

GRIDIRON PIONEERS AT HENRY KENDALL COLLEGE

By Robert Rutland

Between 1903 and 1911 Henry Kendall College, now the University of Tulsa, failed to field a football team for intercollegiate competition. However, those were momentous years for the college. In 1906 an expansion program was launched on the Kendall campus which ended in the transfer of the college to Tulsa from Muskogee. The offer from Tulsa's city fathers for a free grant of land was accepted, and in the year of Oklahoma's statehood the college began its fourteenth year in a one-story, two-room building then located at the corner of Fourth and Boston streets in Tulsa.

The college was located on its present site in 1908 when both Kendall and Robertson halls were completed.

Kendall's reappearance on the collegiate football scene in 1912 came at a time when the game itself was becoming modernized. New rules had altered the game. Offensive teams were allowed an extra down, or four downs, to make ten yards. The length of the playing field was reduced from 110 yards to 100, with a 10-yard "end zone" behind each goal line for receiving forward passes. Kickoffs, formerly made from the 55-yard line, were placed on the 40. Touchdowns were revalued at six points. And perhaps most important, the 20-yard limit on forward passes was removed.

Other changes occurred, including elimination of the on-side kick. But to southwestern fans and players the liberation of the forward pass was by far the most important.

Between the 1903 and 1912 seasons Kendall had played only one game. In 1910 a strictly "informal" Kendall team lost to Broken Arrow high school's state champions, 11-5. It was not until October, 1912, that Kendall decided to field a team for that season. Sam McBirney, a young banker, was coaching at Tulsa High School.¹ Who could coach the Kendall eleven? H. L. Allen, a student at Kendall who had played football before coming to Tulsa, offered his services in exchange for part of his tuition. The offer was accepted and Allen began forming a team.

The 1912 squad met four opponents and won from but one, the Euche Indian school at Sapulpa (57-0). In what might be called a post-season affair, Allen agreed to meet McBirney's high school eleven and the results were humiliating for the college team. Paced by a crushing young back later destined to wear Kendall's colors,

¹ A brief biographical sketch of Sam P. McBirney and a tribute to his deep interest and life's avocation, coaching the Kendall football team, are given in *Appendix A* at the end of this article.—Ed. (M.H.W.)

John Young, the prep team rolled over Kendall, 32-6. Young was the individual standout, but the high school line gathered glory when it held Kendall for three downs on the one-yard line. Incidentally, one of the largest football crowds ever assembled in northeastern Oklahoma watched the game—over a thousand fans!

George "Red" Evans took over the coaching task in 1913. Although the schedule was not impressive his team won five games and lost only to the Pittsburg (Kansas) Teachers, 32-25. At the start of the season, Evans relied on 13 candidates, but injuries soon whittled the squad down to the basic 11 players. For the game against Haskell A. & M. Evans borrowed several wagons and drove the squad to Broken Arrow, where, despite the tiresome ride, Kendall won, 58-0.²

Confident that this was Kendall's year to turn the tables, Evans accepted a challenge from McBirney's Tulsa High School team which had just won the state championship. During that season the prep squad had set a new national scholastic scoring record by completely smothering Okmulgee, 155-7. Young was again McBirney's star performer, while Evans relied on Joe Hause for his break-away man.

The game was played on Thanksgiving Day, 1913, and began after a long delay over the choice of officials. Once the contest started, Tulsa's prep stars scored quickly. Four minutes after the kickoff the high school team scored and Young converted. Hause kept Kendall in the game by scoring on a long run. A few minutes later, with "Swede" Peterson clearing the way, "Injun Joe" broke away again. Hause's second score seemed certain until a desperate high school tackler hauled him down short of the goal line. From that point on, the prep team went on a scoring rampage, tallied three more touchdowns and won going away, 25-6. The victory might have been even more lopsided if it had not rained throughout the final quarter.

Evans' team was decidedly handicapped because star Quarterback Tom Ray had been seriously injured in an earlier game. Nevertheless, the defeat was decisive. After the game, several of McBirney's friends urged him to offer his services to Henry Kendall's 1914 team. It was his love of the game which brought about his acceptance—a short time later—of the Kendall coaching post.

