IN MEMORIAM

L. THEO BELLMONT
September 24, 1881 - December 27, 1967

L. Theo Bellmont was born in Rochester, New York, September 24, 1881. He was the son of Leo and Mary Lutz Bellmont. He attended schools in Rochester. He became fascinated early in his life with a fiercely honed awareness that along with drive, direction and interest it took money to accomplish any real goal. This point of view guided him for a lifetime. He decided on his objective, then conceived ways to finance it. He worked as a salesman in a jewelry store during his high school days and he was an excellent one. He became fascinated with gymnastics in the old turnerien societies. After graduation from high school he went to the University of Tennessee, working at many jobs to finance his education. He was active in college politics, athletics, and fraternal organizations. He was a Pi Kappa Alpha. He was a football player, a basketball player, a track man. He was also an accomplished gymnast, having learned much from the turners of tumbling, of single staff drills, of Indian clubs. He was a perfectionist in all these fields. He was fascinated by the then non-existent field of physical education. He got a Law degree from the University of Tennessee. It was magnificent training for the way of life to which he was committed. This combination of training and abilities formed an ideal foundation for his work.

After graduation from the University of Tennessee in 1908 he went to Houston as secretary of the YMCA and remained in this job until 1913. During his time in Houston he strengthened the influence of the “Y”. He began programs still remembered there by the old timers who tell the youngsters the programs they think they invented were thought of by a man years ago. He came to the attention of the president of the University in Austin who at that time was concerned with the state of this rapidly developing revolutionary thing called “intercollegiate athletics”. It was a strange thing to the academic world which did not like strangeness.

It is difficult for those in this day to understand what it meant to be secretary to the YMCA in Houston from 1908 to 1913. The city of Houston was just swelling with the great open ended confidence that was to produce the massive city of today. The prodigious possibilities of life were evident to all. L. Theo Bellmont saw them and he was young, in many ways brilliant, a man and involved with Christian faith that man’s brute and beauty could be made a thing of great wonder.
and strength. He spent the rest of his life in this conviction. He had faith. He had honor. He had courage. He had pride. He had the ability to stay and work when the going got tough.

In 1913, upon the recommendation of President Mezes, The Board of Regents offered the Directorship of Athletics at the University of Texas to Mr. Bellmont. This job included supervision, not only of intercollegiate athletics, but physical training, intramurals. So he came to this small school on "The Forty Acres" secure in the faith that he could accomplish many things. And he did. From 1913 until 1929 with a small break for war and an airplane crash, he literally dragged intercollegiate athletics at the University of Texas and in the Southwest into the modern world. In a very real sense he invented the particular pattern that athletics at the University has followed ever since.

No matter what you watch, what you contemplate doing, what you compliment or complain about, much of the ground work in all physical education and athletic fields was laid by this remarkable gentleman. A list of the formidable and durable achievements is simply to indicate his imagination, his powers of persuasion, his tenacious optimism and dogged persistence to do the things he felt needed to be done.

Austin in 1913 was a small town broken into the aristocracy of citizenry and the aristocracy of the gown. A man dedicated to the idea that athletics was important faced certain difficulties with which directors of athletics do not have trouble today. Theo Bellmont and his wife, Fritz, took on the challenge and mighty things were done. Having learned as a boy in Rochester that money answereth nearly everything in athletics he set about building a financial base upon which to operate. He had nothing. It took about three years for him to have that something upon which he could build. He found chaos in the relations of school to school. The Texas Intercollegiate Athletic Association was a loose collection of schools with no rules and looser scheduling made upon the spur of the moment and teams played in whatever pasture available. He was mainly responsible for the organization of the Southwest Conference which is an organization based upon the rule of law. This was in 1915.

In 1916 when attention could be paid to the needs and interests of the majority of the student body, he hired Berry Whitaker from Austin High School and set up an intramural program which was then the first of its kind and is now one of the finest in the land. He organized the physical training department around the requirement that all male students take four semesters of
this work. He developed the classes and had fine teachers. He taught classes himself. This is the Department he devoted the most of his efforts and life to until his retirement in 1952. His contributions in this field are enormous.

Early in his career at The University of Texas he scheduled a football game with that great foreign power of the time, Notre Dame. Football was just becoming the powerful athletic force it is today. We played Notre Dame in 1913 and again in 1915. The fact that we lost both games is beside the point. Bellmont felt we should play the best and we did. He started the Cotton Bowl Game with OU which has now become that holiday known as the “OU Weekend”.

He inaugurated the idea of prepayment plan for athletics. This was the blanket tax and gave the Intercollegiate Athletics something substantial to work with, a guaranteed yearly income.

He organized and carried through the truly amazing drive to build Memorial Stadium. This accomplishment in 1923 was a thing a pure faith, hard work, great powers of persuasion, and the conviction that this edifice would be the only means of furnishing enough financial backing to build a sports program and that the entire program should benefit from this ability. This was one of his strongest articles of faith.

