

**O B**

***REMEMBERING O.B. NELSON***  
***A PARSONS COLLEGE LEGEND***



COMPILED & PUBLISHED BY  
THE 1988 PARSONS  
REUNION COMMITTEE  
EDITED BY DEAN GABBERT



Presented by Parsons fans, this plaque came as a surprise to O.B. during banquet marking 1962-63 season. Team honors included Iowa Conference co-championship and District NAIA championship.



## By DEAN GABBERT

Perhaps more than any other individual, O. B. Nelson left an indelible imprint on Parsons College. For 30 of the college's 98 years, he was part of the Parsons scene as student, coach, teacher and ambassador-at-large.

Twenty years after his death, the Nelson legend continues to grow. Whenever Parsons people gather, stories about O. B.'s quips and antics are sure to surface.

Nelson's irrepressible wit was only part of his charm. He had the rare ability to make people feel good and he never held back when it came to dispensing love and laughter. He had countless friends beyond the Parsons campus and they saw him in a variety of roles. He was a soldier and National Guardsman and one of Iowa's most popular public speakers, but his biggest contribution was in the role of a compassionate human being.

The 1987 Parsons Reunion Committee made the first effort to preserve some of the Nelson lore when it invited alumni and others to submit their favorite stories and recollections about O. B. The 1988 Reunion Committee gave its enthusiastic support to the project and this book is the result. Several of the stories first appeared in the 1987 Parsons Reunion edition published by the Fairfield Ledger.

Contributing to this O. B. Nelson tribute were 37 students, Parsons associates, family members, fellow coaches and just plain friends. Numerous others, by their own admission, tried to record their memories of O. B. and failed. This I can understand because capturing the spirit of this man and expressing it in words is extremely difficult.

As a Ledger reporter and sports writer, I've turned out reams of copy about O. B. Nelson. Sports writers loved him because he was usually good for a lively story filled with catchy quotes. But covering O. B. off the football field or basketball court was difficult and often frustrating. Public speaking was one of his greatest joys and he had some colorful names for it, including the mashed-potato circuit and the rubber-chicken circuit. I loved to listen to him, but early on I learned that all those quips that put his audience in stitches weren't so funny when you tried to piece them together into a readable news story.

More than once I have attempted to dissect O. B.'s sense of humor, but with only limited success. It was not so much what he said, but how he said it. He had an exquisite sense of timing. And he knew how to suddenly drop his voice and speak out of the side of his mouth as if someone else were speaking. When he was in top form, he could make the room ring with laughter without uttering a single word!

O. B. had no trouble keeping human frailty and foibles in perspective, quickly finding the absurd or the ludicrous that the rest of us had missed. He loved practical jokes but his humor had no room for put-downs or ridicule. And his speech, both public and private, had no room for profanity or vulgarity.

Whatever else you say about O. B. Nelson, he was a free spirit. He was never happier than when he could surprise friends or shock strangers by doing or saying something ridiculous. There were no sacred cows in his world and no place for ostentation or pomposity. O. B. understood the psychological and physical benefits of laughter. His message to me was both simple and profound: "Don't take the world and others in it too seriously and, most of all, don't take yourself too seriously."

Several months ago I read a letter from a Parsons grad who played football with O. B. A friend had mailed him a copy of the 1987 reunion paper and invited him to contribute his Nelson recollections. His response was both brief and blunt. The stories are interesting, he wrote, but they have little meaning because they fail to capture the character of O. B. Nelson. He didn't think he could do any better and he didn't care to try.

I'll grant him that capturing the character of one so complex as O. B. Nelson is almost impossible, but I'm glad that so many people tried. At least one writer—Pat Gilpin, a Texas attorney—came very close to the mark and every contributor added something that enriches the Nelson legend.

Since some of the incidents recorded in this book date back almost 50 years, it's not surprising that a few of the better-known stories about O. B. came from more than one source. The thrust of the story was always the same, but the writers often failed to agree on the essential details. At first, I attempted to eliminate duplications, preserving the version that was the most readable. Then I decided it was more fun to compare notes after viewing O. B. through different eyes.

But let's get on with the stories. As editor of this publication, I'm happy that I get to tell mine first!

As a coach, O. B. was never afraid to gamble. There was always some daring in his game plan and he liked to spring surprises on his opponents. In football, he was a master of the quick kick on third down. Once he instructed a receiver to field the kick-off, hesitate for a moment, and then punt the ball over the heads of the kicking team. Believe me, that's a play I had never seen, before or after. Another Nelson weapon was the fake punt. The Wildcats used it frequently, more often than not with success. I recall a night game against Dubuque played in Trojan Stadium. I was working along the sidelines on the east side of the field and I heard Coach Moco Mercer give his final instructions to the Duhawks, including a reminder about the fake punt. Parsons did poorly in the first quarter and for the third or fourth time, the team went into punt formation. Moco's warning shout came too late as the would-be Parsons punter tucked the ball under his arm and raced 50 yards or so before he was caught from behind. Mercer issued a terrible oath, threw his hat on the ground and stomped on it.

It was O. B.'s first year at Parsons and as assistant football coach, he planned a trip to St. Louis to scout the University of Dubuque. The Duhawks were scheduled to open their season against St. Louis U. before meeting Parsons the following week. O. B. invited Roger Loving, John Leech and me to make the trip and we quickly accepted. The location eludes me, but it was a night game played in a public stadium somewhere in St. Louis. We arrived early and while the three of us looked for a restaurant, O. B. headed for the stadium. "I want to try out my press card," he said, and I knew immediately what he had in mind.

Sometime later the three of us spotted O. B. standing outside the stadium with a uniformed attendant. A large steel gate swung open and we were waved inside, parking our car in a space reserved for VIP's. The attendant escorted us to the press box and on the way it was "Mr. Nelson" this and "Mr. Nelson" that. Roger and John knew that a visiting coach doesn't receive this kind of red-carpet treatment and I knew that O. B. had crashed the gate with a press card surreptitiously printed in the Ledger

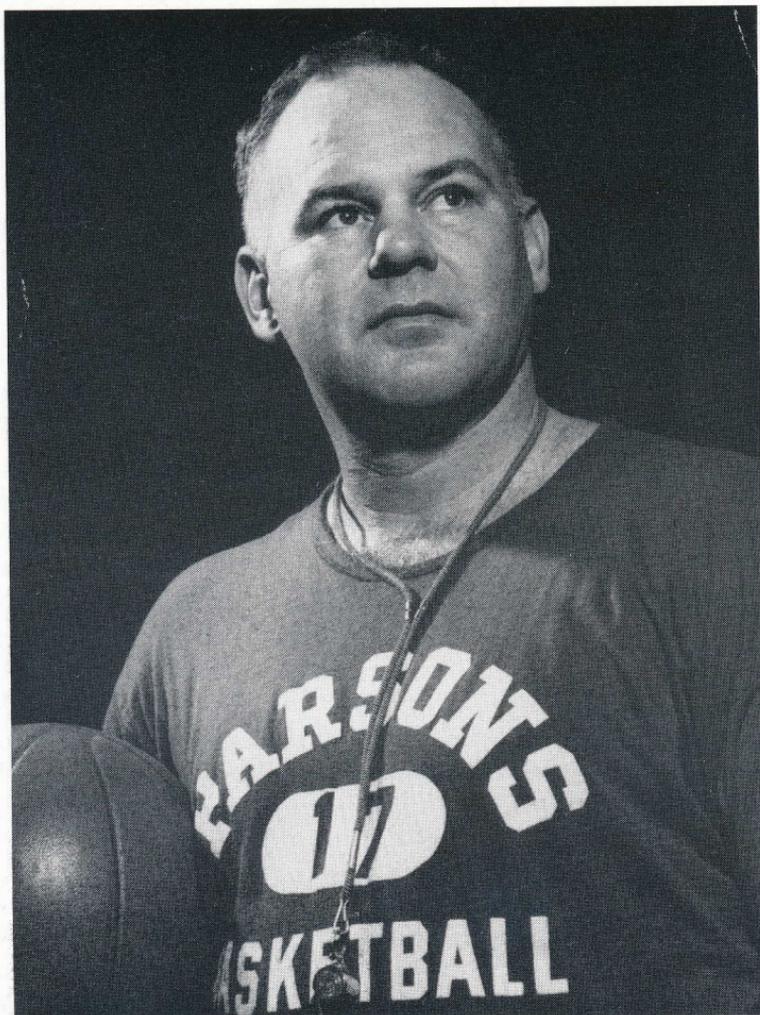
composing room. Mind you, this was not a campus stadium, but a public facility manned by professional gate-keepers and ushers.

After we were seated at desks in the press box, O. B. handed the card to Roger and John. It read "SPORTS DEPARTMENT, NEW YORK DAILY WORKER" and on the left was a photo of Josef Stalin.

I have one more and it's my favorite O. B. Nelson yarn.

I was a sophomore at Parsons when the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was announced on a fateful Sunday afternoon. We all crowded around the radio at the Zeta Theta Gamma frat house on N. Third Street, struggling to hear every word. Suddenly I looked up in time to see O. B. jump from the top of an upright piano. The whole building shook. Again he climbed part way up the front stairs, stepped over the railing onto the piano, and jumped. "Nelson, what do you think you're doing?" someone demanded.

"Man, don't you know this is war?" O. B. replied. "I'm flattening my feet."



Reflecting the serious side of O.B. Nelson, this photo appeared on the cover of a Parsons College basketball brochure and press guide.

## **Charley Barnett Yuma, Ariz.**

There are so many stories involving O. B. that one would hardly know where to start. However, one quickly: One day at football practice, one of the players (I think it was Jack Miller) walked over to O. B. and said, "I think I broke my nose." O. B. took a quick look and replied, "O. K., stay off it for a couple of days."

