

## MEMORIES OF A PAINTED LADY

*Eleven years after his graduation from the University an alumnus reminisces about his salad days at Norman in a sometimes humorous, sometimes biting irreverent collection of recollections of his alma mater*

By MICHAEL TRUE

THOUGH MIXED, one's feelings about his alma mater seldom remain neutral. I've heard fellow classmates of mine, OU '55, praise the University as being greatly responsible for their success and happiness and others blame her for their continued ignorance and misfortune. As in too many other matters of the mind and heart, I find myself agreeing equally with alumni of both persuasions. Individuals bring to college such varied equipment, particularly at a state school. For this and many other reasons, it would be impossible to describe the effect of those days at OU—1951 to 1955—for all my classmates; but I can describe their effect upon me, in memory, hoping that this description achieves some truth at least for those who, in a brief but fateful four years, shared the campus with me.

As freshmen, we came to the campus in what in the teaching profession were known as the lean years, years when instructor-professorships were scarce; after the huge enrollment of the post-war years, salaries were low, and the political situation desperate. Those were the McCarthy years. The Wisconsin senator's demise came in 1954 after the fateful conflict with the Department of the Army. I remember giving an anti-McCarthy speech in Military Science which, at the time, the ROTC teacher-officer approved of; two years earlier my "radical" views might have aroused suspicion. In spite of the fact that the Supreme Court held loyalty oaths unconstitutional, the sovereign state of Oklahoma required an oath from anyone, including university profes-

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sors and staff members, on the state payroll. In order to carry dishes from Hester Hall dining tables for 50 cents an hour, I had to sign an affidavit saying I had never been a communist and had no plans of overthrowing the government. The thought had never occurred to me before that time that anyone could want to overthrow any government, let alone my own; but the public thought communists were so clever and so devoted at that time, maybe they would have hauled dishes for such low pay in order to corrupt the youth of America. I still doubt it.

Whitehand and Hester-Robertson were the principal male residences, along with the watermelon pink dorms (Wilson Center) south of the stadium, before Cross Center was constructed. Many of the incoming men pledged fraternities, of course; two of the four men and all the women from Lawton did. In 1951 only seven people from Lawton (other than myself) chose OU over A&M, Cameron, or private schools. Just two years later the number of OU freshmen from Lawton quadrupled.

The athletes imprisoned in Jeff House, less swank than the present athletic dorm, were, if anyone, the heroes of the campus to the world outside; but in the OU community they remained so separate from the rest of the student body, so mysteriously confined to a different curriculum, that one knew them only through high school, ROTC classes, or perhaps a rare encounter in one of the snap courses. Occasionally, one of them, because of involvement in campus politics or the inevitable selection as All-American (inevitable because *someone* had to be chosen from OU in those years), became a campus personality.

Fraternities and sororities dominated the social life of the campus and, like the overemphasis on athletics, helped to destroy any real community

spirit; the drama and foreign language clubs struggled along with little support. There was no student literary magazine, and I never knew anyone in English—either faculty or student—who admitted or even pretended to be writing poetry or fiction. An upperclassman in economics did start a lively political journal, *The Oklahoma Democrat*, which tried valiantly to discover the liberal voice in state politics. The intellectual centers on the campus were, as so often happens, the YMCA group, Wesley Foundation, and Hillel Foundation, where one saw an occasional foreign film and heard a theological or philosophical discussion. Finis Crutchfield's or E. Kenneth Feaver's campus missionaries worked to keep the faith alive. (I noticed recently in the *ACLU Journal* that Feaver's still trying to civilize Soonerland.) The Baptist Student Union and the Newman Club, my own group, offered little to the questing student, either theist or atheist.

The social events of the campus centered in the fall around the home football games, listening parties when the team was away, caravans to Dallas—a "spirited" Texas weekend and a challenge to all libertines on and off campus, before Oklahoma went wet. The fraternities had a job just to feed and entertain the alumni on football Saturdays. Parents and old grads could quote statistics from every game of the present season even when they knew nothing else about their alma mater and cared less about its hard times: the loss of faculty because of poor salaries and little academic freedom.

One sensed always that somewhere, perhaps just beneath the library on the South Oval, dwelt the real soul of the University, potentially noble and recognizably Oxonian. But for the Platonic strains of unpremeditated

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art, it was usually touch and go, competing as they did with the roar from the stadium, the giggles from fraternity-sorority rush, and the pow-wow power drills in the P.E. building. Although a number of our classmates made Phi Eta Sigma, they hardly upset the more pragmatic, party school pattern at OU that existed before they arrived. The social reform agitation carried on by the class of '66 was unknown to us, too, though we showed some life in supporting an imitative, yet spirited panty raid in the spring of 1952. So ended the freshman year.

