

The Last Word

On the origins of the Auburn spirit

BY WYC ORR '68

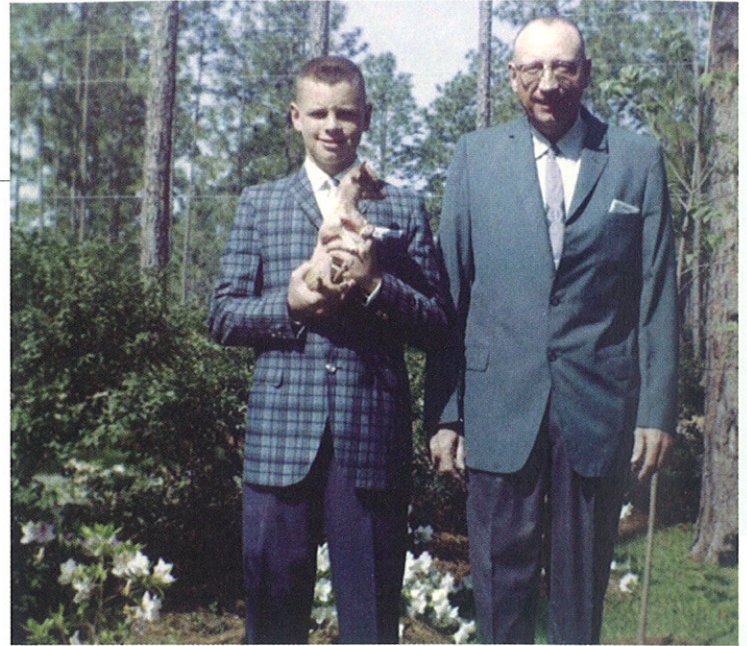
Cultural historians have often observed that Major League Baseball depends more on nostalgia than do other professional sports. The iconic “Field of Dreams” movie exemplified this phenomenon, but the same might be said of college football. Legendary sportswriters such as Grantland Rice, with his immortal tribute to Notre Dame’s 1924 backfield and victory over Army (“outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again”), symbolize the sport’s tie to the past.

Surely no collegiate football rivalry depends on reverence for the past more than that of Auburn University and the University of Alabama. Much of that love of legacy is about family—our own individual families’ participation in the rivalry as well as the participation of each institution’s alumni family. After Auburn’s historic 28-27 comeback win against the Tide in last year’s Iron Bowl, one example leapt into my mind.

It was Nov. 30, 1963, just eight days after the tragic shock of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination. Although my family and I couldn’t allow ourselves to think it, we probably knew that this was to be the last Auburn-Alabama game that my dad, who was dying of lung cancer, would ever see. He was little more than a month past having a cancerous lung removed, but he was determined to watch his beloved Tigers take on the Tide at Legion Field in Birmingham one more time.

Never has there been an Auburn alumnus who loved his school more. Captain of the Tigers baseball team during his senior year, 1935, and contemporary and friend of legendary Auburn athletes Ralph “Shug” Jordan ’32 and Joel Eaves ’37, Johnny Orr was of an era in which most AU students were the first in their families to attend college. Having lost his own dad, who died suddenly when Johnny was only 12, his mother Miriam became an ideal model for single mothers determined to see their children become upright, successful citizens. As manager of a cotton-mill-owned hotel in tiny Lindale, Ga., her work, grit and determination were devoted to earning the sustenance needed to properly raise Johnny and his older sister, Mary.

In a nation mired in the Great Depression, college for my dad and so many others was not just a heady learning experience—it was a ticket to a better life. The shared joy of opportunity and camaraderie in that challenging era no doubt bred so much of what has become universally recognized as the “Au-



burn spirit.” Growing up as the child of such men and women, one could sense that spirit in so many ways, spoken and unspoken. They radiated it. My dad certainly did—and was a shining symbol of the Auburn spirit if ever there was one.

To Johnny Orr, every trip back to Auburn—usually for a football game, but occasionally at other times of the year—was a pilgrimage. He just loved being in Auburn. I can see him now, eyes closed briefly during a ball game. I never knew for sure whether he was praying for Auburn or reveling in the moment, but probably both.

By the time of that 1963 fall classic, I was a high school senior tapped by my mother to drive her, my dad and my younger brother, Robert, to Birmingham from our home in Tifton, Ga. She attended to my dad, who was lying prostrate underneath blankets in the back seat. It was cold and windy where our seats were located in the end zone at Legion Field. No doubt my mother tried to discourage my dad from attending the game, but he wouldn’t hear of it. He was determined to see the Tigers against the Tide one more time. Auburn rewarded my dad’s devotion with a 10-8 victory, holding off ’Bama from a late attempt to drive into field-goal position.

My dad never saw another Auburn-Alabama game, but thank God he saw that one. I have no doubt my dad was looking down on the 2010 Iron Bowl, remembering with a smile another late fall afternoon long ago, when his beloved Tigers also downed the Tide.

The Auburn spirit is born of such memories, and we honor that spirit—as well as our forebears—by continuing to pay homage to our alma mater. Surely that is part of what the Tigers’ original football coach and history professor George Petrie meant so long ago when he penned the immortal words of our Auburn Creed: “... And because Auburn men and women believe in these things, I believe in Auburn and love it.”



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