A beautiful man and a good friend. Truly one of a kind.

## **Annabelle Price Cochran Clermont, Fla.**

The pre-war year, 1939, was a very serious year and we at Parsons were affected. We needed some one like O. B. to bring laughter and cheer to the campus. Even to this day, I smile thinking about him.

I remember one morning on my way to class. I was proudly wearing brand new white lace-up boots. It has rained the night before and just ahead of me, across the sidewalk was a mud puddle. I hesitated a moment, then I heard a shout behind me. Here came hurrying up a husky boy with bushy hair and twinkling eyes. He began pulling off his jacket. He said "Allow me," and started to lay it across the puddle. I let out a scream, grabbed his arm and couldn't keep from laughing.

Do any of you remember the hilarious skit, "Ferdinand," put on in the college auditorium? O. B. was Ferdinand, the bull who was not mean and ferocious at all but just liked to flit about sniffing the daisies. He was as graceful as an elephant. No group could have put on a funnier skit and I laughed until I hurt.

He was a prankster, too. I learned not to turn my back on him. We shared a lab table in a biology class. One day we were dissecting a frog. I probed in vain to find the frog's heart. I finally confessed to the gentlemanly Professor Carter that my frog was "heartless." O. B. spoke up, looking as innocent as a lamb, saying "My frog has two hearts."

Here's a story that was told to me. We had a terrible snowstorm in Iowa. O. B. and Merrill Frescoln had gone home to Batavia for the weekend. On Monday the roads were closed but those two, surprising themselves, were undaunted, refusing to let a little snow keep them from classes. They hiked along the railroad track to Parsons. Slightly frozen and tired, they triumphantly landed on campus only to find classes were cancelled for the day.

When I worked in Des Moines, O. B. and Merrill came to the recruiting center to sign up for the Marines. They stopped in to see me. I was bursting with patriotic pride for them. O. B. was sure that was what he wanted to do and Merrill was going along with his good friend. I had hoped they would stop back and tell me about it, but they didn't. I found out later that O. B. didn't pass his physical, but bless

Merrill—he was on his way. I'm sure he forgave O. B. in time. O. B. did do a good turn for our country, however. Merrill, this good-natured, mild-mannered country boy became a tough Marine called “Killer” by his buddies.

O. B.'s life was short, but memories of him will be around forever. A likeable, laughable, unforgettable funny guy!

## **Lee Kane Urbandale, Iowa**

While on a basketball trip, we happened on a sign that read “The Smallest Church in Iowa.” Since we traveled in cars in those days, we all stopped and toured the small chapel. On the way out was a guest book and much to my surprise, O. B. signed it “Nikita Khrushchev.”

Before one of our home games played at the high school, O. B. made us warm up at the old Trustee Gym, then drive to the high school at game time. We didn't see him until we went to the bench for the pregame announcements. We had played badly the game before and he said he didn't know if he wanted to be associated with us. Needless to say, it got our attention and we won that game for him as much as ourselves.

When playing basketball for O. B., if you let your man get by you on the baseline, that was a definite “no-no.” You immediately prepared to exit the game, because he wouldn't stand for it. As you went by him on the way to your seat on the bench, he would say one of two things: (1) Did you feel the draft when he went by? or (2) Did you catch cold when he went by? It always got results.

I have to say something about O. B.'s dog, Schneibel. I honestly believe at times the dog ate more and more often than O. B. He loved that big, ornrey creature. The dog was almost bigger than O. B.'s car. He became a kind of team mascot for all Parsons athletes.

Many people didn't know that O. B. stood for Oscar Bernard. What he did for Parsons athletes was a true reflection of the man. He was kind-hearted, good natured, hard nosed, stubborn and bull-headed, but beneath it all was a gentleness and kindness in motivating young adults and making them strive to achieve the highest possible goal in athletics. He ate, slept and dreamed sports, but in the right perspective to develop each individual talent. I learned more about basketball from him than I did in grade, junior high and high school. If anyone ever deserved an Oscar, it was O. B. himself. I don't know if there is a Kelly Green Sports Hall of Fame, but this man should definitely be at the top of the list of occupants.

## **Vera Price Young Fairfield**

I taught with O. B. for quite a few years at Parsons College. Marching along beside him at many academic convocations was quite an experience as he was always making me laugh. Probably one of the most memorable experiences came

when I was teaching an applied anatomy course in a classroom in Foster Hall. I was just beginning my class and was going over the bones of the skeleton when O. B. stuck his head in the door. Not saying a word to me, he looked at the skeleton and said, "Tib, is that you? I told you not to eat Vera's cooking." Imagine trying to get the attention of my students after that!

Another time he was checking on the progress of one of his athletes who had a failing grade in my class. I told him that I did not even know what the student looked like as he had only been to class a few times. O. B., never at a loss for words, replied "How about if I send you his picture?"

## **Harold "AB" Buell Tallahassee, Fla.**

In the fall of 1938, I arrived on the campus of Parsons College as a new freshman. Little did any of the more than 60 of us realize at that time that we were to be a class of destiny; World War II was coming and would scatter us to the ends of the earth. Very few of us would graduate in the normal manner, after the regular four years, in the summer of 1942.

That fall found us doing the usual freshman things—wearing our green beanies, getting settled away from home for the first time, registering for classes, and making new friends among our peer group.

One of my first acquaintances was a big, hearty fellow with a shock of wild black hair and a grin as wide as an Iowa barn door. A fellow freshman from Batavia, O. B. Nelson wore his beanie with an air of distinction far superior to most of his new classmates. I was in awe of him from the first, and never attempted to hide it. After all, I had grown up in Ottumwa where the American Legion Post on North Green St. was named the O. B. Nelson Post. Here I was meeting a member of that family with the same unique initials as his famous, heroic uncle—I was impressed!

O. B. was truly a one-of-a-kind guy. Everything that he did was at full throttle and maximum intensity. An example of these characteristics was manifest that first fall on the football field. While most of us spent one or two years as subs and "redshirts" before getting to play in games, O. B. made a place for himself that first year, even though he had never played football in high school! He was one of the great athletes of Parsons College who returned to attain even more fame as a Wildcat coach—a remarkable achievement.

I left Parsons to become a naval pilot, and then go to the war in the Pacific, thus losing contact with O. B. for several years. Purely by chance, we met on the campus a few days before the 1965 Homecoming game. As only O. B. could do, he made my wife and me welcome at a party at his home and got us lined up with tickets to the Homecoming game, seated among old classmates! We had several long talks about many things and it was as if we had never been separated for more than two decades.

I Never saw O. B. again. His untimely death was a loss of unmeasurable

magnitude to his family, his Fairfield friends, Parsons College athletes and colleagues. But it was felt by many of us also who heard of it in far away places because we, too, were his friends. O. B. Nelson was one-of-a-kind, and bigger-than-life. We miss you, old friend.

## **Robert L. Gamrath Fairfield**

I have so many stories about O. B. that it is difficult to choose one. He and I soldiered together, lived in the same room or tent, every summer for nearly 20 years.

About 1950, O. B. and I, along with three or four others, went into Jefferson City in the middle week of our camp period at Fort Leonard Wood. We led him home and tucked him in bed about midnight, but as usual he awakened with all gusto and announced to me that he must call Eunice. Whereupon he opened the hotel window, stuck his head out and shouted "Eunice."

One time at Camp Ripley I was in charge of a formation for our regimental commander to meet the commanding general. O. B. was in full uniform, except he had on tennis shoes. I sent him back to our quarters to change; surprisingly, he always would comply. After the general left, O. B. was quite happy, noting that the general knew him. "He called me Captain," he said.

My favorite story was the time he came into our tent, hot, tired and acting like a caged lion, which was quite normal. I was grabbing a couple of minutes of sack time and he started telling me his daily problems. He would get up, open his foot locker, sit back down, all of the while stripping off his clothes. After a few minutes of this, he again opened his foot locker and started shedding false tears. "Why do all these things happen to me?" he asked. I looked in his foot locker and he had slammed the lid shut on a can of shaving cream, which filled the locker and left all the contents fully covered. O. B. put on his helmet, hooked his gun belt over his shorts, scooped up the lather and smeared it over his hairy chest, and walked across the company area for a shower, without another word.

## **Jim Hinkhouse Atlanta, Ga.**

Before the 1951 football schedule had begun, O. B. was interviewed by the Fairfield Ledger about the prospects for the coming season. To each question about the football team, he answered with a quote about the basketball team. These teams had and continued to have great success.

Despite, instead of regardless, the 1951 season opened with essentially the same team that had moderate success the year before. The team won the opening game, plus the second, third, fourth and fifth. The squad by this time was depleted by injuries and at times didn't have enough sound bodies to scrimmage. Occasionally

during these periods, O. B. would put on helmet and pads and show us how to play the game. The humbling part was that despite conceding us a few years in age, he was still as good or better than most members of the team.

The sixth game was with Simpson College at Indianola. The team had completed the pre-game warm-up and assembled back in the team bus. O. B. proceeded to tell us all that we had accomplished and how many people were aware of our success. Then he read us a telegram that he had "received" from an individual who went on to express his thoughts. At the end O. B. paused and said "This telegram was signed by none other than Abraham Lincoln." The team sat in complete silence for several seconds, then erupted into enthusiasm and nearly tore the doors off the bus getting back onto the field for the kick-off. We won that sixth game. The remaining two games were not to be, but we had experienced that winning feeling.

That 1951 Parsons team produced a Little All-American in Bill Jerome, and Phil Delpierre, who entered the service, was selected to the second team All-Navy. Later in life it also had General Dick Lawson and Dr. Homer Jordan. For me, it gave me one of life's most valuable lessons: If you want something bad enough, it's amazing what can be accomplished.

