

# The First Sooner Governor

By Ernie Hill, '33

OKLAHOMA'S political "carpet-bagging" days apparently are about at an end and the voters are at last turning to the home grown products to administer their affairs of state.

Two years ago, Joshua Bryan Lee, '17, became the first University of Oklahoma graduate to be elected to the United States Senate.

This year, Leon C. Phillips, '16law, became the first graduate of the University to win the nomination for governor on the Democratic ballot, a nomination that is tantamount to election in this overwhelmingly Democratic state.

And when the 260-pound, cigar-chewing, former House of Representatives Speaker assumes the worries of the State's chief executive early in January, he will find that more than two score members of the Legislature are former University of Oklahoma students.

Pledged to economy and a war against patronage, the ninth elected governor of Oklahoma faces the same long odds he did when in 1913 he set out to become the No. 1 political leader on the University of Oklahoma campus and a guard on the football team.

Without previous experience in either field of endeavor, he determined to seek student fame, and in 1915 he was president of the Student Council and a guard on the all-victorious football team that Ben G. Owen still calls his best in history.

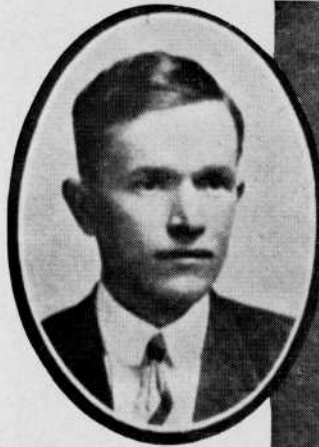
They tell how Red used to slip through the line to smear plays and how in the Kansas game he stopped three plays in a row to throw the Jayhawkers back 25 yards.

And they tell how he set out to become president of the Student Association with as much serious determination as he set out later to become governor of Oklahoma.

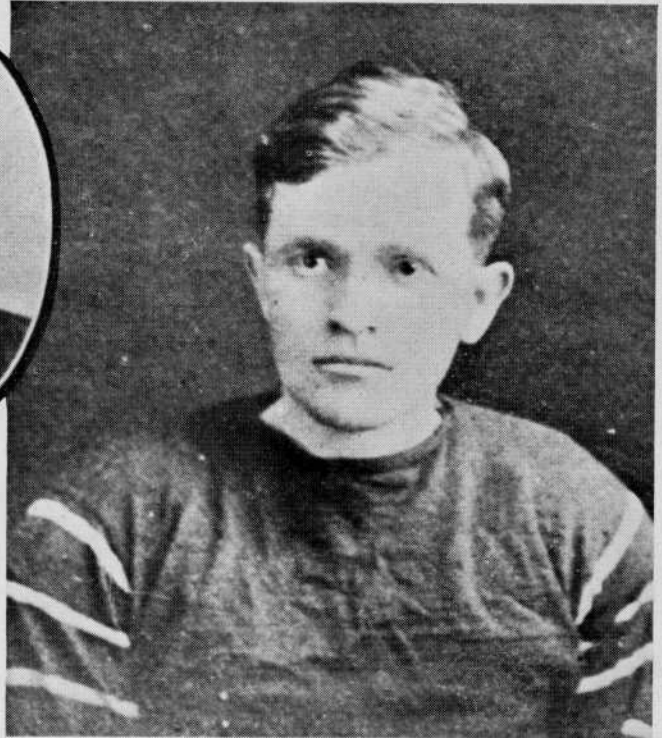
When he entered the University, young Phillips, a former student for the ministry at Epworth University in Oklahoma City, was opposed to social fraternities as a matter of principle. But in the closing days of his junior year, he began to see fraternities in a more tolerant way, and his friend Paul Darrough, now an Oklahoma City attorney, persuaded him to pledge Sigma Nu.

His sister, Mary Lois, now Mrs. H.E. Boorum of Oklahoma City, became a member of Delta Delta Delta.

Leon Phillips, the senior, was serious and bespectacled. The 1916 *Sooner*, fol-



*Two pictures of Leon Phillips during his days as student and football player on the O.U. campus.*



lowing the custom of labeling each senior with a verse, said of him:

*Learned, mighty, modest, he,  
Plain as his own hair to see.*

The yearbook listed these activities beside his picture: Sigma Nu; Masonic Club; Phi Delta Phi; Sooner Bar; Forum; Custer County Club; Assistant Business Manager, 1915 *Sooner*; president Student Association; *University Oklahoman* Board; Publication Board; Y.M.C.A. Cabinet; President Freshman Law Class; Varsity Football; Class Football; Class Baseball. After graduation he was called back to the campus to become a member of Coif, exclusive law fraternity.

**S**UMMING UP his football career, the *Sooner* commented that there were any number of aspirants for the vacancy at left guard on the Sooner team of 1916, but Red's "speedy dependability, his pep and his habit of being always in the fight" finally landed him the place.

Mrs. Phillips, who attended O.U. as Myrtle Ellenberger, was active in the Y.W.C.A. cabinet, serving as president in her senior year. She was secretary, treasurer and critic of Zetaethian society at various times. She was made a member of the O.U. chapter of Phi Beta Kappa in 1920. A graduate in 1912, she was not in school at the same time as Leon Phillips, but her

home was in Norman and they had plenty of opportunities to see each other. They became engaged.

Perhaps no graduating senior ever had such a closing week hung onto his career at the University as Leon Phillips experienced. It was to be a week they would never forget. And it was.

