

BENJAMIN GILBERT OWEN

By Mrs. Benjamin G. Owen

The wagon, team and seventeen year old driver were dust covered as they rolled southward into the Cherokee Strip on a hot Spring day in 1893. Too young to stake a claim, the driver, Bennie Owen, had agreed to follow up the run of his Kansas Neighbors with a wagon load of provisions that they would need to establish themselves in the territory. The excitement of the

race, his pioneering spirit, and the opportunities offered in the new land were a strong magnet that eventually would lead him to accept the challenge of a new university in the raw frontier town of Norman.

Benjamin Gilbert "Bennie" Owen was born in Chicago on July 24, 1875. He was the second of seven children of George H. and Olivia Ann Ring Owen. His father's family had immigrated to the United States from England and two of his uncles had been born there. His mother's family was from New York State. There were five boys and two girls in the family. Bill Owen, who later became a coach of the Oklahoma University baseball team, and Ted Owen, trainer for the football team, established homes on College Street in Norman, where Mrs. Ted Owen still resides. Arthur became a farmer in Washington and George lost his life at the age of 26 in a swimming accident. There are two sisters, Birdie, who died in 1911 and Olive who resided on a farm near Arkansas City.

Bennie Owen came by his love of sports naturally. He was wiry, energetic, athletic and ambitious and was born in the same decade as American football and the first professional baseball league. His father had been a catcher for the Covington, Kentucky, baseball club and his older brother, Bill, was a catcher for the Rock Island, Illinois, team. Bennie moved with his family to St. Louis, Missouri, when he was twelve and immediately became an avid fan of the St. Louis Browns, then one of the top teams in the nation. He attended every home game and idolized the colorful players of the day. A neighborhood baseball team and swimming in the Mississippi along the St. Louis waterfront were his chief recreations when the Browns were not playing.

Bennie Owen was graduated from St. Louis Clay High School in 1891 and shortly thereafter moved with his family to a wheat farm in Sumner County, Kansas, about twelve miles west of Arkansas City and three miles north of the boundary of the Cherokee Strip. He attended Hendershot Academy three days a week, worked on the farm and read medicine with a local doctor. His proximity to the Strip and the exciting events of the times made an indelible impression.

Bennie initially planned to become a doctor and enrolled in the University of Kansas in 1897 to study pharmacy and Latin in preparation for a medical career. At Kansas he participated in track, baseball and in 1897-98 played football under Wylie Woodruff, a former All-American guard from Pennsylvania. He quarterbacked the all-victorious Kansas team under the famous Fielding "Hurry-up" Yost in 1899. From Woodruff he received excellent grounding in solid line play and the use of guards and tackles and from Yost he learned finesse, backfield cunning, a system of rapid signal calling with constant pressure upon the opposition, and clean play that became his hallmarks.

In 1900 he interrupted his studies and went to Europe to attend the Paris Exposition and the Victoria Diamond Jubilee. This trip so exhausted his meager funds that on his return he gave up his goal in medicine and accepted a coaching job at Washburn College in Topeka, Kansas. In his first year as head coach he developed a strong team that won six of eight contests.

Yost called Bennie to Michigan in 1901 to be an assistant coach.

He aided Yost in building the top team of the nation that year. The team compiled an unparalleled record of 11 straight wins, scoring 550 points to zero points for all opponents.

In the summer of 1902, Owen accepted a full time job at Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kansas, as head football coach and chemistry instructor. He had been favorably impressed by the neat Swedish-Lutheran town and the desire of college officials to establish a permanent athletic program. At Bethany his football program was built upon the Yost system of fast play and individual physical condition. He trained his teams vigorously and incessantly. The story is told that he stopped the train while returning from a hard fought out of town game and led his players on a two mile run into Lindsborg. He had solid teams for three years. He introduced the spinner in 1903, and the cross-buck in 1904. He used quick opening plays of a direct pass from center and pioneered in the use of an unbalanced line. In the era of three downs for five yards, his "Terrible Sweedes" compiled a record of 22 wins, 2 losses and 2 ties for a percentage of .916. His teams at Bethany are remembered not only for their outstanding record but for clean play and excellent deportment on field and off.

His fine record at Bethany resulted in offers from the University of Pittsburg and the Territorial University in Norman. The appeal of an opportunity to build an athletic program in the new territory outweighed the more lucrative aspect of the Pittsburg offer. He was hired for three months, September--November, 1905, by the school athletic association and was promised a salary of \$900. The association was in debt and owed two previous coaches and the local druggist, John Barbour, who had advanced \$300 for a team trip to Arkansas. The year 1905 was one of several years in which the new OU coach had to take an IOU for a good part of his promised salary. In these early years, the dire fiscal state of the university athletic association frequently dictated the football schedule. Away games were scheduled with the larger schools to increase the amount of the guarantee and several games were scheduled on each road trip, sometimes with only a day or two between games, in order to minimize expenses.

During these early years Bennie enjoyed hunting the plentiful game of the territory almost as much as coaching football. On October 16th, 1907, Bennie and his good friend John Barbour went after quail in an area about half a mile south of Adkins Ford on the South Canadian River. They were returning from the hunt in a buggy when one of the bird dogs started to fall. Bennie, who was dismantling his gun, reached out to catch the dog and the gun discharged. The full charge struck his right arm four inches below his shoulder and severed an artery. They applied a tourniquet to the arm and loped back to town, going up the alley behind Main Street so as not to attract attention. The first doctor they sought was out of his office so Bennie walked a block to another doctor. He received emergency treatment but when the artery could not be properly restored, the arm was amputated by an Oklahoma City specialist.