Now for a long-silent confession. I attended Parsons for four years, graduating in 1951. During that entire period I received a single 'A' grade in all the courses I had taken. That 'A' was given me by O. B. Nelson in a class entitled "Athletic Training and First Aid." The class occasionally met in old Trustee Gym where we learned to apply bandaids and tape sprained ankles. The biggest result was to my grade point average. Later I was able to gain admittance to Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, for a MBA and I have now retired after 29 years with IBM. I still remember the high point of my academic achievements.

My father was a history professor at Parsons and had O. B. as one of his students. I can recall him saying that the grade O. B. received on any of his exams was more influenced by how O. B. felt that day than by what he knew. O. B. indeed had a brilliant mind.

O. B.'s days at Parsons were interrupted by World War II. My father and O. B. continued to exchange letters and as a young campus "brat" I looked forward to their arrival. The thing I remember most about the letters was the differences in O. B.'s rank, and not necessarily in the accepted order of promotion. One letter would be Sgt. Nelson and the next could be Pvt. Nelson, then Sgt. again or maybe corporal. You could read between the lines that somewhere in the world O. B. had done his thing, in his own manner. But as you may know, O. B. received a battlefield commission and his military career included many years as a National Guard officer.

## **Jim Keltner Laguna Hills, Calif.**

One spring day some 30 of us were sitting in Bob Tree's government class in Fairfield Hall, upstairs. The old student union was right across the driveway. About halfway through the class, up the fire escape and through the window, entered

Then I found out that Dr. Roberts or someone had suggested to him that if he wanted to continue to work at the "New Parsons" he would have to get a master's degree. He did just that—a History MA—and in his history classes he kept his sense of humor and the admiration of his students in very much the same manner as he did on the basketball floor.

During the years of the trimester system, his trimester off was spring—his teaching trimesters were fall and summer. Since basketball occupied the entire spring and spilled over into the fall and summer, he never really got a vacation. In spite of his coaching duties, he never neglected his teaching.

One story. Preceptors usually served as assistants to professors and rarely taught courses of their own. One summer, I asked O. B. if he would like to teach a course, and his eyes lighted up and his smile broadened and it was easy to see that his mind was clicking. With an enthusiastic "Yessir," he dashed off and appeared the next morning with a complete outline for the first half of our course in the History of the United States. I'm sorry I didn't keep a copy, but I can sort of remember the title of one lecture, "What did Dolley serve the British for dinner?" Probably the reason I can't forget is that O. B. Nelson knew how to spell the name of President Madison's wife correctly. The Encyclopedia Britannica III spells it Dolly.

O. B. knew my schedule and I knew his, so after a few weeks on the job, when he looked around the corner of my office, smiled an O. B. smile, and asked, "Are you busy for lunch, Doc?" I answered, "I am now," and we took off for Libertyville for pinball, sandwiches and beer. After the first time we went every so often. Sometimes other coaches were with us, sometimes not, but we played a lot of pinball at Libertyville. I almost always came in last. We were good friends.

## **Ivan Helton Metropolis, Ill.**

O. B. knew basketball and he knew how to get things out of his players. As a coach, he worked us very hard but whatever we did was always fun. I was a sophomore when O. B. came to Parsons as head basketball coach, succeeding Dick Ives. We broke even that year and the next year we won the conference. I really respected O. B., both as a coach and a friend. Years later I was surprised to find that he was only nine years older than I.

O. B. really helped me with my shooting. He told me where my best range was but I didn't believe him at first. So he drew a chalk line on the floor and he said there was where my high percentage shots were coming from. He convinced me and after that I could always see that imaginary line during a game.

I always spent a lot of time on the bench. I remember a game at Simpson when nothing was going right. He put me in and by some miracle I hit four shots in a row. Then he took me out and I never got back in the game during the first half, so I asked him why. "You banked every one of those shots," he said. "You weren't hitting, you were just lucky."

O. B. and I had a personal contest going one year. Once a week we'd shoot around the horn, taking 10 shots each. Whoever lost had to say "you're a better shot than I am" whenever we met in public. It was a game, sure, but he was working on me all the time.

O. B. was always pulling tricks and it was pretty hard to get ahead of him, but I know it happened at least once. O. B. was in Gaumer's Drug Store talking to Chester Hunt, Bob Dunnuck and some others. He mentioned that he had a stray dog that he couldn't get rid of and he was headed for the country to see if he could lose the dog. Hunt followed O. B. at a distance, picked up the dog and delivered it back home before O. B. returned.

When O. B. gave a test, you never knew what to expect. I took a basketball theory course under him and I'll always remember one question on the final exam. It was multiple-choice and it read: "The greatest basketball player at Parsons College is (1) Floyd Von Ohlen, (2) Paul Selz, (3) O. B. Nelson.

## **Roger Loving Sun City West, Ariz.**

Occasionally, I took O. B. with me on recruiting trips—when we were going to interview student-athletes. While in Council Bluffs, O. B. and I drove up in front of Stu Steiner's home. We were cordially received and O. B.'s influence resulted in Stu coming to Parsons.

We already knew Steiner was a good student. Aside from that, guess what "sold" O. B.? The yard needed mowing—like a week before would have been about right. But near the front door there was a football, a basketball and baseball gear aplenty. And Steiner played lots of good ball for Parsons and O. B.

## **Roger Sherrard Marietta, Ga.**

I can remember O. B. Nelson as a very close friend and as a teacher; however I remember him most as my basketball coach. I was very fond of O. B. and Eunice throughout my college years and beyond. There are many past experiences that I can think of and cherish.

Of all the stories that could be told about our hard practices and about our games with our hated rivals (mainly Buena Vista, Luther and Wartburg), my favorite story is about the NAIA national tournament in Kansas City.

I was a freshman in 1959-60, as were several other starters, and we took our lumps most of the season as O. B. coached and coached and coached. Our team started to jell late in the year and we were fortunate enough to win the District 15 playoffs and receive the first trip ever for Parsons to a national tournament. Most of the 850 students attending school went with us to the tournament and proceeded to enjoy Kansas City in the true Parsons tradition, if you know what I mean.

We played the 10:30 p.m. game in the first round and because of that fact, our cheering section was able to sit under our basket for the second half. Our crowd was somewhat rowdy but really spurred us on. We got possession of the ball for a last shot to win the game and we made it with just seconds left. During the timeout that was called, we went over to O. B. and for the only time I can remember, he was speechless. His only words were "When the game is over, run for your lives!"

When the horn sounded after our win, we ran with O. B. to our dressing room and were completely engulfed by all of our fans. People were all over me in a corner and O. B. kept throwing them off and yelling "get out." He could really get mean. As he was doing this, he looked at me and had the biggest smile on his face. He loved it!

That's what O. B. was all about. He loved life and he enriched our lives. Through his coaching we enjoyed three more very successful and fun-filled years on the court.

### **Paul Strathman Mason City, Iowa**

Gene Hoefler, O. B. and I took Bill Wanzell, now deceased, to an exhibition boxing match in Burlington. Needless to say, we had some laughs on the way, but the "capper" came in the ring just before the fight. Everyone was doing whatever you do before a fight. The referee came over to Bill's corner and asked if he had a cup, whereby O. B. answered, "He can take it right out of the bottle."

During a football game on the old college field, the opposing team dropped into punt formation with C. E. Allison going to a safety position for Parsons. O. B., thinking C. E. was too deep, told him to move up, which C. E. did rather reluctantly. O. B., still not satisfied, told him to move even closer, not once but twice, before C. E. was positioned where O. B. wanted him. As you might have guessed, the ball sailed over C. E.'s head and both people were not very happy. C. E. looked at O. B. and shrugged, palms up, to which O. B. answered in a loud voice, "Well, I didn't know he was going to use both feet."

### **Edd Bowers Grinnell, Iowa**

O. B. Nelson was a good friend and I considered him one of the finest coaches that I have had the privilege of knowing.

I remember when I was coaching high school football at Mt. Pleasant and Parsons football was at a low ebb. They were playing Iowa Wesleyan at Mt. Pleasant in a driving rainstorm and were not faring very well. O. B. decided not to go to the dressing room at the half, but to scrimmage his players in the end zone to see if he could get things going in the second half. But the rain continued and the football did not bounce Parsons' way. In the middle of the fourth quarter he turned to his bench where his reserves were huddled under the rain gear, trying to hide themselves from O. B.'s comments. "Look at all these fine young athletes just dying to get into the game and

fight for dear old Parsons,” he said, and this only caused his reserves to dig deeper into their rain gear to avoid O. B.’s wrath.

On the basketball court it was Parsons against Cornell. As I remember it, Cornell was getting the best of the contest and O. B. was taking some of it out on Pops Harrison, the referee. On this particular call, O. B. voiced his opinion a little too hard and Pops came over, pointed his finger at O. B., called a technical and said, “If I see you off that bench again, you are out of the game.”

A few minutes later O. B. didn’t like the call and let Pops know about it. But then he remembered what Pops had told him so he quickly picked up the rubber mat in front of the bench and hid behind it. When Pops turned to eject O. B., he poked his head out and said, “Ha!, Pops, you didn’t see me.” At that Pops broke into a grin and O. B. stayed in the game.

Another incident. Parsons was playing St. Ambrose to see who would go to Kansas City to represent Iowa in the NAIA basketball tournament. Hugh Gamber and Jim Ryan were officiating. Babe Tysseling of Central and I were in the audience representing the NAIA and were to make a report on the game. The score was tied with a few seconds left. Parsons had the ball and O.B. called time out. They set it up to go for one last shot. I have forgotten the player, but when he let go there was just a couple of seconds left. The ball missed the backboard but a player rebounded it in the air and put it in the basket as the horn sounded. Jim Ryan immediately signalled no basket. O. B. jumped over the canvas fence and was on his hands and knees pounding on the floor at Jim Ryan’s feet, but to no avail. The game went into overtime and Parsons eventually won and went to Kansas City. Babe Tysseling and I went to the officials room to check the game out and eventually we asked what O. B. had said. Jim repeated O. B.’s words: “It takes a lot of guts for two Catholic officials to call that in favor of St. Ambrose against a good Presbyterian college like Parsons, but you were right.”

