A Sooner-in-exile waxes nostalgic while looking back on good times shared—and missed.

A LONG TIME GONE

BY Ed Frost
Nearly 20 years have passed but faraway football fans like author Ed Frost still have not recovered from missing "The Kick," Uwe von Schamann's dramatic last-second field goal to beat Ohio State in 1977.

In the summer of 1967, after completing the oral exam for an M.A. in Russian, I popped in a phone booth and excitedly called my mom to tell her the news. The phone booth was in the Union, and I could point it out yet, except that the landscape undoubtedly has changed. I've been gone a long time.

What has not changed, except to become deeper and more intense, is my love for the school that granted me a couple of degrees. I suspect the same is true for a lot of folks who went there. As a student, I was too busy and too caught up in the everyday to realize what it would all mean to me later. If I had known then how much I would miss it once it was gone, I might have kept changing my major and taking classes forever.

I did change majors once. Entering OU in the fall of 1957, I earned a B.A. in journalism in 1961 and looked around for what to do next. Since Vietnam was heating up, I decided the thing to do was to enlist in the Army, so I did. After favoring me with a bit of other training, the Army sent me to California to learn Russian, and that changed my career path from ace sports reporter to professor of Russian language and literature, which became my second major.

After the military, I returned to OU in 1965 and enrolled in the Russian graduate program. There I encountered lovable Robert Vlach, a bubbly teacher who appreciated America and taught me much about Russia before his untimely death in the middle of my M.A. studies. Others who guided me through grad school were Gurij Konstantinovich Chmelev, an indefatigable instructor who always wore a black suit, even on Norman's stickiest summer days; Gerhard Wiens, a native speaker of German who had learned Russian just because he wanted to read the Russian masterpieces in their original language; Herbert Ellison, who brought Russian history to life; Lowell Dunham, a rough-talking but soft-hearted administrator; and Ken Dailey, a down-to-earth history prof who gave me some solid advice that sent me to an excellent Ph.D. program, where I met my future wife and launched my teaching career.

That solid advice from Dailey was: "Apply to Illinois; they have a lot of money." I did and ended up going there, and I tell my kids if it hadn't been for Dailey's advice, they wouldn't exist. Those sorts of repercussions have made me realize the extent of the influence I can have in the lives of my own students. Four of my former students, for instance, have married Russians (and, happily, are all still married to their Russian spouses). The fact that at Illinois I met my wife, Lena Hamrick of Ponca City, was a double bonus—she is the light of my life and an OU alumna. Dailey left OU not long after I did, without ever knowing how much he had influenced me and helped me, and I have
saluted him silently many times. He was a darn good lecturer, too.

So I left OU and headed for Illinois. And, to this day, I've never been to another Sooner football or basketball game or wrestling match. I've never been able to spend more than a few minutes again in the Bizzell Library, one of my favorite places even when I had to be there to complete an assignment. I didn't know when I left that there wouldn't be a Town Tavern any more. I've never again eaten at The Mont, not to mention The Copper Kettle. Never been to another concert in Holmberg Hall. Or back to the Cotton Bowl.

Oh, there've been a few visits to Norman but always so brief that they only whetted my appetite. I've usually been so far away that I couldn't get the Sooners or any news of them on the radio, or often even on TV. When Uwe von Schamann made "The Kick" at Ohio State in 1977, it was quite a while before I knew. We were reduced in my area of exile to watching a regional game. Never mind that 92 percent of the football-watching world was treated to OU vs. Ohio State. In Alabama, where I've been teaching for 22 years, we were shown a southern game.

I have never seen a film of OU-Ohio State. Last year, with some birthday money, I bought an audio tape of the game, for which I paid $12.50 plus shipping and handling—and it turned out the tape was taken off the Ohio State network, so the announcers didn't bother telling their audience of OU's injuries. They did, however, tell about von Schamann as he waited to try his miraculous field goal in front of 88,000 people, guessing that, "... for all we know, he doesn't even speak English." The Sooner kicker earned the announcers' grudging respect, though—before the kick. With the multitudes thundering "Block that kick!" and crafty old Woody Hayes calling a time out to "ice" him, von Schamann appeared calm. One announcer declared, "He's a cool cucumber, isn't he?" The other countered with, "I've never seen anybody like that; it's like there's freon in him." Amen.

Former Sooners from the four corners write in to Soo pers Illustrated to express appreciation of the magazine and frustration at not being able to get news of OU where they are. I understand their plight. One of the hard lessons of life that OU didn't teach us, I guess, was that the Sooners would not be popular and accessible everywhere.

Although Lena and I met in the fall of 1968 at the University of Illinois, we could have met earlier. We probably attended some of the same Russian Club meetings at OU, because while I was doing graduate work there in Russian, Lena was involved with the language on a lower level. In fact, I applied for a teaching assistantship and could have been her instructor, which she says would have nipped any romance in the bud. The University, in its wisdom, chose someone else for the assistantship and saved a marriage, another reason for me to be grateful to alma mater.

