



*The dynamic leader of The Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band will be remembered for his love of music, teaching and his 'kids.'*

By Susan Grossman



# A Fond *Farewell*

**GENE THRAILKILL, 1938-2021**

**Poll any of the thousands of former Pride of Oklahoma members who marched under the direction of Gene Thrailkill and a common theme quickly emerges.**

The man who spent three decades guiding the myriad of moving parts for the 300-plus members of the award-winning University of Oklahoma marching band was dynamic, vocal and devoted. Known as “Coach” his entire professional career, Thrailkill was a man who cared deeply about his students, fought—sometimes loudly—for what he felt was in their best interest, and imparted lifelong lessons to all who invested hours of their time, sweat and energy into being in his band.

Ask anyone from Thrailkill’s era—1971 to 2001—and they will recall a host of his infamous motivational tactics and sayings, like “step turn” practice after presuming some of his charges might have overindulged on road trips. Or phrases such as, “Play like you have hair on your chest!” to encourage sound projection.

They can still see the tall figure in his crimson, game-day sports coat, dress slacks and sunglasses striding down the sidelines or directing from the top of a ladder. And, many still feel the warm bear hugs he always gave. Anyone in need, whether short on tuition or alone on a holiday, simply had to ask for help and Thrailkill delivered.

His connectedness is what made him special, says Bill Wakefield, director emeritus of University Bands, who worked with Thrailkill for 15 years.

“Gene loved to be around people and he would drop everything to help someone,” Wakefield says. “He knew everyone on campus and often picked up the phone to solve whatever problem someone had. If it was a recruit from a small town, Gene would address every concern their parents might have about them coming to a large university. He had a passion for what he was doing and he loved OU.”

The “dropping of everything” often meant Thrailkill worked long hours to make up for time he spent talking to people and helping his students.

Thrailkill’s wife of 62 years credits Gene’s mother for his outgoing and confident nature. But as a high school student, the former Karen Kopp was not too interested when her cousin suggested the

Gene and Karen Thraikill were married for 62 years. The two met in high school and married while still in college.



Courtesy of Karen Thraikill



Courtesy of Karen Thraikill

As a child growing up in Illinois, the young Gene Thraikill couldn't have imagined that he'd lead one of the nation's top marching bands for three decades.



Courtesy of OU Western History Collections

Thraikill directs from the sideline ladder in his trademark blazer and sunglasses.

*“With his whistle, shorts, T-shirt, and athletic shoes, he acted like one, so people started calling him ‘Coach’ and that name followed him here.”*

tall, popular and athletic senior ask her out. Thrailkill dated frequently in their small Washington, Ill., town, and the shy junior was a bit afraid of him.

“I would see Gene in the hall and avoid him, just run in the opposite direction,” laughs Karen. “He had dated so many girls and I hadn’t dated at all. But he continued to chase me around and one day came up to my locker and asked me to go to a youth group Valentine’s dinner at the local Methodist Church. I had to say yes because, come on, it was at a church!”

By the summer of 1956, Thrailkill had given her his class ring. But as he prepared to leave home to study music and percussion at the University of Michigan, he asked for it back.

Yet during winter break of his junior year, Karen and Gene married. Just before graduating with a bachelor’s degree in music, daughter Stacy was born and the couple soon moved to Athens, Ohio, so Gene could continue his education at Ohio University.

It was there that his leadership and drive to build better bands began. Thrailkill’s first teaching position was as director of the Dixie High School Band in New Lebanon, Ohio. The head of the music department where he was a graduate assistant had just finished judging what he called the “worst marching band in the world” at a statewide contest.

“Gene went home for lunch that day and there is a letter from this very school saying they needed a band director, and he threw it away,” Karen says. “Then he got to thinking, ‘How bad could it be? How could things get any worse? Maybe I could make it better.’” And, after receiving his master’s degree in music education, he accepted the job.