O. B. once invited Dich Ulrich of Grinnell and me to an Elks stag in Fairfield. Mike Ditka, then a player for the Bears, was the speaker. They also had some ladies from Chicago to entertain. We went with O. B. to pick them up at the railroad station and bring them to the Elks. O. B. interviewed them since he was the evening’s master of ceremonies. After he learned their names and the fact that they were exotic dancers, he excused himself, saying, “Well, girls we’ll see more of you later.” There were about 200 or 300 present and before the performance, O. B. passed a jar through the audience. It had a slit cut in the lid, but nothing else. Later we were having a cup of coffee at O. B.’s home before returning to Grinnell and O. B. asked us to help count the money in the jar. It totalled about \$60 and I asked him what it was for. “Oh, nothing in particular,” he said. “I just thought I would take up a little collection for myself.”

O. B. could think on his feet and I’ve been told he was a very good professor. He touched a lot of lives and he left many fine and humorous memories. I am happy that I could call him a friend.

## **Forrest Schwengels Fairfield**

It was a big football game with our arch-rival, Iowa Wesleyan. I was playing left end and O. B. was playing right end on defense. Wesleyan was using a series of plays from a double wing offense, a good formation for reverse plays. The ball carrier would start to the right to go around end, but would hand the ball off to another back coming from the opposite direction.

The way to stop this was for both ends to rush toward the point where they expected the handoff to occur. On this particular play, O. B. and I made our rush, about 3 1/2 or 4 yards behind the line of scrimmage where Wesleyan had been making the exchange. We had excellent execution, but the quarterback changed the play and the handoff took place much closer to the line. So there we were, standing and looking at each other while the play went by. O. B., never at a loss, stuck out his hand and I grabbed it and we shook hands. (It gave Wesleyan a 15-yard first down). Coach Faurot had a clear view of this peculiar action and (to put it mildly) was very unimpressed with our performance. "What the hell were you two guys doing out there?" he asked when he jerked us out of the game.

In his usual unflappable way, O. B. grinned and said, "Well, coach, we didn't want them to think we didn't end up there on purpose!" As soon as he could, Faurot put us back in, fairly well assured we wouldn't make that mistake again. O. B.'s great sense of humor had saved us.

## **Dick Eland Fairfield**

This story is one of O. B.'s classics. You'll recall that during the 1965-66 season, O. B. had an outstanding basketball team consisting of Joe Johnson, Bill Adkins, Tom Carter and many more that I don't remember. At that time our basketball manager was Fred Hunt, and Fred had the notion that since we were losing games by very small margins, we might have players who were shaving points and gambling.

O. B. was making an afternoon speech to a convention in Des Moines and that may be when he decided to play a little trick on Fred. That night we had a home game against the Phillips 66 Oilers and after the game we were scheduled to go to Des Moines to spend the night, leaving early the next day for a game at North Dakota U. I was instructed to swear Fred to secrecy and then tell him that O. B. was going to Des Moines not to make a speech, but to meet with the NCAA Investigating Committee. That night we lost to the Phillips Oilers, again by a very small margin.

The next morning at breakfast, we had O. B. paged on the telephone and I later told Fred that the NCAA believed that Joe Johnson and one of the reserves were definitely involved in point-shaving. Arriving in Minneapolis where we changed planes, we had O. B. paged again and this time I was instructed to tell Fred that not only were Johnson and one other player involved, but there was a very strong possibility that O. B. was also involved.

After arriving in Grand Forks, Fred picked up a "message" at the motel desk stating that Dr. Roberts and the NCAA committee were flying up to meet with O. B. before the game. As soon as he delivered the message, Fred and I left O. B.'s room. By now Fred was very worried. I told him he and I would probably have to coach the team that night, because I felt NCAA officials were coming to pick up O. B. as well as the two players.

Shortly before 5 p.m., O. B. cooked up the final twist in this elaborate plot. We took what cash we had and let the bills stick out of an attache case. The case was laying on the bed and O. B. was in the bathroom shaving when Fred entered the room. O. B. called to Fred and instructed him to take the attache case to the airport, ship it to a Winnipeg, Canada, post office box number, and buy him an airline ticket to Winnipeg.

As Fred looked down at the attache case, his eyes became extremely large. Without saying a word to me, he pointed to the money sticking out of the case. At that point, O. B. came out of the bathroom, covered with shaving cream and wearing only a pair of shorts. He laughed until the tears came and finally he said to Fred, "I hope this teaches you a good lesson."

## **Merrill Frescoln Fairfield**

O. B. was always pulling pranks on me and I think the most embarrassing one happened when several couples went to Mount Pleasant to visit Eunice's mother, Mrs. Fricke. The men went on to Oakland Mills and after catching very few fish, we returned to Mount Pleasant. No one would sit by me and I kept going to the kitchen to wash my hands. Sunny had me stop on the way home to wash again. Nothing did any good. At home, Sunny wouldn't sleep in the same room, let alone the same bed, and I had trouble going to sleep because of the smell. My shirt was hanging near the bed and the next morning I found the source of the problem—fish bait in the pocket. O.B. had put his arm around me and somehow dropped that awful-smelling stuff in my shirt.

That was far worse than the time he wound toilet paper around my bed in the dormitory at the Zeta fraternity house. He set the paper on fire and then woke me up and told me the dorm was on fire. Not only that, but he nailed my shoes to the floor. I got up and stomped out the fire with my bare feet.

I suppose I knew O. B. longer than anyone, even before we started to first grade together in Batavia. He was my lifelong friend.

## **Kathleen Linderson Lockridge, Iowa**

I have a vivid memory of O. B. disrupting a Parsons play practice to announce the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The play was "Stage Door," directed by Gladys Ball. The Peira lists the performance on December 8, so this must have been a Sunday afternoon dress rehearsal.

With no warning, there was O. B. running up and down the aisles yelling "War!" and encouraging everyone present to enlist. Needless to say, this was a problem for Mrs. Ball, but somehow she managed to continue the rehearsal.

**Dennis L. Edwards  
Rochester, Minn.**

O. B. had been recruiting me during the last few months of high school in Indianapolis, Ind., mainly by phone from Fairfield. He finally got me to agree to come to Fairfield to look around. First of all, I had never heard of Parsons or Fairfield at the time, but I agreed to take a bus ride.

I arrived at the bus stop in front of the hotel. There two officers in full dress uniform greeted me as I reluctantly stepped off the bus. I just knew I had been shanghaied into military service. However, it was not the case. It was Colonel O. B. Nelson and a friend who had just finished National Guard duty that evening.

**Wayne Elias  
Tamarac, Fla.**

I had the opportunity to know and play for O. B. from 1963-64 through 1967. Four years. A warm, funny, fair man and coach. I will always remember him and our trips. He was tough but fair and he could always crack a joke. I was a three-year starter and captain my senior year. We always started practices by shooting from half court. There will always be only one O. B.!

**Judy Williams Butterbaugh  
West Union, Iowa**

In the early 60's, after Don and I graduated from Parsons, we returned regularly for Homecoming festivities. O. B.'s house was a popular place for social gatherings and it was one of our regular stops. During a cocktail party, O. B.'s large Weimaraner entered the room and casually walked over to a loveseat which was occupied by the mother of a current Parsons basketball player. The dog very slowly and deliberately climbed up on the loveseat and sat beside the lady. He then edged over close enough to her so their hips were practically touching, sitting with perfect posture and looking straight ahead. The lady moved over a little, but the dog again shifted in her direction. This continued until she was crowded to the edge of the couch. She stood up, smoothed her clothes and looked at O. B. as if to say "Aren't you going to do something?" O. B. shrugged and said, "Well, it is his couch." The dog then stretched out and slept through the rest of the party.

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As usual O.B. kept his audience laughing while serving as master of ceremonies at a Parsons football awards banquet. With him are (from left) Don Peterson, president of the Fairfield Quarterback Club; Bob Devaney, Nebraska football coach and guest speaker; and Chelo Huerta, athletic director.

## The Alma Mater

Where the wild rose tints the prairie  
 With the summer sheen  
 Stands our noble Alma Mater  
 Of the White and Green.

Greet we then our foster mother,  
 Noble friend so true,  
 We will ever sing thy praises,  
 "Parsons, hail to you!"

Chorus: Lift the Chorus 'til it reaches  
 Even Heaven's blue,  
 Singing to our Alma Mater,  
 "Parsons, hail to you!"



O.B. and two of his early basketball stars reminisce about three Parsons victories over St. Ambrose during the 1949-50 season. Shown are Bud Baccus (left), and Ivan Helton who sparked O.B.'s first winning team.

## Philip E. "Tib" Young Fairfield

To know him was to love him  
That's all we need to say.  
For those of you who knew him  
Understood he was that way.

From early morn till late at night  
He always wore that smile.  
And even if you crossed him  
That still would be his style.

Today we talk about him  
And things that he did do  
Because when he was with you  
He meant so much to you.

For him time had no meaning  
And when he came in late  
He melted all your anger  
And swept away the hate.

You never knew what next  
When he was by your side.  
And when it was all over  
You both could feel his pride.

As we gather here together  
And talk about his past,  
It casts a spell upon us  
And forever may it last.

You feel him right beside you  
As you hear those tales of yore.  
It makes you elbow through the crowd  
And search for many more.

So tribute to that captain  
Who made us meet today  
To freshen up our memories  
Long with us may they stay.