The sophomore year gave us a heavy jolt; in the summer of 1953 the death of 22 of our brightest and most promising young men brought with it the suggestion of our own death and deprived us of several good friends. The three I knew best—Buz Bates from Norman and Bob Rhyne and Dick Schleiff from Fort Smith—stood out above the usual OU freshmen because of their intelligence and talent, the two attributes that won them Navy ROTC scholarships and indirectly caused their deaths. A plane carrying them from the East Coast to Corpus Christi during the second summer cruise crashed shortly after takeoff. May they rest in peace.

The war in Korea had taken many young men who might have been members of the class of 1955—and for the first two years we all expected to be fighting in it, probably, at the time of graduation. Nonetheless, the ROTC classes quickly won everybody's contempt because of the boredom, the mindlessness, the futility of the wasted time in class and on the

drill field. My senior year, after flunking summer camp (a considerable task for anyone but me, whose lack of military prowess astonished even my closest friends), provided a sense of freedom that I've seldom experienced since. College without ROTC now represents an ideal which I hope all students can enjoy someday.

One can hardly remember OU from 1951-1955 as a center of learning: the college newspaper paid too little attention to issues political, religious, or sexual, among its own or other students. But one could get an education, hear good music, work in a decent library and know at least a small community of students and faculty seriously concerned about ideas and their consequences. Several faculty members became known for teaching something of merit: Raines, Ruggiers, and Elconin in English, Peach in economics, Duncan in political science, Levy in math, Roller in the history of science, among others. But generally the faculty seemed rather superfluous to all the extracurricular activities, to the "second curriculum," as Jerome Ellison calls it. The student editors of the *1953 Sooner* showed the apparent irrelevance of the teachers by omitting faculty pictures from the yearbook entirely.

The tone of the University during those years was set, I'm afraid, by the major in Business Administration, and the school reflected his standards to an inordinate degree. A man on a large allowance, with a student subscription to the *Wall Street Journal* and eventual responsibilities in Dad's investment house in the City, he had

little truck with matters of the mind. There's nothing wrong with any of these conditions—really—but one can see why the professors had a rough time shaking those boys up with *any* idea about *anything*! Any spirit of disinterested inquiry simply couldn't survive in such purposeful, buttons-and-bows air. The limited BBA fare worked pretty successfully at stifling the struggling liberal arts.

The feminine mystique held most of the women in bondage, too. Too many bright and promising young ladies assumed the role of dust-bowl debutantes, latter-day Southern-type boomer-sooner belles to please their parents? their fiancés? their sorority sisters? I could never decide whom. One sorority girl I knew and admired used to sneak out to concerts and lectures occasionally. She had a rough time explaining such interests to the sisters.

Outnumbered 3 to 1 by the boys, a girl had obviously little chance and even less encouragement to spend too much time with the books *solo*.

But several of my classmates, men and women, survived the atmosphere, went on to professional careers of great promise and retained an interest in ideas that flowered later in

DRAWING BY MIKE DIRHAM



more invigorating air. Of those who went to graduate school or pursued careers of real consequence, only a couple were BMOCs or BWOCs. Now, one directs a library in Florida, and one's a college professor; they include also six medical doctors, an engineer, a college administrator, a lawyer, and an exceptionally capable mother.

What OU gave these people I couldn't say exactly—perhaps (and this is a kind of recommendation) it simply left them alone. A person graduating from Oklahoma University in 1955 could hardly think of himself as “educated.” So in that way the University at least protected one from pretense, that bogey man that scares away all one's natural inclinations to admit freely and, through reading and experience, to correct one's ignorance—to embrace and to explore the mystery of a world only partially known. It seems to me, however, after the experience of several other universities, that an alumnus might ask more of his state school.

Okies all, we give too little money too grudgingly and thus get less intellectually than the citizens of North Carolina, Nebraska, or Wisconsin. Though Norman might still be Cam-

bridge on the South Canadian to the class of 1966—as it was to many of us in 1955—it hardly compares with the more distinguished, independent, and jealously self-determined centers of learning in Chapel Hill, Lincoln, and Madison.

So, even now, 11 years after graduation, I have to think of OU more as a painted lady than as *alma mater* (fostering mother)—a lady with some style (Cherokee Gothic and frenzied modern), with rough but hardy intelli-

gence, perhaps a little uncouth and just a bit fickle. Our affair belonged more to the heart than to the mind; and anyway you look at it, the lady deserved finer treatment than she ever got from the likes of me. An ignorant hayseed in 1951 and probably an ungrateful wretch in 1965, I remember her now with great fondness. Oh! In memory, she makes the heart beat faster and the pulse quicken. I look forward to a visit with her soon—we've been apart too long. *END*

