

The Death of Evans Field: The End of an Era

James W. Pohl

As you read these words, construction is already underway on a modern 14,000-seat stadium located to the east of Evans Field. Very shortly Evans Field and its field house will be demolished, and, in its place, there will be laid an asphalt parking lot. On November 15, just one week after Homecoming (November 8), the sun will set on Evans, as a playing field, for the last time; and the cheers of the crowd will be replaced by honkings of the horn and rumbles of the exhaust. "Sic transit gloria mundi."

Of course, this was not the first Evans Field; and it may not be the last. At the time of this writing, the name of the newest field is still a matter of debate. This Evans, the one that they are tearing down, was, for a time, known as "new" Evans Field. Earlier it was merely an open area of land known generally to San Marcans as Kyle Field. The original or the "old" Evans Field was located in the approximate area of the present site of the tennis courts, where Ed J.L. Green runs into Sessoms Drive. If that description isn't clear enough for the old-timers, it might help to point out that "old" Evans Field was next to the picturesque stone wall now also partially demolished (at least the most picturesque part of it), that was so generously given to the University by the class of 1936. In fact, the appellation, Evans, came later. Originally, the ground was called Normal Field.

It was early in the fall of 1919 that the man who was to become a respected figure in San Marcos, Oscar Strahan, with his charming wife, Marion, stepped off the train at the depot to assume his coaching duties; and it was to Normal Field that he repaired the very next day in order to mold into a team a group of diverse lads who were scheduled to meet a seasoned Texas A & M team in just three weeks' time. First of all, the Aggies, under the legendary coach, Dana X. Bible, would stun a great Centre College team 22-14. Centre led by its All-American quarterback, "Bo" McMillin, had just beaten the national champion, Harvard. Second, that year A & M was destined to play its first undefeated season. And, finally, the week before it would meet Southwest Texas, A & M would ruthlessly crush a hapless Sam Houston State team by a devastating 78-0 score.

When Strahan met his boys, he liked them; but it is fair to say that he found them sorely lacking in the fundamentals of the game. In the briefly intervening period, he particularly emphasized tackling; and his effort paid off. A & M won by a score of 28-0 (a touchdown in each quarter), but it knew that it had met a feisty foe.

The most perplexing problem with "old" Evans was the lack of a stand for spectators. Fans had the uninhibited and disconcerting habit of wandering onto the field and encouraging the players at close-range. Then, the playing area was literally covered with rocks. To Strahan, the situation was intolerable. Before the season's end, the surface was leveled and graded; and, then, with the help of students, principally those from the Chautauquan Literary Society, bleachers were erected. They were up in time for the Thanksgiving Day clash with intra-city rival San Marcos Academy. This time the Bobcats won 13-0.

The bleachers kept the fans off the field, a semi-miraculous fact that amazed Spurgeon Smith, a professor of biology and a close friend of Strahan. Professor Smith later confessed that he simply didn't believe that such abstemious conduct was possible in San Marcos. It was Spurgeon Smith, incidentally, who is credited with having given the Bobcats their name. In his view, the noble beast, while generally docile and retiring, could be aroused to a fighting fury in the defence of his home territory. This description appealed to Strahan, and the Bobcat became a university tradition.

Ultimately, "old" Evans proved to be less than satisfactory for all sporting events; so, by 1924, the aforementioned Kyle Field was used for track and field events. It laid across the old highway, and it would soon be the site for the "new" Evans Field. In 1930 it was equipped with lights in order to accommodate night events, and, on the evening of April 24

of that year, the first meet, a dual one with Howard Payne, was held under the lights. The lighting was improved in 1932 in order to permit night football when electricity, generated to supply 60,000 watts, poured into twenty flood lights arranged two apiece on ten poles which stood sixty-five feet off the ground.

It was on the night of September 30, 1932, that a new facility complete with a 1,900-seat grandstand extending to

a length of 200 feet was formally dedicated; and, again, the Bobcats met Howard Payne. This was the first year that Southwest Texas was a member of the Lone Star Conference. The college band, under the direction of the late Dr. Robert E. Tampke, played several popular tunes; and the assembled throng joined in. Then, with a sudden roll of the drums and a flourish from the brass, the Bobcat band broke into the familiar and revered strains of "Alma Mater", and the enthusiastic crowd burst forth in song with tear-stained cheeks and unrestrained emotion. "Alma Mater", like the Bobcat, was of local origin.

Written by Miss Jessie A. Sayers, a devoted lover of the university, friend of the C.E. Evans family, and a sister to the Governor of Texas, Joseph D. Sayers. "Alma Mater" has remained an enduring fixture at the university for almost three-score and ten years.

Almost at once, attempts were underway to expand the stadium; and, in 1935, a major opportunity appeared. These were the New Deal days of Franklin Roosevelt, and an extensive construction was dependent upon a \$400,000.00 grant from the Public Works Administration. Of that amount, \$15,000.00 were to be used for an extension of the grandstand, to be made of steel and concrete, and another \$10,000.00 for a field house to be located on the same nine-acre site. In 1936, the "new"

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About the author...



Dr. James W. Pohl is a member of the history department at SWT, and, in that capacity, he serves as Professor of Military History. By accident, he began writing sports history a few years ago. Dr. Ben Procter of the TCU history department was gathering disparate pieces for a college-level history of Texas. Procter, a former University of Texas All-American, a member of the Los Angeles Rams, and a Harvard Ph.D., knew that Dr. Pohl was a sports enthusiast; so he asked him to write a chapter on the history of sports in Texas. It was with some reluctance that Dr. Pohl agreed to the project. Now, he says, "It is curious. It turned out to be the only complete sports history ever written on the state. Since that time, I have received many calls to produce more sports articles, to write book reviews on sports, and to settle sporting disputes. Suddenly, and without design, I am now regarded as something of a sports' authority. I am flattered, but I disclaim the title. I am primarily a student of war, and, while I find sports very enjoyable, I have never regarded them as much more than a pleasant diversion." Years ago, Dr. Pohl boxed as an amateur and as a professional; and he still swims more than a mile every day.

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Evans Field was formally dedicated. Its completed facilities included the main field and two supplementary ones. It also had a quarter-mile ring described as "one of the best cinder tracks in the South." By the fall of 1937 the field house was completed, and the entire park was expanded to take in a full fourteen acres. In time, the stadium would hold more than 7,000 people. In 1938 a sidewalk was added to the highway bridge for the convenience and safety of the students. Coincidentally, about that same time, a young and vigorous United States Congressman named Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the August commencement. The enrollment of the University was not yet 1,000 students.

For the most part, Evans Field has remained much the same through the years. It has seen generations of Bobcats take to the stands and to the field. It has heard the voices of coaches Strahan, Jowers, Miller, and Wacker exhort their helmetted charges. It has heard the venerable strains of "Alma Mater" before the tumult and the roar of the crowd. We can be certain that even with the splendid new stadium that there will still be generations of Bobcats to come, and that the honored traditions of our university will endure.