## Lyal I. Colton New London, Iowa

The year was 1949 and it was halftime and Parsons football team was not doing as good as O.B. had wanted. Coach Nelson had given the usual halftime lecture and was winding down when he look over at me—I was playing defensive end—and asked, “Colton, what in hell are you doing standing out there? Why don’t you get down in a three-point stance?”

I informed him I had played that style for about five years and nobody had complained. He said “you aren’t down at Podunk now.” Very early in the third quarter (right in front of our bench) I got down in the three-point stance and when the ball was snapped I headed for the quarterback with all my speed and my 145 pounds and met the Carthage fullback—his headgear right in my face. I thought my nose was broken (this was before the days of the face guard). I got up and gave O. B. a dirty look and resumed my usual defensive stance.

Being a physical education major in 1949, I thought that I should take up amateur boxing. My sparring partner was Gene “Honk” Hoefer. Gene and I spent a lot of time in the old gym since we always figured the Library would be crowded. We had worked out for several rounds and jumped rope and were “cooling down”, as the aerobics people would say, when O. B. came in the swinging doors. We had the gloves off and were headed for the spacious weight room (about the size of 3 telephone booths) when O. B. said, “Come on, let’s spar around a little.”

I knew what O. B. had in mind as several of the fellows began to gather. You see the girls were starting basketball practice following Gene’s and my workout. I turned him down, as did Gene. Gordy Levitt was in the crowd and O. B. invited him to box. Gordy offered to wrestle him on the mat, but he didn’t want to box. But after some persuasion, Gordy put on the gloves. That big tackle was a head-hunter and in no time he had O. B.’s nose spouting blood and the fight was over. O. B. quickly wiped the blood all over his face and chest and staggered out on the basketball floor where the girls were practicing and such yelling and screaming I have never heard, before or since. That was one time when the coach should have just coached and not participated.

I entered the Burlington Amateur Boxing Card and O. B. went down as my manager, along with Gene Hoefer, Paul Strathman and, I think, Bob “Humphrey” Berg. I told them when I was scheduled and requested their assistance in the lockerroom. It was close to my fight time and nobody showed. A fellow came down and said “You’re on, Colton.” I didn’t even have my hands wrapped. I had to do my own wrapping and I was so nervous I could hardly throw a punch. When the bell went off, I remember O. B. yelling “You’re circling the wrong way.” My opponent was Ronnie Beckley from Peoria. He would throw a left hook and catch me behind the head and hold me and give me rights to the head. I was spouting blood just about as bad as O. B. did when Gordy got through with him. When the second round started, O. B. was still coaching me after the bell and when I turned to meet Beckley he had run across the ring and nailed me and down I went. As I was getting up on my elbows, O. B. said, “You’re confused, you better stay down” and I did. That was my third amateur fight (and my last one) and Beckley had about 56.

## Pat Gilpin Houston, Tex.

On the surface O. B. Nelson gave the appearance of being an easy-going local wit. Underneath he was a profound individual who deeply influenced the lives of many young people. Above all, he was a great teacher. He was equally at home in the classroom or in the locker room. To those of us fortunate enough to have known O.B., there was nothing unusual in the fact that he held a graduate degree in history while being a varsity coach.

Like many former high school athletes, I came to Parsons College in the fall of 1958 as a GI with dreams of becoming a coach. I still believe that coaching is a noble profession. But coaching would not have been the right career for me. O. B. affected my life dramatically by convincing me to change my major from physical education to history. When I initially resisted his advice, he once asked me if I intended to spend my summers after graduation at the University of Iowa taking courses in the care and cleaning of baseball bats.

While many remember O. B. as a coach, I remember him best as a teacher who used subtle humor to teach the great lessons of life. During the years I was a student at Parsons, many, if not most, of the students were first generation college. We often did not know how to reconcile our unsophisticated backgrounds with academia. O. B. became our role model. He taught us nothing is so sacred it can not be criticized. He taught us whatever our status in life, not to take ourselves, or others, too seriously. Most of all, he taught us by example that we could embrace the intellectual world without denying our heritage.

O.B.'s humor was a matter of timing and context. He delivered his punch lines in a droll, understated manner, never so much as smiling. Regrettably such humor does not translate well into the written word. Nevertheless, I would like to relate a few instances where O. B. Nelson used humor to teach the great lessons of life.

In the fall of 1958 (I believe), Pope John XXIII's coronation was televised. Professor Lewis Wheelock was exuberant. I remember overhearing Wheelock telling Professor Robert L. Tree: "Bob, what better way to teach about the Middle Ages than to have students watch the coronation on television." When the day came, Wheelock took his Western Civilization class to watch the coronation at Ballard Hall, which in those days served as the student union. Every so often during the telecast, Dr. Wheelock would explain the historical significance of certain parts of the ceremony. The students were not as thrilled about the coronation as Wheelock, but the experiment was going well, nevertheless. During a lull in the service, O. B., who was sitting in the back, stood up and in a deep and solemn voice started to chant in the best tradition of Catholic mass prayers: "Nooo—Traa—Dame Fortee—twooo, Na—Vee Threee."

O. B. loved teaching but hated grading papers. During the basketball season when he was away from campus, it seemed, at least to the students, O. B. was never going to return test papers. At least that was the case in a class I was taking. In the spring semester of 1959, during the rainy season, he failed to return our Western

Civilization test to the point that even O. B. was embarrassed. One class meeting (after a long basketball trip) the test papers still were not returned. O. B. announced to the class that he had posted the grades. Finally a student held up his hand and asked where the grades were posted. Without looking up, O. B. said: "Oh, you can't see the grades, they are posted in my basement and it is under water." The next class period he returned the test papers.

In 1960, Professor Wheelock again found himself the victim of O. B.'s humor. By the fall of that year, Parsons had grown so fast that Dr. Wheelock became concerned that the college and the students lacked a sense of tradition. At the fall freshman convocation held in the evening, Dr. Wheelock gave a long and sometimes rambling lecture about the history of Parsons since its founding in 1875. Apparently Dr. Wheelock had consumed an extra cocktail that evening, for his lecture seemed to go on and on. Dr. Wheelock was a huge man physically. He looked like the pictures of President Howard Taft, found in college textbooks. Intellectually, he was a giant as well. To new students who did not know him, Dr. Wheelock could be very intimidating. On this occasion Wheelock spoke in the fieldhouse while standing on the gym floor behind several conference-style tables. On the tables he had placed several artifacts from the college's past, including General Parsons' Civil War sword and various plaques and other items. At long last, Dr. Wheelock finished his lecture and O. B. Nelson followed him to the speaker's table. O. B. quietly walked over and examined the artifacts on the tables. Then he turned over General Parsons' sword, raised his eyebrows, and in a low but audible voice said: "Made in Japan."

There are many other O. B. Nelson stories that come to mind. For instance, he once came to the next class meeting following a class in which he announced quiz grades orally. He told the class he wanted to apologize to a certain football player (who shall remain nameless) for embarrassing him by reading his grade incorrectly. What O. B. said was: "John, I am sorry that I made a mistake on your test score when I said you got seven" (out of a total of 100 points). O. B. paused for what seemed like infinity and then said, "Actually, John, you got a nine."

And of course there was the time O. B. started the semester in his State and Local Government class by telling students what the doorkeeper at the Iowa Statehouse was paid and then reporting how many horses there were in Iowa. All the while his demeanor was serious. He then smiled and explained to us that even courses in state and local government could be interesting.

While I remember O. B. as a great teacher, I also have fond memories of him as a coach. I still remember the student body carrying him off the court in 1960 (I believe) when Parsons won the Iowa Conference. Prior to the spring of 1961, I had enjoyed some modest success as a distance runner. Although O. B. was not track coach, he always found time to encourage me. When I had run a particularly good time in the 880 dash in the Iowa Conference meet in 1959, he had been the first one on the track to congratulate me. At the same time O. B. was objective in evaluating talent. At the beginning of the outdoor track season in 1961 after watching me warm up in practice, he told me "I think you have lost the desire to win." I never won another race.

pass that anybody could have thrown. I sort of shot-putted the ball and I didn't even know where Dick Lawson was, but he caught it and ran for a touchdown. In four years of football, that was my only pass.

O. B. knew how and when to embarrass you if he wanted to. During my senior year I made numerous trips with him when he had speaking engagements. Sometimes he would introduce me as Parsons' triple-threat halfback. Then he'd pause and say "Stumble, fumble and fall."

Certainly O. B. Nelson had a great influence on my life and I'm sure that many of the things that I do as a coach and teacher came from him. For one thing, he gave me my interest in history. Most of all, he taught me to be fair. He used to say that when you have two physical bodies equal in strength and one is better than the other, the difference is desire and attitude. I still tell that to my kids today.

## **Bob Spencer Fresno, Calif.**

Parsons was playing Northeast Missouri State in football. NEMO was a very hot item that year and was picked to win by 3 or 4 touchdowns. O. B. gathered his charges before the game and explained they had the element of surprise on their side. If they could pull a surprise play at the start of the game, it might shake up the Bulldogs and Parsons would have a chance to win the game.

I was chosen to receive the opening kickoff. O. B. told me to catch the ball, take a start up the field for 5 yards or so, then make a 90-degree angle and run off the field and up through the stands and out of the stadium. And don't come back until the game is over, he added.

That seemed quite a bit out of the ordinary, but being a dedicated athlete, I said I'd do it. Parsons won the toss and we chose to receive. I did exactly as I was told and the NEMO coaches and players were so shaken that Parsons had a 3-touchdown lead before they began to play ball. The result was a big upset victory.

O. B. was teaching a freshman history class on the second floor of Fairfield Hall. The room was located on the north side of the building, with a 3-story drop to the pavement of Carter Drive below. A young lad in the front row asked O. B. about his philosophy on pop quizzes. Very serious, O. B. responded, "Son, when you see me come to class through that window, that will be the day we have pop quiz" and the student knew he had nothing to worry about.

