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# THE UNCONVENTIONAL UNIVERSITY BOSS

— by Kate Jackson Lewis

(Managing Editor's note: This article is about an unusual Western Oklahoman who has now been transplanted in Southeastern Oklahoma. Mrs. Lewis' article first appeared in THE OKLAHOMANS on November 18, 1979 and has not been updated for inclusion here.)

ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICIA SHERMAN

22

It was no surprise to Durant townspeople when Dr. Leon Hibbs, Southeastern Oklahoma State University's president, donned a white Stetson hat and took over the reins of the university's rodeo team. Hibbs has shown a penchant for the unconventional since he became president in 1967.

Durant Attorney Dean Spears said he'd never forget the first time he saw the new president. "I was used to former President A. E. Shearer, very stately and poised. The first I see of Hibbs, he's wearing a green and gold freshman beanie and sporting a crew-cut. I got used to that and what happens? The next I know, he's riding a four-legged critter and wearing a ten-gallon hat."

Spears' remark, made at a Hibbs' "Roasting," was fundamentally true.

Hibbs told the group that he was wearing the cowboy hat long before he got the beanie. "My dad runs a sale barn in Western Oklahoma and I was in a saddle almost before I walked."

Hibbs came to Durant from his post as Dean of Education at Oklahoma City University. He received his Bachelor's degree from Northwestern State College at Alva, a Master's in Education from the University of Oklahoma, and a Master's in science and a Doctorate in Education from Oklahoma State University.

At Southeastern, Hibbs has tried everything from teaching horsemanship classes and coaching rodeo to passing out Green Stamps to fill a dorm.

"If it sounds like a good idea, he'll try it, and just about everything he takes a crack at has a way of working," DURANT DAILY DEMOCRAT Editor Bob Peterson says.

Newsman Doug Hicks said, "Hibbs calls his ventures 'calculated risks' and figures he's ahead if 20 percent pan out. The Board of Regents for Oklahoma Colleges liken him to a 'Riverboat Gambler.'"

Call him what you will, his gambling days date back to childhood in Beaver, where townspeople knew him as a lad who made money by buying a used article, working it over, then selling it for a 50 percent profit.

A boyhood friend recalled that when Leon was 17, he borrowed money to buy a service station. The deal was so tight the loan included enough cash to make change for his first day's sales. Four months later, Hibbs sold the place at enough profit to pay for his first semester in college.

When the 36-year-old president (one of the youngest at the school) took his first stroll across the "campus of 1,000 magnolias" 12 years ago, everything was quiet and peaceful. But not for long. Within a short time, a student shooting occurred; a venereal disease outbreak threatened to reach epidemic proportions; and student protests were growing louder about poor housing, untasty cafeteria food, and inadequate parking space.

Hibbs took one of his "calculated risks," bringing a storm of protest from the "Old Guard." He ordered the mass trimming of venerated magnolias. Put to test for an answer, Hibbs responded, "I was cleaning up the campus and wiping out a mugger's paradise."

A less daring man may have sought another job. (Hibbs admitted considering a number of attractive job offers, but he made no plans to leave and said so.)

"This is a tough job. I'm responsible for all of the people who work or attend classes here. If I make a mistake — if any of them make a mistake — ultimately I get blamed for it," Hibbs explained.

"My family is rooted here. It's the first time the four children, from toddler stage to college age, have ever lived under the same roof for four years."

One of his children expressed the consensus of all when he said, "You can go if you want to, but I'm not."

Another child said, "Well, I'm not either, but I'm not big enough to tell you that."

The skilled mathematician looked for a formula to solve his problems. "Since schools exist for, and because of, the students," he reasoned, "why not let them have a voice in finding the solution?"

He began by throwing open doors in order to make himself an available listener. He started eating in the student cafeteria, playing intramural sports, and hobnobbing in dorms and the snack bar. An outgoing man by nature, the administrator let it be known that he wanted to listen to their complaints. He even listed his home phone number in the student directory.