Red was to be admitted to the bar on Tuesday. They planned to be married secretly Wednesday. Then, on Thursday he would march up to the platform and get his degree. Without telling anyone of their marriage, they planned to slip away Friday on a honeymoon.

No one knew of the plans except Myrtle's mother, who lived in Norman, and Leon's sister, Mary Lois, who had graduated from the University the previous year.

The trouble was, they had planned nothing to keep them busy on Monday. The boys at the Sigma Nu house called Myrtle and then Mary Lois early Monday morning to report that Leon was suffering from an acute attack of appendicitis. At first, neither refused to believe the report. But when they were finally persuaded that Mr. Phillips was one sick graduating senior, they came over.

He was writhing with pain. Medical facilities in Norman were sketchy since school was out. So there was nothing to

do but take him to Oklahoma City by interurban. Mary Lois still recalls with anguish the anxiety they experienced on that interurban trip.

An operation was performed that night at St. Anthony's Hospital in Oklahoma City and Myrtle and Mary Lois went back to Norman with the plans for one eventful week shot full of holes before it had actually started.

It was two weeks before the disappointed bridegroom was able to catch the Santa Fe for Norman one evening, call Mary Lois to get a license, Myrtle to get a preacher and then make a belated appearance for the postponed ceremony.

Phillips and his bride, who had been principal of the school at Snyder, decided against going back to Arapaho where he had been invited to go into his father's law office. They thought it might be best for a young lawyer to start out "on his own," and they picked Okemah as a likely spot for an energetic young attorney to succeed.

The choice proved a good one, and except for a period spent in the Army during the World War, he steadily built a good law practice in Okemah. He enlisted in the army in the early days of the war and was sent to Camp Taylor, Kentucky, for training in the Infantry. His army service was uneventful except for a serious illness during the influenza epidemic in the winter of 1917-18 which led to his family being erroneously notified that he had died. The war ended just about the time his outfit was ready to be sent to France.

After the war he returned to his law practice, but took little part in politics except to serve as secretary of the Okfuskee County Election Board and secretary of the Okemah School Board. He became active in the Methodist church and Mrs. Phillips taught a Sunday School class. They adopted a young son, Bob, now 17 years old, and a daughter, Lois Ann, now 12 years old.

It was in 1932 that Attorney Phillips decided to enter State politics. W.N. Barry, who had held office as representative from Okfuskee County for a number of years, was a candidate for the State Senate. Mr. Phillips decided to run for the House and won the election.

As a freshman representative, he missed the spotlight for most of the session, but in the closing days wrote the mortgage moratorium bill and led the fight for the passage of the bill. He also blocked adjournment in the sales tax fight in a successful battle against the administration.

In the 1935 session of the Legislature, Mr. Phillips was elected Speaker and made an outstanding record as a "strong man" of the session. His re-election as Speaker in the 1937 session was predicted, but his opposition to the administration led to his defeat in the caucus by a very narrow margin. He became minority leader in the



*Mrs. Leon Phillips (Myrtle Ellenberger, '12) and Leon Phillips, '16law, who are slated to be the first O.U. couple to occupy the governor's mansion.*

House and his fight against extravagances of the "Spending Sixteenth" is credited by observers with being an important factor in his successful race for the nomination for governor.

There is reason to believe that Mr. Phillips will be a new kind of governor. Early in the campaign he issued a formal platform, with specific pledges to fight patronage politics and seek economy and efficiency in the State government.

During the campaign he said: "I hope the time has come when a man can stand for the same program after he is elected that he advanced while a candidate."

After winning the nomination, he said, "I meant every word of it and I will not turn back."

**SEVERAL** of the planks in his platform referred to patronage evils. He pledged:

"By appropriate legislation, if possible, and by initiative petition, if necessary, to take the Phighway Department and the Tax Commission away from the corrupt politicians to whom W.H. Murray delivered them in 1933 and give them back to the people, thus eliminating the abominable patronage racket.

"To see, by proper legislation, that the money appropriated for relief and old age pensions is not 'gobbled up' by unnecessary white-collared, swivel-chaired loafers who now honeycomb the administrative machinery of such funds.

"Limiting the number of employes and the salaries paid in all departments, including administrative heads and their immediate subordinates."

In regard to economy, he pledged to fight unnecessary spending in this way:

"Placing every department of the State

on a strict budget basis, with payment of all deficits which have been so disgracefully incurred, and with firm steps taken to see that their causes never again arise."

Mr. Phillips made a strong pledge to put education in Oklahoma on a more stable basis and to prevent playing of politics in this field. His plank on education was:

"To establish all schools on a permanent basis. We must guarantee every child equal opportunity of education. I shall not permit destruction of our schools, or the threatening of heads of educational institutions for political advantage. And I will not permit anyone to play politics to the detriment of the education of our youth."

Perhaps it is expecting too much to hope for a really harmonious relationship between the governor and the State Legislature in Oklahoma. But there are many favorable factors this year.

Don Welch, '19ex, of Madill, is scheduled to be Speaker of the House, and J.A. Rinehart, '23law, El Reno, is slated for president pro tempore of the Senate. Both were Phillips supporters and he has expressed himself as being satisfied over this slate.

So many members of the "Spending Sixteenth" were defeated in the primary election this year, that members of the new Legislature may reasonably be expected to sense a definite public reaction against flagrant patronage, and be more inclined to follow an anti-patronage program advanced by the governor.

At any rate, Oklahoma will have its first experience with a governor who is the product of its own State University, and will have a Legislature with O.U. alumni and former students ranking high in the leadership in both Houses.