The loss of the arm was only a temporary obstacle although it caused the coach to miss a few games. Bennie trained himself to write with his left hand, resumed his hunting and fishing avocations within a few weeks and always sought to do everything as well with one arm as he had with two. His annual fishing trips to Northern New Mexico over several

decades with his companions, Emil Kraettli and "Judge" Lindsey, and the thousands of trout they caught attest to his skill as a left-handed fly caster. He became so expert with one hand that in later years he was asked to give instruction to disabled veterans.

On May 22, 1912, Miss Nina Bessent and Bennie Owen were married. The wedding was held in the First Presbyterian Church, Crawford and Gray Street, Norman, Oklahoma. A beautiful reception was held in the home of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. C. H. Bessent, North Peters Avenue, Norman, Oklahoma.

Charles H. Bessent, the bride's father, was a prominent pioneer banker who had come to Norman in 1891. He was associated with founding of the First National Bank and later with the Security National Bank. The newly-weds built a house on Elm Street next to the home of the E. B. Johnsons, whose four sons later quarterbacked Oklahoma University football teams. The Owen's home soon became a mecca for university personnel. Friends and former sports figures could always count upon a warm welcome. The Owens entertained graciously after every home game and there were endless reminiscences of games won and lost, successful plays and humorous situations that occurred down through the years of Oklahoma football.

The Owen home had a large basement of several rooms. During the school year it was always filled with ambitious and determined athletes who lived there while going to school, participating in sports and working part time to pay for their college education.

Bennie and Nina Owen had three daughters--Jane, now Mrs. Delbert L. Haynes of Sandpoint, Idaho; Ruth, now Mrs. J. W. Page, Jr., of Houston, Texas; and Dorothy Ann, now Mrs. Thomas L. Bryan of Oklahoma City. In spite of frequent kidding about a football coach who had only daughters, Bennie was extremely proud of his family and his daughters idolized their father. His practical view of life, unfailing good humor and wholesome example were an inspiration to his children as they were to all who knew him.

Owen's career as head coach at Oklahoma University spanned many changes in the administration of the University and ups and downs in its political and fiscal fortunes. It also spanned the era of most significant developments in the game of football. The rules changes in 1906, 1910 and 1912 by which the game evolved from a mass play, three downs for five yards rushing game to the wide open game of four downs for ten yards, 6 point touchdowns, the forward pass, the 100 yard field and four 15 minute quarters that we know today, were eagerly accepted and capitalized upon by Bennie Owen as they occurred. He began working with the forward pass in 1906, used the direct pass from center in all plays in 1910, and installed an action pass play in 1912. His 1914 and 1915 teams were among the first to employ a massive passing attack, using 30-35 passes per game when most other schools were content with a few attempts.

In his first season at Norman, his team achieved a 7-2 record and gave Oklahoma its first victory over Texas, 2-0. In 1908 his team improved on the score by downing Texas 50-0. He had undefeated teams in 1911, 1915, 1918 (in spite of enlistments, draft calls and the influenza epidemic) and again in 1920. The record gains added luster when it is considered

that almost all of the games with the major schools were played on their home fields. He led the University into the Southwest Conference in 1914 and into the Missouri Valley Conference in 1920 where it remained until the Big Six Conference was formed in 1928.

Owen's active coaching career terminated in 1926. His 22 consecutive years as head coach is the longest in Oklahoma University football. His record stands at 122 wins, 54 losses, and 16 ties for a percentage of .693. He served as Athletic Director until 1934 and then as Director of Intramural Athletics until his retirement in 1950.

In addition to the present football stadium and field house, Bennie Owen visualized, promoted and built the swimming pool, the baseball field and bleachers, the concrete tennis courts and the nine hole university golf course with grass greens that was located Southwest of Brooks and Jenkins. These facilities have provided enjoyment for countless thousands of students over the years.

On October 11th, 1953, Bennie Owen received national recognition for his long, innovative and illustrious football career. He was inducted into the National Football Hall of Fame, in a ceremony held prior to the start of the Oklahoma-Texas football game in Dallas. The ceremony was televised nationally. Among the many other honors accorded Bennie Owen are membership in the Helms Athletic Foundation Hall of Fame and the Oklahoma Athletic Hall of Fame. In 1955, on the 50th anniversary of his association with the University, the Alumni Association sponsored a testimonial dinner at which the establishment of a Bennie Owen Memorial Scholarship Fund was announced. More important to Bennie Owen than the formal honors bestowed upon him, however, were the memories and the countless lasting friendships of former players and associates that he treasured.

In 1964 Nina and Bennie left their home of more than 50 years in Norman and moved to Houston where Mrs. Owen still resides. Bennie Owen suffered a severe circulatory ailment and passed away in February, 1970. His death marked the end of an era but the "lessons that Owen's players learned from his example-to sublimate themselves for the good of the team, to get along well with others, to take victory quietly and modestly and defeat gracefully, to plan intelligently and work hard, that alibis were no good stayed with them all their lives." His Sooner teams were winners and their gentlemanly conduct did much to enhance the reputation of a new university and an infant state.