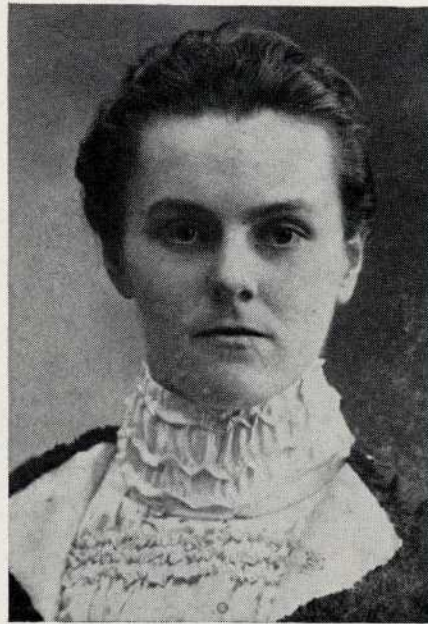


Clare Fisher, author of the story on the first dramatic productions, in costume. The play, in which this costume was used, was given so long ago Mr Fisher says he has forgotten its name. Miss Hattie Jones was the first piano teacher for the University of Oklahoma and participated in the first dramatic productions of the university

Yesteryears

BY CLARE W. FISHER, '06



THE copy for a cut in the October issue of *The Sooner Magazine* recalled to the operator who set the cut lines what are real old times in the early days of the college of fine arts—the pre-historic days of stage productions at the University of Oklahoma.

The opera *Chimes of Normandy*, or the *Bells of Corniville*, was first produced here about 1900. It was under direction of Grace King, now Mrs J. D. Maguire, who was then head of the fine arts department. Albert Seawell, Lem Martin, Ben Davis, and the writer sang the men's solo rôles. Miss King and Maude Watts were two of the lady soloists. Miss Hattie Jones had charge of the music. *Pinafore*, *The Merry Milkmaids*, *Pirates of Penance*, *Queen Esther*, and several other operas were produced on the stage of the old Franing theatre, and let us say here, always to full houses and were usually taken to Oklahoma City, Guthrie, and Purcell. In those days, I think, from productions viewed lately, that we had as good if not some superior performers in some parts, but of course we did not have the scenic effects of today.

Later, under Professor Gulich, the fine arts department turned to straight drama and produced such plays as *The Lion and the Mouse*, *Lover's Lane*, *Charity Ball*, *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, and many other dramas. In these we had "Deak" Parker, the famous newspaperman, Walter Ferguson, Ralph Campbell, Cortland Fequay, the writer, who did some of the directing, and all of the stage managing. Among other things, this bunch had the pleasure of presenting the *Lion and the Mouse* to

dedicate the first Masonic temple at Guthrie. This was only one of the many trips taken to neighboring cities.

When Professor Holmberg became the dean of the college of fine arts, his first production was the *Bohemian Girl* which I directed, and one other opera, which I have forgotten, in the spring of 1908 or 1909. This was the last of the real old time productions with which I am familiar. We had lots of fun in those days, put several dollars in the treasury and I believe we gave the general public their money's worth, at least I know we always played to SRO, which in the language of the show business means standing room only and the students loyally supported the play. There were no empty seats as I have seen at several productions in the last few years. If you want to know the fun we had corner Dean Holmberg some day when he is in the right mood and get him to talking of those days.

I remember one incident in connection with a rehearsal for the *Chimes of Normandy*. In those days the automobile had not been heard of, and there were no buses making regular fifteen minute rounds. There was only one rough board walk leading from town to the campus. We had all assembled for rehearsal of solo parts and about nine o'clock it started one of those downpours for which Oklahoma is famous, and at twelve it was still raining. There was not a rain coat or a parasol in the entire crowd. So what was to be done? Finally some one discovered a rubberized covering for the grand piano, and the question was solved. The boys formed a square holding up the cover

and the girls marched in the center and thus each and every one was delivered safely and dry to her rooming house. But every one of the boys would have made a wet exponent's heart glad.

The scenery at the old Franing consisted, in the early days, of a kitchen and prison, a parlour interior and one exterior. Later a road show went broke and as it had some particularly beautiful scenery Mr Franing bought it. There was a beautiful interior and exterior and two other sets that were fair. By planning and working one could produce many different settings out of this bunch of scenery.

In the old stock bill, a military play, *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, in which Walter Ferguson had the lead, it was necessary to have a stockade with a "breakway" for the Indian attack and the big rescue at the "blow off." It sure was some job to build as it had to run from the front to back of the stage with action taking place on both sides of it. By using lath and blind stop covered with grey cloth and painted a stockade

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was finally produced that faintly resembled the genuine article. But my heart was in my mouth when the time came for the break in the Indian attack, the whole fence was just as liable to go as part of it. But it held staunchly, all but the part that was supposed to give way and the climax went over big.

The senior class, back in these days, always gave a class play, to help defray expenses of graduation. They usually produced something like Sheridan's *The Rivals*, or some other classic. These, as a usual thing, were a little too heavy for the available talent to handle, although several very creditable productions were given. But it was a jolly last get-together meeting for those who had spent four years together, and was something for them to remember in after life.

