

# The flogging of Bill Stephens

BY CHESTER H. WESTFALL, '16

«THE Flogging of Bill Stephens" will be the title of a paragraph in future histories of Oklahoma. This paragraph will be sandwiched in among accounts of charity drives and failing banks, foreclosed homes, and ruined fortunes, shivering families and hungry babies. Pages before and after the paragraph will be devoted to unbalanced budgets and declining markets, salaries slashed and positions abolished, winter blasts and summer drouths. Looking back, the story of 1930, '31 and '32 will appear rather drab.

And in between will be the happy paragraph telling of the episode of "The Flogging of Bill Stephens." The lamentable fact of the lashes on the back of a fine, outstanding, self-supporting student—an accredited representative of the Fourth Estate—will be passed over lightly. Was not his name flashed over the wires to a thousand papers? And he got on the radio. Letters were written to the newspapers about him, doubtless sermons were preached on the subject. And after all, the "flogging" was probably mild treatment beside that meted out to "joiners" in a thousand lodge rooms by "boys" who were three times the age of the foolish and impetuous "fourteen."

And then will come a grin, a couple of chuckles, and a hearty laugh.

Bold, black type that had laid on dusty shelves since the sinking of the Lusitania was brought back into use. The settling of the war debts, the blunders of Mr Hoover's administration, the virtues of Mr Roosevelt, the discovery of the secret of the cosmic ray will be found by actual measurement to have been accorded, all combined, exactly one-half the space that was devoted to "The Flogging of Bill Stephens."

Rival news organizations developed editorial policies and campaigns and scoops from the episode. Alumni of the university quit tasks of the day and spent sound currency rushing to meetings and conferences. The board of regents met in solemn session. The medical profession was astounded that so many men and women, the entire faculty of the university, could come down at the same moment attacked by the same malady. It was the jitters!

A human old governor recognized the humor in the situation, saw after all that

as a fundamental development in human events it ranked somewhat below the assassination of Russia's royal family, and used it to take a sly dig at a political enemy.

Participants in the affair, too impetuous before the act, a little backward after it, the regular average number of whom will have become great and famous, and the normal average will have become ditch diggers and day laborers will get many a chuckle over the paragraph. They will marvel a bit at how seriously they took themselves back there in 1932, and a lot more at how seriously they were taken by a couple of million people.

The episode has resulted in a lot of criticism of the university. Perhaps some of it is justified. It's considerable to expect that the university, built by and serving two million people, not one of whom is perfect, should itself attain a state of absolute perfection.

Undoubtedly the university faculty of three or four hundred and its student body of some five thousand, take themselves very seriously. Thank God they do. That's normal, and we've been praying for the return of normalcy since October, 1929.

Surely no more episodes will be necessary to effect the permanent abandonment of the D. D. M. C. or any other forbidden organization at the University of Oklahoma. That's to the good. The matter will result in a more careful attention by the authorities to the out-of-classroom activities of the student body. That's to the good. The incident has attracted to the university the attention of thousands who haven't given the institution a thought in years. If they will look into it, they will find that they have a sound institution, not perfect by any means, but becoming constantly better and serving the state sincerely, loyally and effectively. They will find a president who is doing a difficult job remarkably well, who is meeting the problems of the depression standing up, who is solving the problems of serving the state with less money to spend by cutting out the least essential parts of university activities, but preserving effectively the essentials that have been built up by the combined labors of thousands over the past forty years. And that will be to the good.

Grins and chuckles and hearty laughs may be just as much needed in 1952

when this history is being read as they are needed now. I doubt it. Bill Stephens, the Fourth Estate, Dr. Bizzell, faculty, alumni, the "serious Fourteen," citizens, Oklahoma I PROPOSE AN IMMEDIATE GRIN, A COUPLE OF CHUCKLES AND A HEARTY LAUGH!

Mistakes have been made. They were mistakes of the head and not of the heart.

The *Daily Oklahoman* performed a public service in attracting attention to a revived outlawed order. Left unexposed, this overzealous group might have brought about events that none could smile at, that would have brought permanent sorrow and suffering to themselves and others. Let's be happy over that and trust that the *Oklahoman* pays no penalty for its service.

Carl Magee of the *News* performed a service in getting the boys finally to come in. True, his newspaper instincts recognized the possibility, and he took immediate advantage of the opportunity, to develop a real newspaper scoop. The public expects its favorite paper to score an occasional scoop, and fellow newspaper men are quick to congratulate the man who does it. It was a good story, Mr Magee, you're welcome to it.

Dr. Bizzell and the board of regents took the only action open to them under the circumstances at the time the action was taken. They refused to be swayed by entreaties or threats. When they were overruled by superior authority, they accepted it. After all, given additional time to know all the circumstances, the spirit of Christmas time might have brought them to the same conclusion.

Governor Murray took a short cut to accomplish an end that undoubtedly most people applaud. It's a difficult thing to tell a young man who has spent years on the road to education, at the cost of labor to himself and sacrifice to his parents, that, having committed one foolish but not really vicious error, he shall not be permitted to become a doctor or a lawyer, or to follow any other professional line. It is understandable that such a situation would lead a governor to take an action probably without precedent in this state, and, by executive decree, overrule the action of the constituted university authorities. Let's thank the governor for the act, with the confidence, however, that the unprecedented action taken could result only from such unprecedented circumstances as surrounded this incident. A great university can be built up only by constant assistance from but no interference by other agencies. I feel sure the governor, university authorities, our thousands of alumni and former students, and citizens everywhere will agree with this.

The entire incident has kept a lot of us pretty busy for a couple of weeks. Let's trust it is a closed incident. Now let's get back to work.