding Organ Teacher in North America. She was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame and was awarded the University's Distinguished Service Citation. She was one of the few allowed to play the organ at Westminster Abbey, and she conducted master classes at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. She was an honorary member of Phi Beta Kappa, was one of ten OU professors singled out for teaching excellence in 1952, and the first woman in the College of Fine Arts to be named a David Ross Boyd Professor.

To acknowledge her stature, in 1962 the American Guild of Organists held their national meeting in Oklahoma City. The highlight performance featured four of her students. "We wonder," said the

Guild's paper, "what college music department in what country across what oceans under what director could turn out a mixed quartet to match the foursome from the University of Oklahoma." The Guild "has long since come to expect—even to demand—winners from the studio of Mildred Andrews." She played the organ at St. John's Episcopal Church in Norman from 1936 to 1962, and one wonders how many of the congregants realized the gift being bestowed upon them every Sunday.

She was a woman of gentle charm and dignity and enormous self-discipline, quite indifferent to her fame. Her students were the only children she ever had, and they returned her care with their affection and gratitude. Upon her retirement in 1975, she was one of the most distinguished members of OU's faculty.

In 1973, at fifty-eight, she married Rough Boggess, assistant to the dean of admissions. Mildred Andrews Boggess died on August 10, 1987, at seventy-one. Her estate left money for the magnificent pipe organ that sits in the balcony of Gothic Hall in the Catlett Music Center. In 1997, the organ was named in her honor.

It is, apparently, not an easy thing to make the list of "Notable Persons" from Hominy, but perhaps in this case they might consider adding another name.

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*In this column, David W. Levy, Professor Emeritus of the OU History Department, recalls a person from OU's past whose name is not attached to a building or other prominent campus feature, but who, in more modest, but in no less admirable ways, helped make this place what it is.*