How would some of the present day performers like to have to make up an entire cast, or a cast and chorus of any where from twelve to one hundred people with a few sticks of grease paint, a wig or two, a little crepe hair, a bottle of spirit gum and a box of talcum powder? And only one person had any idea how to use what he had. That was the common occurrence at every performance until the year 1907, when we had three or four more who knew something of make up. Yet we produced plays ranging from *The Merchant of Venice* down to the *Merry Milkmaids*, the lightest of light operas, with a correctly costumed cast and the details of make up faithfully followed.

Perhaps one of the most enjoyable occasions in the pre-historic period was the trip to Guthrie to dedicate the first Masonic temple erected there. The play chosen was *The Lion and the Mouse*, then in the heyday of its popularity. A crowd of about fifteen were in the cast, and with the orchestra, consisting of around forty or fifty pieces, was—don't tell anybody—wined and dined for two days and gave two performances to a packed house on both occasions. And as the small town papers say "A fine time was enjoyed by all."

There were no try-outs for parts. The students were asked if they cared to take part in the play, and if so to report for rehearsals. Then an almost professional rule was followed. Usually the leads were understudied, and when on two or three occasions they tried to get too temperamental they were removed at once and another given the part. After this had been done a few times there never was any trouble with any one in the respect of not obeying the stage manager.

In those "good old days" you could see Guy Y. Williams, John Darling, Roy

Kingkade and Roy Cook put on a tumbling act that was as good as any of the high class circus performances. And the night after the show at a dance, you would see Professors Paxton, Par- rington, Buchanan and other members of the faculty, vicing with the students for the pleasure of a dance with this or that fair co-ed. Those were happy days when faculty and student body were members of one big family.

Did any of you ever see "Gov." Ferguson embarrassed, or at loss for a ready verbal "comeback." Well if you see him ask him what he said to Alice Brittain when looking for his hat, and see him turn red and stutter. And ask "Deak" Parker why the old *Transcript* could never keep a waterbucket longer than one week. This will probably be "over the heads" of the present generation, but it is beery unlikely that the old timers will fail to understand.

Back in those "good old days" there was plenty of pep and fun on the campus. One Hallowe'en a bunch of students procured all the wagons and buggies that could be found in town and after bringing them to the football field, which was located where the fine arts building now stands, carefully took them all apart. It was about two days before all the parts were assembled and removed. There was a bright freshman from New York here that year, and one night he made a few remarks too many down town. The local order of D. D. M. C., or what then corresponded to it, called on him about two o'clock and escorted him to West Main street where there was a ditch with a convenient water hole, and invited him to sit down in this up to his neck and deliver one of Cicero's orations in the original and translated, interspersed with original comments. The comments were much more numerous. Another time George Bucklin, then registrar, was told to get his hair cut. He neglected to do so, and about ten o'clock one night he was called to the door, taken out in the yard and given free tonsorial services. President Boyd attempted to interfere with this and some way the next morning he came to classes with his handsome VanDyke beard shaved off. And it seems that the bunch were no respecter of persons.

At football games the whole student body would get on the side lines and yell themselves hoarse. And we had a regular beef trust team most of the time in those early years. They played the guards back and tackle over then and when you saw one 210 pounder line up behind another 210 pounder, with a 180 pound back back of him, another 190 pounder, a 185 pounds and a 165 pound quarter thrown in to balance things, you would wonder how they ever stopped them. They did—some times—and

sometimes not. Fred Roberts went over for a touchdown in one game against Texas with four husky Longhorns hanging on him the last twenty yards, and in five minutes afterwards Fred Merkle repeated the trick the same way.

One year the team went to Arkansas, and it was said that they were rocked from the side lines all through the game. The next fall when Arkansas played a return date here, one of the players evidently forgot himself on the first down, for he slugged John Hefley, a 200-pound tackle. The rest of that game had all the resemblance to a Dempsey-Firpo bout, mixed up with a crowd of Irishmen at a wake where plenty of the usual liquid refreshments had been supplied them. At the finish of the game all the substitutes on the Arkansas team were in there "battling" (that's sure the right term) and most of them were ready to go to the hospital. And there was not a single Oklahoma player out of the lineup that started that wasn't still in there. Two or three black eyes and a broken nose by Bob Wingate were about all the casualties suffered by the Sooners.

After "Benny" came the teams ran more to speed and less to beef. And believe me he sure produced some speedy ones. His "war-cry" was "get a little pep," and they sure had it. Many a time Bill Cross would be calling signals for the next play from the bottom of a pile of players, and the Sooners would be lined up and gone with two or three opponents laying on the ground back of the line of scrimmage.

And so when one runs across an old time picture or a clipping, and leans back in his easy chair to reminisce in the days that are, and thinks of the days that were, as the pipe smoke whirls and drifts ceilingward, he ponders over the friendships made and wonders how and when and where and what part of the "old gang's" still here and who have passed to the great beyond. But one thing's sure and that is if any part of that old bunch ever gets together on a home coming day and turns loose it will take more than the Ruf Necks and Jazz Hounds to bring peace and quiet to the stadium.

Some day I would like to see a bunch from '02, '03, or '04 up in the stadium when Oklahoma is staging a spectacular game and hear the old "rebel yell" float out over the air again. It may be prejudice, but honestly, I believe that seventy-five of those old boys could make more noise than all the gang out there now.

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Walter P. Crysler, jr., whose publishing firm of Cheshire House has been principally a fine book publisher, has entered the general publication field with a mystery novel, *Anonymous Footsteps* by John M. O'Connor, \$2.