During his four years at the helm, the Dixie High School Band in that small town of 1,400 gained statewide acclaim,

going from never winning a marching contest to being one of the best bands in the state.

This experience began his band-building trajectory. From there, the family, which now included daughter Dawn, moved back to Athens, Ohio, where Thrailkill was hired as assistant director of bands. Within a year he was promoted to director and immediately instituted several new styles and traditions, many of which the band continues to use today.

It was in Ohio where Gene earned the nickname “Coach.”

“He was so young and out on the field giving instruction, showing people how to march, just like a coach,” Karen says. “With his whistle, shorts, T-shirt, and athletic shoes, he acted like one, so people started calling him ‘Coach’ and that name followed him here.”

In the summer of 1971, the Thrailkill family, which now included son Chad, arrived in Norman.

As just the fifth director of The Pride, Thrailkill wanted to change everything about the band, beginning with its uniform. At the time it was covered in braids and a lot of buttons, making upkeep difficult for students. When he proposed a new design featuring navy pants, the young director was quickly told, “The Big Red Band does not wear blue.”

With virtually no staff, Thrailkill managed all aspects of the program in his early days. Daughter Dawn recalls him creating drill charts—the diagrams that instruct marchers where to go on the field—by hand.

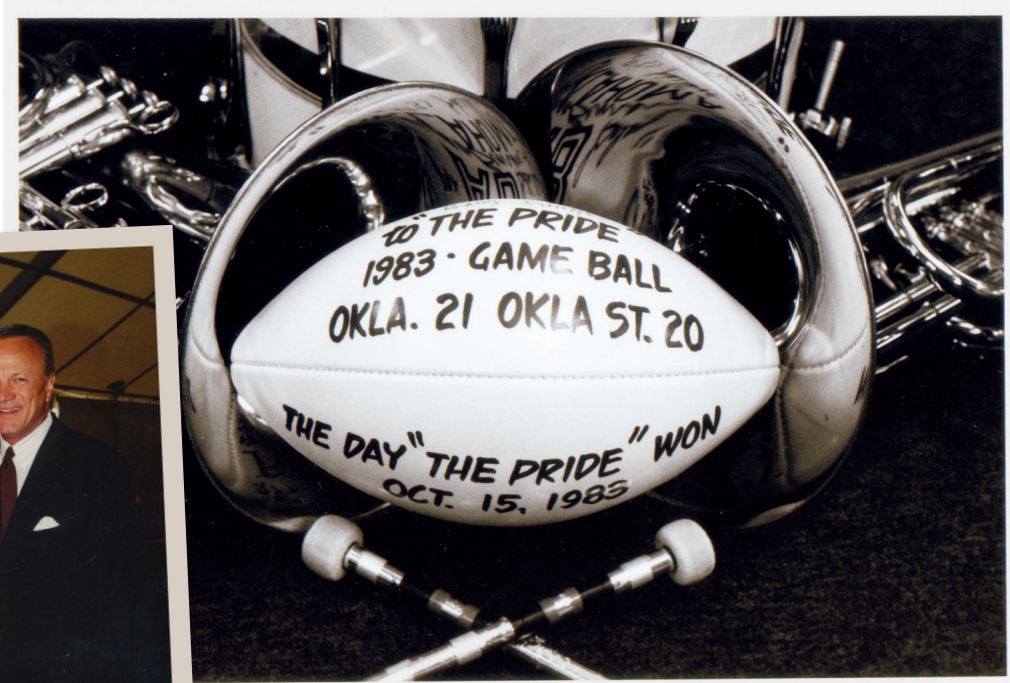
“He had a big plywood board that looked like a football field in our living room that sat on a card table,” she says. “There were matchsticks for each member, and he would handwrite where everyone was supposed to go. It took a lot of work. And he did that for every show.”

Thrailkill set high standards and expected excellence, for which The Pride has been nationally recognized. To Pride members, it was worth every difficult, yet exhilarating, minute, most significantly, the running out of the north endzone tunnels of the Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium to take the field for pregame.