At any rate, we went the "just friends" route for several years in Champaign-Urbana and were good pals who often ate together and spent a lot of time talking on the phone. Lena was the bilingual secretary of the Slavic Department because she could touch-type in Russian, so we had a lot to talk about. Any time I'm around, the conversation is going to include Sooner football, especially when I'm talking with a friend of the Sooners. So there I was in Illinois, far away from any radio outlets carrying our favorite team, but at least I knew this girl who had gone there and was sympathetic. Early in our Illinois days, who should become prominent in the Heisman Trophy race but Oklahoma's own Steve Owens. We talked about Steve a good bit as the magical day of the announcement neared.

The day it came over the radio that OU had its second Heisman winner, I was understandably elated and called Lena at the Slavic office. The other
secretary answered, and I gave her the message. In a while I got a call from Lena, who was laughing at her co-worker's puzzlement. The secretary had dutifully reported, “Ed called and said just tell you ‘Steve won,’ and you’d know what it meant.” And Lena did, there in that land of non-Sooners.

Another Illinois memory touches on OU basketball. The Sooners came to Champaign-Urbana to play the Illini in the Assembly Hall, which seats around 18,000. Neither Lena nor I was able to attend, but we knew the Sooners were there and rooted for them. I listened to the tense game on the Illinois network, though not constantly—just checking the score now and then in between fits of studying. Toward the end, I saw that we were still in it and might steal a road win, not an easy task. I still remember the tone of the Illini announcer as he described the final moments. Clifford Ray is the player I recall from our team, though I don’t know whether he scored the winner. Some Sooner did, though, and the stunned announcer described it as, “X gets the ball under the basket; he gets the bucket, and they win the game.”

Assistant: The outcome of the 1971 “Game of the Century” ruined many a Sooner Thanksgiving when Nebraska finally prevailed in a classic contest that lives on in OU legend.

got quiet, and so did the crowd.

When I stopped leaping around my basement apartment, I gave Lena a call, and we celebrated. Later, Illinois students returned from the game to Lena’s apartment complex. Some she knew came dragging in the hall and reported glumly, “They won.” “No,” retorted Lena, “we won.”

The “Game of the Century,” which intelligent life knows was OU and Nebraska in 1971, ruined our shared Thanksgiving. Neither of us had a television, so I rented a black-and-white set, and we watched and died together. We had planned a Thanksgiving feast that evening at a restaurant in a nearby town, but we didn’t have any appetites when we got there. We ate but not with any gusto.

Illinois days were happy days, but...
Granville Liggins perspiring heavily as he labored for the Sooners in Miami that night, while outside I could hear the wind blowing snow across the Illinois landscape.

There were other great days in Illinois besides passing prelims and defending my dissertation. Several of them revolve around OU victories over Texas, witnessed on a television screen at the Illini Union. In 1972, as described in an earlier Sooners Magazine, Lena and I were whooping and hollering as the Sooners battered the Longhorns 27-0, and a man in front of us turned around and introduced himself as Professor Percy Buchanan, of OU’s Asian Studies Program. He was in town for a conference, had sneaked away for something less scholarly and was also applauding OU. In 1973, with Barry Switzer at the helm for the first time, I watched in the Illini Union national championships galore. The Sooners have done their part since I arrived in Alabama in 1974. They won national titles in 1974, 1975 and 1985, while Bama answered in 1978, 1979 and 1992. Alabama fans think their program is second to none, which has made it a tad difficult to live here at times. I record here that I am grateful to the coaches and players for those national titles.

I’m grateful for other triumphs, too. To Stan Abel and the OU wrestlers forSooners everywhere were glued to their television sets as Steve Owens went over the massed Tennessee defense in OU’s squeaker 1968 Orange Bowl win. basketball prominence, and to Kelvin Sampson and his blue-collar Sooners for carrying the torch. To Greg Grost and the OU golfers for a national title. To Larry Cochell and the OU baseball team for another (and, yes, I’m old enough that I remember our first in baseball in 1951). To Greg Buwick and the men gymnasts for still another national title. All of that and much more has happened since I came to Alabama in 1974. It’s been a lot of fun, guys, and thanks for the memo-
ries. I live in the land of Bear Bryant, Joe Namath, Don Hutson, Lee Roy Jordan and many more. But, as a Sooner, I have been able to hold up my head.

There have been funny moments, too. In 1978, with Billy Sims shining, we were ranked No. 1. But Billy fumbled near the Nebraska goal line late in the game, and the Huskers prevailed, 17-14. The following Monday, when I walked into my first class, some wiseacre led the class in singing “Boomer Sooner” as I made my entrance. I had to laugh, and so did the students. But, as often as not, I’ve had the last laugh.

As a Sooner-in-exile for 30 years, I’ve never been to the Lloyd Noble Center. I never saw the Selmons. I missed the Switzer era. I wasn’t around for the excitement of the Banowsky years, and I’m not there now, with President Boren rejuvenating the campus. But I have friends who send me clippings about vital matters like recruiting and coaching changes, and even some non-sporting news. I get Sooner Magazine, JayMac Newsletter, OU People, Sooners Illustrated and whatever else I can rustle up. I buy press guides for the athletic teams. I load up on “Heisman” post cards and send them all over the U.S., so people will know we’ve had three winners of that prized trophy.

And I dream that one day I somehow will return to the place where my heart is. In the meantime, I’ve been thinking about changing my major again.