In the autumn of 1932, freshmen coming to the University of Oklahoma were invited to purchase (for 15 cents) a little booklet called the Sooner Yell Book. Compiled by "Sid" Patterson, Assistant Yell Leader, 1931, the booklet was "dedicated to the Class of '36 to whom the upper classmen are looking for an inspiration to revive the old 'Sooner Spirit.'" And if Patterson was forced to acknowledge that the old Sooner spirit needed some "reviving" in 1932, he also had to pledge to the freshmen that both the Ruf Neks and the Jazz Hounds, the two "traditional University of Oklahoma pep clubs," would, during the coming year, get themselves going again "after several seasons of inactivity." Evidently—at least in the view of the Assistant Yell Leader—the old Sooner spirit was suffering a wintry season.

In retrospect, perhaps it is not entirely surprising that the Great Depression, which had fastened its grip on the nation and the state with such devastating results, should have taken its toll upon some of the traditional, light-hearted fun associated with college during the "roaring '20s." No doubt the popular picture of college life in the 1920s suffers from considerable exaggeration. Surely it was not all raccoon coats and school pennants, fraternity smokers and illegal booze, cigarette-smoking coeds exulting in unprecedented sexual freedom, the Big Dance and the Big Game and the Big Weekend. But no matter how much that stereotype was overstated in movies, magazines and popular songs, American campuses before the Great Crash of October 1929 and the depression that followed had probably been more frivolous and carefree places than they were about to become.

By the time the Sooner Yell Book hit the businesses on Campus Corner (many of which had dutifully placed their ads in the booklet), there were almost 12 million unemployed Americans, a stunning 24 percent of the work force. Total farm income in the United States had fallen from $13 billion in 1929 to $5.5 billion. In Oklahoma, the falling prices for both oil and agricultural commodities brought widespread suffering, serious local unemployment and the beginning of an out-migration that would cause the state's population to drop by 60,000 between 1930 and 1940. Oklahoma City already had experienced a food riot as unemployed men and women broke into grocery stores near City Hall, and a large "Hooverville" of ramshackle cardboard shanties and tents had been erected along the river. All eyes were focused on the coming presidential election. Back in 1928, Oklahomans had given the Republican, Herbert Hoover, the largest majority in state history up to that time; two months after the freshmen arrived in Norman, however, every single county in Oklahoma went for the Democrat, Franklin Roosevelt.

The stark conditions of the early 1930s may help to explain why some of the traditional college enthusiasm of the 1920s now seemed slightly irrelevant. The dire economic situation also lends a particular poignancy to the Yell Book. To some on the campus, clearly, it was important to behave as though nothing had really changed. They set their wills to the task of "reviving" the old Sooner spirit and of awakening the Ruf Neks from their slumber. They implored the new freshmen to memorize the "Anthem":

I'm a Boomer Sooner now and ever
With that Boomer Sooner spirit of O.U.
For its honor I'll stand
And I'll fight with that band
To uphold its glory, failing never;
Greatest love will last forever.
Onward with the Alma Mater.

They beseeched them to learn the "Hi Rickety":

(Twice slow)
Hi-rickety-whoop-to-doo!
Boomer-Sooner-Okla U!

(Twice fast)
Hi-rickety-whoop-to-doo!
Boomer-Sooner-Okla U!

Apparently women students were exempt from wearing the mandatory freshman cap, if this cartoon from the 1931 Sooner yearbook is any indication.
The centerpiece of the Sooner Yell Book are the nine “Rules Governing O.U. Freshmen” printed above. They will seem very curious relics of a bygone day to most modern readers. It is now the official practice of the University to welcome and to integrate new students, to make them feel at home as essentially equal members of the community that they have entered. Even if the separation, subordination and ritual humiliation represented by these rules was good natured and intended to be perfectly harmless, their undeniable thrust was to mark the new students off from the others, to put them through a period of social testing, a sort of mild “ordeal” of segregation and inferiority, before their full admission into the family.

Perhaps the wisest insights into practices like these are still those of the Belgian anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep, whose now classic work, *Rites of Passage*, appeared in 1908. Van Gennep noted that almost every culture employs initiation practices designed to mark important steps in the cycle of a life. He also pointed out that these practices bear striking resemblances to one another despite the obvious differences of form and the great variety in the many cultures where they occur. Such rites, he suggested, normally pass through three stages. In the first, some method is found to separate people from the larger group. In the second stage, they are marginalized, subjected to special indoctrination or traditional ordeals to help them make the important transition they are undertaking. Finally, they are incorporated into the community, integrated—but with a new status. It is apparent that something of the sort was being attempted on the Norman campus.

Such rites are practical and tolerable only in relatively homogeneous communities. The student body at the University of Oklahoma was such a community in the 1920s and 1930s and would remain so until after World War II. Today—when our freshmen arrive from dozens of foreign countries and from nearly every state in the union, when they are of different races and religions and class backgrounds, when some of them have grown up on the streets of inner cities and others in isolated farm towns—these “Rules Governing O.U. Freshmen,” if anyone should be bold enough to offer them, surely would be greeted with something less than enthusiasm. They might, in fact, be greeted with laughter and, here and there, a sarcastic remark or two.