Terri Cooter spent four years in The Pride playing trumpet from 1977 to 1981. She met and later married her husband, David, a fellow trumpet player, and served three years as the band’s music librarian. Cooter again worked closely with Thrailkill during her 14 years as president of the Band Alumni Association.

“From my years in The Pride and working in the office, I learned so much about teamwork and organization from him,” says Cooter. “It takes so much work, thought and planning to organize 300-plus kids every week and keep the wheels moving in the right direction. He was so organized and thought of every detail, from organizing band camps

Courtesy of OU Western History Collections



Courtesy of OU Western History Collections

**ABOVE AND LEFT** - Gene Thrailkill cemented his legendary status during the contentious 1983 Bedlam game, which became known as "The Day 'The Pride' Won" after the band played "Boomer Sooner" as many as 300 times.



Courtesy of OU Western History Collections

Members of The Pride established many traditions under Thrailkill, including marching in costume during the annual Halloween halftime show.



Dynamic, vocal and devoted, “Coach” Gene Thraillkill was only the fifth director of The Pride and led the band to winning the Sudler Trophy in 1987.

to planning trips and experiences for the students. My best memories of Coach are working closely with him in the office.”

For David Renner, the idea of being a student and not marching was inconceivable. So he spent six years in The Pride playing baritone as he pursued an OU degree in broadcast journalism. His last day wearing the uniform was Jan. 1, 1985, at the Orange Bowl. Throughout his tenure, Renner was witness to a number of memorable moments, including the day Thraillkill and members of his staff were removed from the sidelines in Stillwater for not having the appropriate passes.

It’s a story that has been passed down through generations of band members. OU was losing the 1983 Bedlam battle and, as he was escorted from the field, Thraillkill instructed the band to play “Boomer Sooner” until the team was ahead. Legend has it that the song was played more than 300 times.

“We followed his instructions, the team made a miraculous

comeback, and the Sooners won 21-20,” Renner recalls. “After the game, many of the players ran to our section in the stands and jumped up and down in appreciation of our efforts to help them, which gave me an incredible feeling of validation.”

Soon after, then-head Coach Barry Switzer came to the OU band room, which at the time was in the stadium, and presented a game ball to the entire band. Painted on the side was, “The Day ‘The Pride’ Won.”

The last time Thraillkill led the band was at the Orange Bowl in 2001, when OU won the national championship in football. Brian Britt, who had been a freshman percussionist and music major the day The Pride won the famous Bedlam game, says it never occurred to him that directing the band would be an option. But with Thraillkill’s encouragement, Britt applied for the position and was hired.


Now, more than 20 years later, the seasoned director abides by a fundamental lesson from his predecessor.

“The most important part of this job is taking care of the students as people and helping them succeed,” he says. “When he retired, the band was in great shape and I believed my most important responsibility was ensuring The Pride continued to thrive.”

During Britt’s first year, he evaluated the strengths of the program, as well as areas on which to focus to ensure continued growth and health. He created a five-year plan and made evolutionary changes, assisted by the trust and hard work of the band’s members, to keep The Pride successful after Coach’s retirement.

“What stands out most to me is how Coach fully invested himself in the role of director of The Pride,” he says. “It was clear that he was ‘all-in’ for the students every day. He loved working with us and for us.”

Although Thraillkill had been retired from the university for 20 years, the loyalty of his “kids” never wavered. When Thraillkill was seriously injured after a fall in spring 2021, word spread through the ranks of band alumni across the country who rallied to support him and his family. In November that same year, Thraillkill died from complications of the fall. He was 83.

Hundreds gathered for a celebration of his remarkable life March 25 at McFarlin Methodist Church in Norman, listening to stories about their friend and mentor. Untold more watched via livestream. The event served as confirmation that in the words of the “OU Chant” often sung to conclude band functions, the investment Thraillkill made as a teacher, husband, father and grandfather will live on. 

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