The following class session O. B. drove up in a convertible and climbed the fire escape, entering the room through the north window. Of course, he had a pop quiz under his arm. After administering the quiz, O. B. dismissed the class and left the room the same way he had entered. Then he loaded the quiz copies in the back seat of the convertible and drove off down Carter drive with the wind blowing the papers all over campus.

Fry-Thomas Fieldhouse was noted for a leaky roof during the last few

Most of all, I remember O. B. as a good and decent man. In the early 1960's I returned to Fairfield and stopped by his house to visit. I told him of my deep involvement in the Civil Rights movement in the South. At the time I was teaching at Tennessee State University in Nashville. O. B. became excited and got his wife out of bed to tell her what I was doing. Until that time, I had never discussed race relations with O. B. but I was not surprised by his reaction. He may not have been in the streets marching and carrying signs in the 1960's, but in the 1950's he named Frank Harper (who would later become a medical doctor) captain of the basketball team. Frank Harper happened to be black.

It has been 30 years since I first met O. B. Nelson. Today I am older than he was when he died. In the case of O. B., it is true that the good die young. Today I am a Texas Civil Rights trial lawyer. Being a lawyer allows me to combine the competitive drive that is so much a part of athletics with the intellectual enjoyment that comes from scholarship. O. B. taught me many years ago that the physical and the intellectual are compatible. After a particularly long and exhausting trial, I sometimes think of O. B. Nelson and recall how much richer my life is because I knew him.

### **Bill Jerome Fort Madison, Iowa**

O. B. knew how to motivate his players in a lot of different ways, sometimes with tears, sometimes with jokes. His pre-game talks were always very emotional. I don't know how many times his grandmother died, but it happened several times.

For the most part, today's coaches are slow to take a player out of a game when he makes a mistake. But O. B. didn't operate that way. He was intense. When you made a mistake he'd almost come out to the huddle and get you.

O. B. never lied to you. He might fib to you, but you always knew where he was coming from. He was so giving in everything he did and he had a real concern for his players. Nobody had any money and we all operated on a shoestring. O. B. had a kind of sense that told him when things weren't going well. That's when you would end up in the Nelson kitchen and there was poor Eunice with several extra mouths to feed when she had already started dinner.

Back in my day, O. B. didn't just tell us what to do, he showed us. He scrimmaged with the football team and he was very physical. If you played basketball, he would always challenge you to a game of horse and you could never beat him. He knew every inch of old Trustee gym and he'd sink a carom shot off the wall or shoot the ball through the rafters.

O. B. always had something up his sleeve. During my senior year we had a big game with Iowa Wesleyan and just before the kickoff he told me I was going to throw a pass. "If we receive, they know you're going to run right on the first play. Only this time you're going to run right and throw to Lawson." It's a good thing we didn't work on it in practice, because I couldn't have done it. As it was, it was about the worst

years of O. B.'s coaching career. During a warm night in February, a rainstorm moved in and the dripping began, including one right over the Parsons bench. At halftime, O. B. decided he had had enough of the leaky roof and he sent one of the managers to his home to pick up some equipment. At the start of the second half, O. B. appeared in boots and a yellow slicker while holding an umbrella over his head. The crowd loved it and the college administration took heed. The following summer a new roof was foamed on the fieldhouse.

### **Jack D. Miller Long Beach, Calif.**

When traveling home from an out-of-town basketball game, one of Obie's favorite treats was to catch one or two players in the car asleep. With the help of those who were awake, he would fake an accident by hitting the brakes hard, swerving the car rapidly from side to side while everyone yelled at the top of their voices, "Watch out!" It never failed. It was always good for laughs and the person who had been sleeping remained wide awake all the way back to Fairfield.

To pass the time while on the highway, we often had quizzes to test each other's knowledge. It didn't take long until Obie got around to his "beaver" quiz. It went something like this:

Obie: "What's the fastest animal in the world?"

Someone: "A tiger."

Obie: "No."

Someone else: "A leopard."

Obie: "No, but you're getting closer."

Anyone: "A cheetah."

Obie: "No. Do you give up?"

(Everyone gave up.)

Obie: "A beaver. A real fast beaver."

And so it would go. "The tallest animal in the whole, wide world?" Immediately someone would answer "A giraffe." Wrong, of course. "The answer is a beaver, a real tall beaver." No matter what the dimensions were—shortest meanest, fattest, best-looking—the answer was always the same and it got funnier and funnier as it went along.

In June, 1952, a close friend, Dan Hadaway, was married in his hometown of Davenport, Iowa. Dan and I were members of the Zeta fraternity and the house chipped in and bought Dan and his wife a deluxe toaster. Just for fun, I found a truly old toaster to go with it, one of those kind where you had to drop down the side to insert the bread. It was vintage 1920 and the cord didn't even have a plug on it. Driving to Davenport in Obie's Studebaker, we made several "pit stops" and arrived just in time for the reception. Obie presented our gifts and when the ancient toaster was unwrapped, it brought down the house. It stood out like a jewel, amongst the crystal and fancy blankets and towel sets.

Obie and I and several others jocks were playing a game of pick-up basketball one afternoon in the old gym. It was time for girls basketball practice and just before they took the floor, someone hit Obie in the nose with an elbow. Who could get more out of a bloody nose than O. B. Nelson? No one. Quickly he left the floor, smearing the blood all over his sweaty body and making it look like he had been butchered. He then went outside and as he entered the front door of the gym, he let loose with a cry of pain. Stumbling, moaning and pretending to be one step from death, he collapsed on the gym floor. By now the girls had quit playing basketball and were in a state of shock. In a few moments, Obie calmly got up and walked off the floor while the girls watched in disbelief.

## **Bob Harrison Mt. Pleasant, Iowa**

Bill Smith always had great stories about O.B. I remember him telling about one of O.B.'s football teams that got off to a slow start. They had played only one game and they had trouble scoring. When they got down near the goal, they couldn't punch it over. Bill told O.B. that he needed a trick play, like the Statue of Liberty or a flea-flicker, something that they could score from. But O.B. said no, insisting that wasn't the answer. Both Parsons and Iowa University had Saturday games and the Hawkeyes pulled out a victory by scoring on a surprise play. Bill was up early for some Sunday morning golf and when the Des Moines Register Big Peach arrived, there was the trick play, fully diagrammed. On his way to the golf course, Bill stopped at the Nelson house on South Second St. and rapped on the door. Suddenly a hand reached out and snatched Bill's paper. "I've already read it," O.B. snapped as he slammed the door in Smith's face.

One summer O.B. and Eunice and the kids travelled to the East coast, visiting Bill and Bessie Smith and their kids in Clark, N.J. Bill took O.B. to one of his favorite places, a tavern called Sleepy Hollow. The bartender's name was hard to pronounce and everyone called him Cupcake. According to Bill, the bartender was bigger than O.B. and O.B. wasn't about to call him Cupcake to his face. But the two of them got along well and O.B. enjoyed both the bartender and the libations which he served during the afternoon. After several hours, Bill announced it was time to go home and he ordered a case of beer for a backyard cookout that evening. Bill asked for the tab, and after some figuring, Cupcake said it was \$6.80. O.B. couldn't believe it as he hoisted the beer to his shoulder and walked to the car. "All that for \$6.80?" he asked. "With prices like that, I could afford to fly out here and drink."

When Jack Miller was on the basketball squad, he and O.B. always had something going between them. Before starting basketball practice we all warmed up by shooting baskets. Jack's girlfriend had knitted him a pair of beautiful argyle socks which were in vogue then and Jack was very proud of them. As Jack took his shots, he looked down the court and there was O.B. playing one-on-one with a couple of guys, wearing Jack's handknitted socks under a pair of dirty tennis shoes. Needless

to say, a chase ensued and I think it ended up outside in the snow. Later O.B. sneaked up on Jack in the shower and doused him with a can of Black Magic Shoe Dressing. Jack gave chase again and we all watched as they ran out the door of Trustee Gym and headed toward the Zeta house through 10 or 12 inches of snow, both of them naked as jaybirds.

I remember one basketball game when one of the officials got under O.B.'s skin. I guess that happened in nearly every game he coached. This time the official was Bud Knox, who was leading the way down one side of the floor after the ball had been put in play at the end of the court. Knox was ahead of the play, looking backward as he ran, when O.B. decided to play bullfighter by holding up a wet towel. Knox got the towel right in his face as he ran past the bench. I'm fairly certain O.B. got a technical foul on that one.

I'm sure stories about O.B., the funny ones, will be around forever. I remember O. B.'s jokes and his great wit, but that was only one side of him. He was a very smart individual and he had the knack of getting out of any athlete whatever talent was there. I'm not sure how he did this, but if there was some ability there, he could always find it. I also remember that sports to O.B. were just that—sports, something that was meant to be fun. I don't mean to say that he didn't care about winning; everyone that knew him knew he always wanted to win. But most of all he believed that all sports should be fun and that's the way he made them.

## **Eunice Nelson Fairfield**

I imagine almost everyone reading these stories knew O. B. well enough to remember he had a great wit and sense of humor. He did and said very funny things. However, it seemed to me funny things just sort of happened. O. B. did things that to him were perfectly reasonable, but to anyone else they would have seemed very strange. For example:

Early one cold, snowy December morning (2 a.m. early) someone was knocking at our door at 1205 S. Main. That was about all I was aware of until later that morning when O. B. told me this story. "A friend was having car trouble and came by hoping I would drive him home. Of course I did. He lived a few miles out of Fairfield in a remote area with lots of farmland but few people or houses. I had let him out and started back to Fairfield when I glanced at the fuel gauge. The needle was sitting right on empty. I broke out in a cold sweat. I could see big black headlines in the paper reading LOCAL COACH FOUND FROZEN IN CAR or LOCAL COACH PICKED UP FOR INDECENT EXPOSURE and you didn't know which it was going to be." What is so strange about helping a friend who is in trouble, you say? Nothing, except all O. B. had on was his undershorts and shoes.