Coach McBirney scheduled eight contests for the 1914 season. He persuaded the all-state back, John Young, to enroll at Kendall. Young had been sought by Michigan, Oklahoma, and other more prominent colleges, but the prize pupil chose to stay with his teacher.

²Not to be confused with Haskell Institute of Lawrence, Kansas. This was officially known as the Haskell State School of Agriculture, founded at Broken Arrow in 1908. It closed in 1917. See Oscar William Davison, "Education at Statehood," *The Chronicles*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1 (Spring, 1950), p. 80.

The team started the year full of confidence. McBirney left his bank early in the afternoon, rode out to the practice field near the campus and held sessions with a squad that never numbered over twenty players. Although they won their opening game easily, McBirney was not satisfied with the showing. With Oklahoma and Oklahoma A. and M. on the schedule, the tendency was to "look ahead." Even he was doing it.

Paddle in hand, McBirney stressed fast starts, rugged blocking and teeth-chattering tackles. He drove the squad on, pointed to the games with the Sooners and the Farmers (as the A. and M. Cowboys were then called), and stressed the fundamentals of good football.

"Buck fever" gripped the Kendall team when the first opportunity arrived. A. and M. had a long list of names on its roster, and that fact alone gave the Farmers a tremendous psychological advantage. The game was hardly under way when the Aggies pushed through Kendall's defenses and scored. But the shock of that touchdown brought order out of chaos. The nervous and bewildered Kendall team was transformed into a smooth-functioning machine. It began playing the type of football that McBirney had emphasized—wide open—like the vast stretches of the Stillwater campus. Ivan Grove, the Kendall quarterback, was injured early in the game and replaced by Vergil Jones. Grove's passing and punting duties fell to Young, who brought Kendall back in the game with a touchdown heave. Jones missed the conversion and Kendall trailed, 7-6.

The second half was fought on even terms until three seconds before the final gun when A. and M. uncorked a pass play which produced a score. The final count favored the Farmers, 13-6. Between the two schools this hectic series was destined to continue as one of the section's leading football attractions.

In a warmup game for the Oklahoma contest, McBirney took his team to Claremore for a game with the Eastern University Preparatory school.³ The orange-and-black Kendall team (the colors undoubtedly borrowed from Princeton) won easily, 54-0, but the game was not a "tea and crumpet" affair. A reporter's account of the game disclosed that "near the close of the game, encouraged by a mean crowd on the sidelines, the Prep team became rough to the most extreme degree." As a testimonial for the journalist's remarks, Vergil Jones, the diminutive and speedy end, came out of the game with a fractured jaw.

The long-awaited day arrived when McBirney's friend, Bennie Owen, brought his red-shirted Sooners to Tulsa. The Oklahoma team had trimmed a great Haskell Institute squad in Kansas City. The Kendall game was a stopover for the university squad which was

³*Ibid.* Now known as Oklahoma Military Academy.

headed for Norman. Proceeds of the contest, which was played on Monday, November 30, were to be used in providing an Oklahoma State exhibit at the Pan-Pacific exposition in San Francisco. The Sooners arrived in Tulsa early on the game day, dressed and went to the playing field which was near the railroad station.

When the Sooner squad, twice the size of Kendall's 16-man crew, pranced onto the field wrapped in their huge "O" blankets, the game was practically theirs by default. The poise of the Kendallites gave way to a "scare" which all football players sometimes experience; not necessarily a fear, but a pit-of-the-stomach feeling of uncertainty.

Playing without the services of their ace fullback, "Spot" Geyer, the OU eleven kicked off and immediately recovered a Kendall fumble on their host's 25-yard line.⁴ On the first offensive play of the game, Elmer Capshaw, the Sooner pass artist, tossed a long aerial to Neil Johnson for a touchdown. Another Capshaw pass came a few minutes later and placed the ball on the Kendall six, where Boyd carried it over for the second Oklahoma touchdown. Before the half ended, Boyd threw a pass to Montgomery, who had scored the second marker for the Sooners, and the OU end again tallied.

