January 1, 1985. The Sooner kicker split the uprights for 3 points and a 20-14 fourth-quarter lead over Washington. The Orange Bowl crowd roared, the Ruf/Nek covered wagon—without the officials’ permission—bolted onto the gridiron in celebration. Then a whistle, the yellow flag flew, the field goal became a 15-yard penalty, and the momentum shifted dramatically. Washington came back to win, costing the Sooners a potential national championship.

I don’t know the name of the Ruf/Nek who drove the wagon onto the gridiron a millisecond too early, but if this dismal scene had occurred 40 years earlier, I guarantee that the driver would have been a fellow member of my class of ’48, Lew Thompson.

Thompson’s connection with the Ruf/Neks originated in his first enrollment at OU in 1941, and as a result of another interesting football game. On a cold, rainy October Saturday, the Sooners upset heavily favored Santa Clara, the West Coast powerhouse. Students were in a raucous mood, and the Ruf/Neks were organizing a demonstration on the North Oval, encouraging a celebratory classroom walkout.

Thompson, a freshman since September, was supporting himself with various part-time jobs and passed by en route to deliver sacks of snack food to a sorority party. He stopped, told the organizers another of his part-time jobs was freelancing photographs for The Daily Oklahoman. If the Ruf/Neks would move their rally over to the Presidential lawn, he’d get a picture of President Joe Brandt talking to them. That certainly would make the paper.

They went for it. Thompson, camera equipment in hand, knocks on Brandt’s door. Brandt is absent but expected momentarily. Thompson explains what’s afoot, gets access to the balcony and leaves word that the students want Brandt to speak to them. Brandt arrives, tells the students he’ll make their walkout an offi-

A Word to Worried Parents

So you think obtaining a college education is difficult today? You should have been at OU in the topsy-turvy ’40s.
cial Monday holiday. Thompson’s photos make a spread in The Oklahoman.

If my memory serves me, it was the first sanctioned student walkout—but to get to the useful part of this tale, we must skip back a few months.

Thompson arrived at the OU campus from Shawnee with the $50 required in those Depression times to pay his admission fee, plus $18 to sustain him until he found work. He had helped a friend milk the family’s cows, in exchange for a ride in the friend’s truck to Norman for himself and a trunk containing all of his worldly belongings.

Lew left the trunk on the sidewalk near Campus Drug, went in and asked for a job. He cited experience at Coffey Drug Store in Shawnee and was hired on a trial basis. He carried his trunk to a rooming house the manager recommended. But this is not where the story started.

In Hollis in 1939, the bleak bottom of The Great Depression, Thompson’s mother was losing her struggle to provide for her children, had found better paying work in California and would move the family there. Lew asked to stay behind. He felt he could find a job and support himself. He found it at Tom Coffey’s drug store in Shawnee.

Coffey needed a night watchman (as drugstores did even in those days). He could use Lew, 16 and big for his age, as delivery boy, janitor and helper in the photo studio Coffey also ran. Thompson enrolled at Shawnee High, slept in the drug store and began learning photography in the darkroom.

This paid off at OU. In his search for a second job, he found that the Athletic Department could use a photographer, and Snorter Luster, then an assistant coach, provided him a free place to sleep and park his trunk (a going-away present from Coffey). The arrangement left scant time for class work, but it didn’t matter. Before final exam time that winter, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

That Day of Infamy was Sunday, December 7. On Monday, December 8, Thompson enlisted. He didn’t get back to the campus until 1946.

The second enrollment was totally different. Now he was a retired Army captain, having gone into the newly forming Rangers, survived the bloody battle of Guadalcanal, other island campaigns and the reconquest of the Philippines, earning battlefield promotions on the way.

Now he had retirement money, his tuition and fees paid by the G.I. Bill of Rights and a monthly paycheck. He and other returning veterans took over fraternity houses and changed a lot of things about campus life. But the connections Thompson had made with OU athletics were still alive. He noticed the male pep squad that enlivened events before the war wasn’t active.

The manager of Rickner’s Book Store found the old Ruf/Neks records in storage there. A meeting was held, the club was revived and lives on today to help celebrate Sooner victories.

Ruf/Neks aside, those from the Class of ’48 may recall Thompson as the fellow who revived The Covered Wagon— the monthly campus magazine. It lived on a subsidy from student activity funds, had a tiny readership and offered little to read except the sort of jokes that were popular with college mags in the 1940s. By now Thompson was a journalism major. The Board of Student Publications picked him as Wagon editor. He collected a staff of writers, cartoonists and photographers, including me as assistant editor. We were to convert a prewar magazine into a postwar publication appealing to a campus swarming with mostly males just out of
FALL 2002

For more than 30 years, novelist Tony Hillerman has followed one best-selling mystery with another, taking his devoted following into the intriguing, mystifying and starkly beautiful world of the Navajo, establishing his protagonists Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee as two of the best-known contemporary detectives of the genre. With his autobiography, Seldom Disappointed, Hillerman steps out from behind Leaphorn and Chee to reveal a character every bit as fascinating as his fictional creations—himself.

Hillerman looks at his own life with startling clarity and warmth, turning his keen insight and wry, self-deprecating humor on a life lived with modest expectations colored by an optimism destined to carry him through life's many challenges. Growing up in tiny, Depression-fraught Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, he never realized he was poor until he left for college, able to afford only one semester before following his brother into the Army, a teenage infantryman coming of age in the mud and madness of World War II.

Recovering from serious war wounds, he returned with the veterans to the University of Oklahoma, where he chose journalism, then became a reporter, United Press bureau chief and journalism department chair at the University of New Mexico. At OU he met and later married the girl of his dreams, Marie, with whom he had one child and adopted five more. His enormous success as a writer, while greatly satisfying, seems still to surprise him.

Seldom Disappointed
By Tony Hillerman

Seldom Disappointed
By Tony Hillerman

Perennial, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers
Hardcover $26.00
Paperback $13.95

Also available on audio:
12 Hours / 8 cassettes
Unabridged / Read by the Author
$39.95