That same morning as O. B. started uptown, he got as far as the neighbor's driveway and was out of gas. Well, we all thought it was funny. Maybe you had to be there.

## **Marilyn Nelson Bergess Mount Pleasant, Iowa**

One time when my younger brother, Bob, was about eight, he and a couple of neighborhood kids decided to camp out in our backyard. I had a date that night and when he arrived to pick me up, the kids were busy with flashlights and sleeping bags in preparation for their night's outing.

My date and I arrived back at my house around midnight to find every light in the house on, not to mention three sets of neighbors milling around in their robes, curlers, nightgowns and other sleeping apparel. We tried to find out what was going on, but when half a dozen people are trying to explain a situation, it's hard to make any sense out of it at all.

Just then headlights appeared at the end of the driveway and I could tell it was my dad's car. I turned to my date and informed him that here came someone who was sensible, intelligent and could explain what was going on here!

The car came to a halt, the door opened and out stepped my dad in nothing but a pair of white boxer shorts. My date looked at me, rolled his eyes, muttered "Oh, great" under his breath, got in his car and drove off. Needless to say, I never saw him again.

## **Dick Nelson Iowa City, Iowa**

I have so many memories of my father that it's hard to pick just a few. When the old Trustee Gym was still in use, he impressed me with his ability to shoot and bounce the ball off the rafters and still make baskets. He was a great two-hand shooter. O. B. also was a great pingpong player. I tried for three years before I ever beat him at a game.

My father liked kids, whether they were 20 or 5. He always had ballplayers at the house for holiday dinners. He also enjoyed having a convertible full of kids heading to the ice cream store.

I'll always remember my senior year at Fairfield High School and our homecoming pep rally when my dad gave the pep talk in the town square. It was a good talk, a good speech. I was proud of my dad and very happy to have known him for 19 years.

## **Sarah Nelson Shupienis Wanda, Minn.**

History is stories. Dad loved history. Your recalling of the past about my father is a wonderful way to keep his memory alive. Believe how much I loved my father and what a large void was created in my life when he died. How grateful I am that through this project his grandchildren could get to know and appreciate a man they have never met.

We could always count on Dad taking us and the kids in the neighborhood to the Fairfield Dairy for ice cream.

One Christmas, Santa came to our house to surprise us. Schneibel, our large Weimaraner dog, came tearing down the stairs to investigate the intruder. Santa tore off the beard and hat so the dog would recognize him and not attack. The real surprise came that Dad was Santa.

Dad liked to drive and he liked to drive fast. We had many wild rides on the back roads to Batavia to visit our grandparents. After he got his new Chrysler station wagon, he was testing out the speed and got clocked by an airplane. The result was the pending loss of his driver's license. We were ready to go on a trip and Dad avoided being served papers so he could continue to drive. On our return he lost his license. We took every opportunity to give him a hard time since we had to chauffeur him around.

I was proud of what a dynamic coach Dad was. But his yelling at the officials, being asked to leave games, and pounding on the floor was at times embarrassing for me. The only time I had ever seen my father in the hospital was also the last time I saw him alive.

## **Kate Nelson DeJong Knoxville, Iowa**

Most of my memories of my father are just bits and pieces. A lot of things I remember have to do with Parsons. I can still see Dad, Bob and me sitting on the aisle watching "The Music Man," and later walking around looking at all the costumes after everyone had left. Or sitting in the bleachers watching Dad coach a basketball game. I can see him with his towel in hand, pointing, shouting and doing almost anything but just sitting and watching.

I do remember going quite often to see Grandpa and Grandma Nelson in Batavia. The trip wasn't much over 20 minutes. But it seemed a lot longer. So Dad started watching for the silver water tower. It really became a contest to see who could shout "I see the tower!" I live in Knoxville now and when I go home to see Mom, I go through Batavia. Each time I get close I look for the tower and a voice says, "I see the tower!"

There's another incident I'm sure I won't forget. I don't know how old I was, but I was still in grade school, so I suppose I was about nine or ten. Dad stopped by school one day and took Bob, one of my girl friends, and me to lunch. The three of us got to laughing and we didn't stop. Despite many warnings that something was going to happen, we didn't stop. Well, something did. I choked and started to get sick. When I got back from the bathroom, the table was clean and Dad was fuming.

As he dropped us off at school, he looked at me and said, "We'll talk about this when you get home." I about died. I thought for sure I was a goner and it was

a long afternoon. When I got home, Dad's temper had cooled and he picked me up and stood me on a counter. He looked me in the eyes (which were wide with tears and fear) and said, "I love you; don't ever do anything like that again!"

## **Robert D. Nelson Chicago, Ill.**

I was eleven when my father died, and it's difficult now to distinguish whether all my memories of him are from my childhood observations, or if they have taken a new shape and color through the retelling of countless, wonderful stories of the teacher, the coach, the husband, the father.

What I do remember with certainty is the big man with the humorous charm of Jonathan Winters smothering me in big bear hugs, not setting me free until he heard me shout the secret password "Swordfish; or the many drives on the backroads from Batavia, after visiting his parents, sitting on his lap or standing on the front seat, so I could see my way home, having his arm around me at every stop.

I also fondly recall the many dinners and speeches in his company on stage, repeatedly being introduced to each new audience as "Bobby Kennedy's son," and in the spotlight of my boyish embarrassment, thinking, "Oh, Dad, not again!"

I can still feel the excitement at the fieldhouse watching him coach the basketball practices and games, and how my sisters would swoon and marvel at having these college athletes in our home and around our holiday dinner table.

There are many stories I enjoy, including one about my father's best friend and college roommate who NEVER went anywhere at night without his slippers on his feet. One eventful night while the roommate was fast asleep, my father quietly nailed his slippers to the floor and surrounded the legs of the bed with layers of toilet paper. My father lit it, and as he screamed "Fire!", his roommate bolted up from bed, hastily shoved his feet into the faithful slippers, and as deviously planned, fell flat on the floor!

I wish I could have known my father longer, but I feel fortunate I was able to know him through so many wonderful stories retold by my family and his numerous friends. We are all fortunate indeed to have inherited so many gifts of love and laughter from him.

## **Cindy Nelson Boston, Mass.**

I remember very little about my father, the late O. B. Nelson. Except that he smelled like bay rum cologne and cigars. I was only five when he died of a heart attack. My sister Sarah told me that he had a heart-a-corn. I think she got confused. But to me, at five, a heart attack had no more meaning than a heart-a-corn; I knew it meant that he wasn't going to be around anymore. I remember going to the funeral home. I wore blue tennis shoes with white laces. My mom held me up so I could look at him.

I touched his hand. It felt like clay. I remember Charlie Danielson playing Taps at the cemetery and the 21-gun salute. I picked up one of the empty shells. A lot of people came over to our house after the funeral. My dad had a lot of friends.

And it's strange because I remember so little about him, yet I feel like I know him so much. It was friends and family who brought my dad to life for me. And friends and family have kept him alive for me all of these years. He was really an extraordinary man. He was also very human. I never tire of hearing O. B. Nelson stories. And there are certainly an abundance of them. The late Bill Smith once told me that anyone who ever met O. B. Nelson had a story to tell about him. One of my favorites is when my dad was teaching Western Civilization at Parsons one semester. On the first day of class a student said "Mr. Nelson, do you ever give pop quizzes?" My dad replied, "The day I give a pop quiz I'll come in through that window." The students laughed very hard since the classroom was on the third floor. But the next day my dad borrowed a ladder, crawled up through the window, and gave his class a pop quiz.

He had such a rare sense of humor and great comic timing that he could always get away with his pranks and jokes. I often think that I inherited a bit of his wit and humor. People have said I remind them of him. I always thought it was my sense of humor, but maybe it's my nose. I have so much I wish I could share with my dad. So much to offer him. I know there are so many tasks I've accomplished that he would be very proud of me. I'm proud of him. I hope I can make half the mark on this world that he was able to. I miss him.

## **Edwin D. Scorza Takoma Park, MD.**

O. B. Nelson was the father of one of my oldest friends—Dick Nelson. I can't tell you if O. B. was a wonderful father at all times, you'll have to ask Dick and his brother and sisters about that. But I do remember a few special events. Back in 1954, when I was five, I came to live with my grandparents, Carl and Beatrice Rundquist. It wasn't long until I became part of the regular mob of kids moving in and about the Nelson's large family house.

I wasn't aware of it at the time, but I have since come to suspect that O. B. and Eunice Nelson were more sensitive to my situation than most. My father had been killed in a plane crash in 1954 and that's why we had moved to Fairfield. I remember some pretty sad days when I'd call a friend to play only to be told that his dad was taking him fishing or swimming or the like. That rarely if ever happened with Dick Nelson and if it did, I usually got a call back inviting me along on the trip. I was never aware of any special effort on their part because I was always made to feel at home. As the father of two young boys, I can really appreciate what an accomplishment that was.

O. B. and Eunice suffered through our pea-shooter craze and O. B. squired us around to various farm ponds where Dick and I would decimate the bullfrog

population. Eunice patiently kept the growing collection in her freezer until we finally had enough for a cook-out.

Once O. B. took it upon himself to teach Dick and me and one or two others how to handle a pistol. By this time Dick and I were 12 or 13 and I was coming back to Fairfield from Iowa City as often as I could. O. B. had a .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol and I thought the thing weighed a ton. He took the clip out and showed us the correct way to handle it, carefully explaining that we must always put the safety on and point the muzzle straight up after finishing shooting at a target. When my turn came to shoot, I let off a round and was more than slightly surprised at the recoil. O. B. started to give me some advice on how to hold down the gun and I turned around to listen with the gun pointed straight ahead. O. B. moved carefully to take the gun away from me and then I got a taste of his fatherly style of discipline. Needless to say, I've never forgotten to put the safety on and point the muzzle up.