Despite the efforts of Blevens, Handley and other Kendall linemen, the contest appeared to be a rout as the second half began. However, Owen, possibly moved by his friendship for Kendall's coach, started his second-string backfield. Kendall punted after failing to gain, but the Sooner back who received the kick fumbled the ball on his own 15 and an alert Kendall man recovered. In five plays freshman Grove and Young punched the pigskin across the Oklahoma goal, the scoring honor going to Grove. Grove then converted and Tulsa's partisan crowd began to hope again.

That one break was the lone flaw in the Sooner game that afternoon, and as the clock ran out it appeared that the final score would be 20-7. In the fading minutes another Sooner touchdown came after a 30-yard pass and a scoring plunge by the OU tackle, Billie Clark. The final count was 26-7. Kendall's failure to stop the Oklahoma overhead attack had accounted for the difference.

Clad in a starched collar, high-topped shoes and a derby hat, McBirney tried to console the gloomy Kendall squad as the fans filed out of Tulsa's old Western Association ball park. Paul Handley, "Spud" Austin, Cliff Allen, "Puny" Blevens and the other linemen were ready to drop with fatigue—most of them had played the full 60 minutes.

Several weeks later a banquet honoring the team was held in a Tulsa hotel. The highlight of the affair came when the college

⁴For a more detailed account of the game, see Harold Keith's *Oklahoma Kick-off* (Norman, 1948), p. 292.

presented a silver loving cup to McBirney. The cup bore this inscription: "Presented to Mr. and Mrs. Sam McBirney and Susan for the distinguished services of our coach, Sam—Football, 1914, Henry Kendall College."⁵

APPENDIX A

Sam P. McBirney was well known as one of Tulsa's leading citizens who had long served as Vice President of the National Bank of Commerce at the time of his death in Tulsa, on January 20, 1936. He is survived by his wife and their four children: Susan (Mrs. W. F. Bush), Williams, Samuel and Mary Megan (Mrs. R. D. Bryan). Mrs. McBirney (née Nettle Williams), at the time of her marriage to Sam P. McBirney in 1913, was Supervisor of Home Economics in the Muskogee public school system, and to-day is an outstanding business woman of Tulsa.

The following tribute to Mr. McBirney appeared in *The Collegian*, Vol. VII, No. 5 (December 1, 1917), quarterly magazine of Henry Kendall College, p. 20:

"Sam McBirney, Coach

"No man in the Southwest is more frequently spoken of and admired during the football season than Sam McBirney. He has been a friend and football coach of Kendall College for a number of years. Before coming to Kendall and during his early football experience he played half-back on some small teams, and the year 1900 he began coaching New Mexico University and led to championship in two years. He is famous for being responsible for southwestern championship of two college teams also; during 1913, he coached Tulsa High to state championship. During the year of 1913, a number of his best athletes of Tulsa High School graduated and the following autumn began their college career at Kendall. McBirney seeing a great future for these men was easily influenced to take charge of the college team. The team did good work during the year 1914, and the entire squad returned to college the following fall and were led farther into the science of football, tying the score with Oklahoma A. & M. College, and being beaten only one point by Oklahoma University. The year 1916 opened and McBirney was one of the first men to appear on the Kendall gridiron. It has been said by good authority that there is no man in the west that can plan a better offensive course for a football team than McBirney. This was proved during the autumn of 1916 when his team were southwestern champions and all-victorious. Most people thought that he would not attempt to coach any more, but this year even though his duties as a banker are extremely numerous, he appears at the college every evening and can be heard from a great distance giving his commands for hard hitting and speed. The College is certainly fortunate in having such a friend at its doors, and the boys who make up the football squad are free to express their respect and admiration for such a noble character."

Acknowledgments are due Dr. Fred S. Clinton, of Tulsa, for his interest and assistance in securing the above biographical notes, the photograph of Sam P. McBirney accompanying this article, and photographs of the Kendall Team and Field House for the following article.—Ed.

⁵The author is indebted to Mrs. Sam McBirney for her corrections of this article, as well as her permission to use the correspondence files and scrapbooks of her late husband.—R. R.