When an audience at a student talent show listened to an off-key rendition of "Blood on the Moon," sung by a bear-costumed figure, they were delighted to see their president remove his mask and reveal himself as the guest of honor.

When Durant citizens began to celebrate the Centennial, Hibbs entered the beard-growing contest. The genial Doctor won the prize — a sousing in the campus fountain. The tricky Hibbs managed to pull his sophomore competitor into the pond.

Hibbs knew that playful antics wouldn't find money for building dorms. Neither was it a cure for campus dissension. But the fun and association brought students and faculty together and broke down communication barriers.

Hibbs said, "I have a great faith in people. My philosophy has to be that if you keep everything you possibly can right out on top of the table where everyone knows the truth — all of it — those same people will make the right decisions."

Soon Hibbs' ventures paid off. Students rolled up their sleeves and helped out when it was announced that new twin dorms were soon to grace the campus. A student-faculty forum began to function. Two collegians were invited to serve on all college committees. They helped to formulate rules for the twin dorms, and women students had the same freedom to come and go that men did. Keys to outside doors were issued to all students.

When the new dorms were ready for occupancy, reports came that other colleges were having trouble keeping their dorms filled. Hibbs pulled another lucky card by promising Green Stamps to students paying for room and board in advance for the first semester. Students' mothers furnished the impetus, and the dorms were filled brimfull. Hibbs paid for the stamps himself, and the dorms are still paying their own way.

Hibbs is reluctant to take credit for the many changes

and additions to the university since he came. "Most of the ideas that worked here came from students, faculty, and off-campus people."

"The ten new buildings and the new curricular ideas I have helped initiate are important, as are the campus infirmary, the radio station, the off-street driver-education range, and degree programs in professional aviation, recreation and conservation."

"We have the most unique food service in the nation — a French sidewalk cafe and an all-French menu. Our dormitories are full, and we have very little indebtedness."

"The one improvement I prize most," Hibbs said, "is the soon-to-be-realized Industrial Arts Technological Center. The architect has the plans and construction will begin soon."

How did he get involved in rodeo?

"Four years ago, I began teaching horsemanship classes to provide weekend recreation for campus-bound students. Though the program started without horses or money, friends of the college donated a motley assortment of steeds, some good — others worthless. I rode every horse to determine its worth. One of the regents managed to get both hay and oats contributed."

Through stud fees and Hibbs' management, the program became self-supporting. Equine studies are now offered for credit, and courses may be applied toward a degree in recreation.

Rodeo-minded riders started roping, tying, and bulldogging; so Hibbs took on another task — coaching rodeo. His teams were winners from the start. "With four consecutive National Championships to their credit, the men's team hopes to win a fifth time to set an all-time record. We have a team of sophomore women who should win a national title next year."

Though Hibbs enjoyed working to get rodeo started, he considers it of little consequence among the other accomplishments at the college. "Now that I have a champion performer, Betty Gayle, helping with rodeo, I can spend more time implementing new projects and ideas."

"No, I won't give up riding. I've been with it too long. I came to love horses and cattle when I lived on a ranch. We did it all, then: cutting cattle, tying calves, bulldogging for branding. Only we didn't call it rodeo — it was called work," he grinned.

"My family likes horses. My wife, Maxine, started to school with me at Elmwood, south of Beaver. We finished high school there and got married 29 years ago. Max, 24, is a mathematician for Conoco and lives in Stillwater. Gaye, 23, teaches kindergarten at Denison, Texas. Craig, 18, is a freshman at Southeastern, and LeAn is a fifth-grader."

"Gaye has been a barrel racer and a teacher of horsemanship; Craig is a champion roper, and LeAn is a fine recreational horsewoman. Max is interested in horse and cattle breeding."

Hibbs even enters performance events. "I perform regularly in cow cutting. In fact, I have a horse entered in the National Cutting Horse Association Futurity in December. I once roped steers, but not as a college performer."

What would Hibbs change if he could relive his 48 years?

"I don't know whether I would change anything if I had my life to live over. Everything fits together so well that any one change might have altered my life so drastically, that I wouldn't be me."