On one occasion, I was invited to the Nelson home for Thanksgiving dinner. That afternoon, before the meal was served, O. B. set out in the family station wagon and cruised the Parsons campus, picking up stray students who had no prospect of a Thanksgiving dinner. He returned home with two or three that year. Fairfield was a great place to grow up in the 50's and early 60's. I owe a great deal of thanks for those years to my grandparents. O. B. and Eunice and my buddy Dick added many special memories.



**O.B. looks like he could easily do without Christmas as the Nelson family gathers for this 1965 holiday portrait. Eunice is seated at left with Sarah, Dick and Marilyn. On the floor are Cindy, Bob and Kate.**

# *In Retrospect:*

*--By Joyce Gabbert*

This Christmas column was first published  
in the Fairfield Ledger Dec. 23, 1976

Santa Claus is dead, you know. At least for the Gabbert children, he died with O. B. Nelson. The small fry who play on the swings at O. B. Nelson Park nowadays never knew this wonderful, jolly gentleman with the big heart and the bear hug.

Our children knew him, as did his six own, and dozens of other offspring of Parsons College faculty and the First Presbyterian Church Sunday School.

Death will never be as tough again for the four Gabbert kids, who adored him. Their grief was inconsolable that day in July, 1968, when he slipped quickly away to bring his inimitable brand of humor to the heavenly hosts.

Our favorite Christmas story about O. B. took place when his oldest daughter, Marilyn, was a pre-schooler. Her mother, Eunice, was upstairs putting Dick and perhaps Sarah to bed. (Katie, Bob and Cindy weren't born yet.) Santa Claus came in the front door to the wide-eyed child's amazement. He ho-ho-hoed and asked the usual questions, then departed into the snowy night.

Marilyn, bursting with excitement, went running up the stairs. "Mommy, Mommy," she exclaimed, "Santa Claus was here and he had Daddy's shoes on."

O. B. always cooked the holiday dinners in the Nelson household. Guests were numerous and often included a bevy of O. B.'s Parsons College athletes, whom he verbally whiplashed during football and basketball seasons, then indulged with his culinary triumphs on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's.

The Nelson kitchen would be a disaster area, but the food would be delicious. He was not above mixing with his huge hands, tasting and munching as he went.

Everyone who knew him has a different story about O. B. Nelson. Those of us who were close could write a book. All his children have inherited his particular brand of wit, sprinkled with their mother's. His blithe spirit is present whenever they're around.

He was a brilliant guy; we thought he lavishly wasted his talents. As I look back, he squandered only love and laughter. It seems to me that has something to say about the Christ Child.

As a dewy-eyed freshman, I was madly infatuated with this Parsons College athlete. He introduced me to my husband. He became the brother I never had.

Eunice was my college roommate and loyal confidante. My husband, Dean Gabbert, was O. B.'s good friend. As the four of us sat in his kitchen the night before he died, he took himself off to bed as was often his custom. He kissed Eunice and me on the tops of our heads and said, "I'll see you in the morning if I'm still here." Eunice, of course, and Dean saw him the next day. I never did. But you see for me, he never really died! And that's the paradox.

So Santa Claus, wherever you are, those of us who love you say thank you for everything. Have a very Merry Christmas!

# O. B. Nelson 1921 - 1968

O. B. Nelson was one of Iowa's most colorful sports figures. To the alumni of Parsons College and the citizens of Fairfield, he was much more.

Nelson was head basketball coach and assistant professor of history at Parsons when he died suddenly July 14, 1968 after suffering a heart attack at his home at 800 South Main St.

He was 47.

During 20 years as a Parsons College coach, he turned out five championship basketball teams and the college's first unbeaten football team.

A star athlete at Parsons, O. B. won 10 varsity letters in three sports. He was named to the first All-Iowa Conference football team at end during his sophomore year in 1940. He received his BA degree at Parsons in 1946 and later earned his master's degree in history at the University of Iowa.

O. B. began his coaching career at Grinnell High School in 1946. He came to Parsons in 1948 as head basketball and assistant football coach. He was named head football coach in 1949 and directed both sports for nine years. In 1957, the Parsons coaching staff was expanded and he retained the head basketball post.

Nelson's basketball teams posted a record of 262 victories and 191 defeats. His 1950 and 1952 clubs placed first in the old Southern Division of the Iowa Conference. He also won full conference titles in 1956, 1961 and 1963.

O. B.'s big year was 1955-56 when his teams won both the Iowa Conference football and basketball crowns—a feat that hadn't been accomplished in 30 years. His 1955 football club, with an 8-0 record, was the first undefeated team in the school's history.

Nelson's basketball teams of 1960 and 1963 won Iowa NAIA titles and competed in the national NAIA tournament at Kansas City. His 1967 team was also selected for the Area III NCAA college division tournament.

O. B. coached at Parsons longer than any other staff member. Seven of his cagers posted career scoring marks of more than 1,000 points. Numerous others won all-conference recognition in both basketball and football.

Nelson, whose given name was Oscar Bernard, was born April 3, 1921 at Batavia, the son of Carl E. and Margaret Redman Nelson. He was the youngest of two daughters and three sons. He was named for his uncle, O. B. Nelson, a decorated soldier killed in World War I.

Nelson was reared in Batavia where his father was a storekeeper, graduating from Batavia High School in 1938. He was married to Eunice C. Fricke Nov. 28, 1945. There are six Nelson children—Marilyn, Dick, Sarah, Kate, Bob and Cindy—and nine grandchildren.

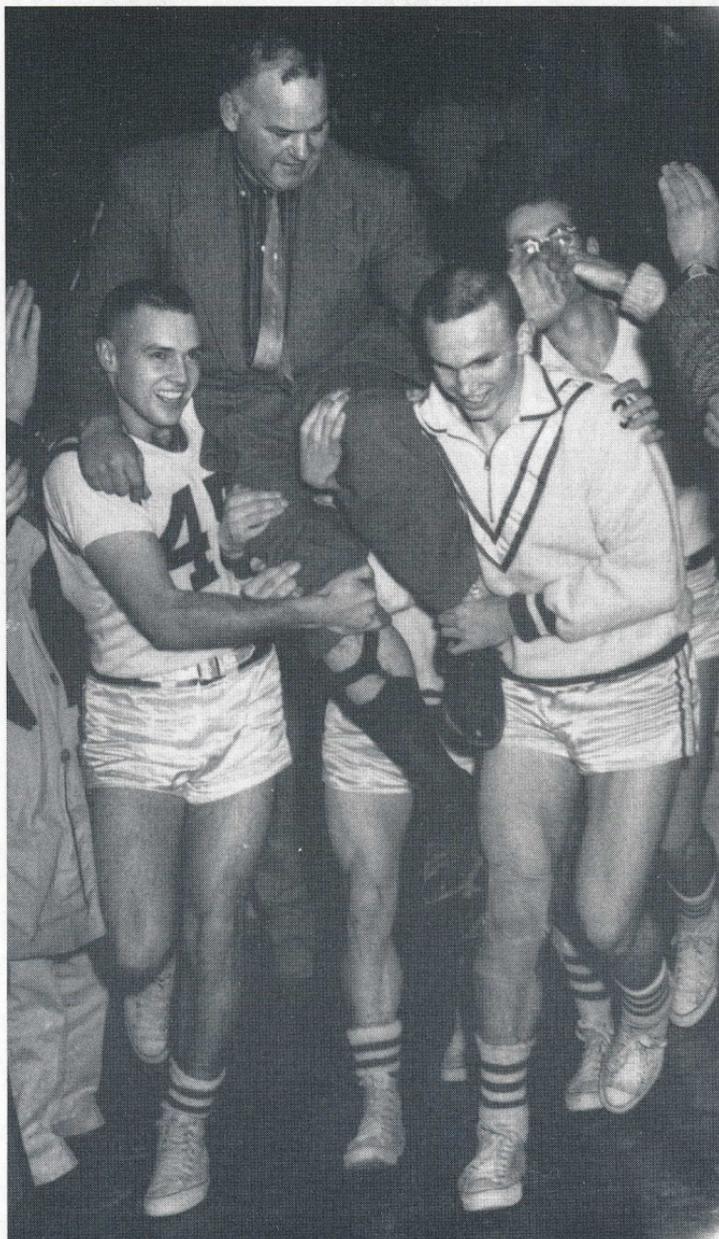
A veteran of World War II, O. B. served 38 months overseas with the Fifth Infantry Division. He participated in five major engagements, including the Normandy landing. He was discharged in 1945 with the rank of first lieutenant.

Nelson also served many years in the Iowa Army National Guard, retiring with the rank of colonel. He commanded several National Guard units, including the Service Company of the 133rd Infantry and the Second Medium Tank

Battalion of the 113th Armor. He was a 1962 graduate of the Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

In 1950, O. B. was honored by the Junior Chamber of Commerce as Fairfield's "Man of the Year." He was a member of the First United Presbyterian Church, Elks Lodge and Veterans of Foreign Wars, all of Fairfield.

In 1967, O.B. was named to the Parsons Football Hall of Fame by the Fairfield Quarterback Club. Fairfield's O. B. Nelson Park was named in his honor during ceremonies held Sept. 3, 1968. The Jefferson County Historical Society honored O.B. with a Sports Hall of Fame Award in 1983.



**Jubilant Parsons Wildcats carry their coach off the court after winning Iowa Conference Crown in 1963. Players in foreground are Jim Wake (left) and Al Wardlow.**