He founded the Texas Relays. Theo Bellmont was a superb showman. He felt that selling was the name of the game. He liked to sell ideas or products. The First Texas Relays filled the Stadium. It also filled the roadsides from San Antonio to Austin and from Georgetown to Austin, for he had attracted national attention to the relays by having Tarahumari Indians from Mexico run from Georgetown to Austin. The flamboyance of this production helped move track into being a spectator sport.

In 1917 Theo Bellmont went to the School of Military Aeronautics in Austin as a first lieutenant. He was sent as a pilot to Kelly Field in San Antonio and was flight instructor. He crashed in a field south of Austin in the summer of 1918 and was seriously injured.

In the fall of 1919 he returned to his duties at The University of Texas, slowed in time but ready to do the things he had felt needed done before the War.
During his career at the University he was very active in civic affairs. In 1920-21-22 he was president of the Rotary Club. He was vestryman of All Saints Episcopal church for twenty-five years. He and the late Dr. Battle were truly pillars of that Church. He organized and led the Capital City American Legion Post. He was Director of the University YMCA for many years staunch in the faith that this organization that had helped him so much in his youth truly merited assistance.

He headed the Travis County Chapter of the American Red Cross and directed the relief work during the last great flood on the Colorado river.

He was chairman of the Board of the University Co-op and helped shape it into a modern profit sharing co-operative able to compete with any firm on a business basis.

He was president, comfort, hope, ramrod, inspiration, manager to the old Faculty club. This club was one of his favorite places, one of his favorite ideas. Here he seemed to enjoy himself mightily.

His work over the years in the Scottish Rite Masons was tremendous. He was awarded the 33rd degree and made Knight Commander of the Court of Honor. He was a director of the Scottish Rite Dormitory for more than seventeen years. This was the last of the delightful duties he was to relinquish. He served on this board until a short time before his death.

He was concerned with the government of the City of Austin. He served on several Grand Juries and learned to appreciate the majesty and the responsibility of this system. His training as a lawyer provided the broad approach and his life in physical education provided the great understanding and compassion. He strongly supported this conscience of the community.

He served on the Tax Reappraisal Board, and on the Board of Equalization of The City of Austin. He served on various boards set to appraise land values for the city. He was a regular and concerned visitor at the meetings of the City Council.

L. Theo Bellmont was Director of Athletics from 1913 until 1929. He had direct responsibility for all the various areas involved in the entire field of physical education. He hired coaches who developed teams, he built a stadium and supplied fields and financial support to
afford them opportunity. There were championship teams in football, basketball, baseball, track and tennis. He founded and strengthened the Department of Physical training for Men. He started, developed, and maintained the Department of Intramural Sports for Men. He established the Department of Physical and Health Education.

There is not much more a man could have done given the time and the circumstances. All these departments are strong because of his influence. In 1929 he became Director of the Department of Physical Training for Men which was then established as a Department in the College of Arts and Sciences, later to be classified in the humanities group. From 1929 until his retirement in 1952 his efforts were concerned with developing a strong department based upon the idea that all students deserved the best teaching possible. He set the tone, the approach, the basic philosophy of the Department.

In the areas where the Department now shows strength he established the pattern and showed the way. Today, the University has the finest handball teaching facilities in the country. He believed in handball as a sport. He played it exceptionally well. He had a standing challenge to the intramural champion every year and won until he quit playing after he was sixty. He built the first handball court in the basement of the Old Main Building of a wall and some shutters. He designed the courts in the Old Gregory Gym and they were as good as any courts at that time. He scheduled classes and kept strong teachers. The present strength of the sport is due to the many years of teaching in the Department which he created. Some people think the strong program somehow just happened. It grew from his confidence.

He established strong programs in weight lifting and its allied conditioning aspects many years ago when there were only a few outside the physical culture group. He kept a reasonable approach to the entire field. He established the first remedial and adapted program of its kind in the country, and the present department reflects his concern with this area.

No matter where you touch any area involved with physical education at The University of Texas it is in large part what it is because of the things that L. Theo Bellmont did to make it possible. His acts were so solid with implications for the future that in some ways they seemed prophetic.
He will be missed by those many who knew him for he was a magnificent human being. Many honored him and were devoted to him because of the things he stood for. His ideas and ideals are so imbedded in the matrix of the life at the University as to become a part of that life. That some do not know the history of a small world and the men who made it does not detract from the fact that some of them were extraordinary humans.

One of the profound prayers of any man is that he be lucky in his women folk and that his women folk have a deep and abiding sense of what it means to be a woman. Theo Bellmont was one of those rare persons who fell in love with the right woman and this beautiful sense of rightness prevailed throughout his life. He married Miss Freda Alice Jucket in Chicago in 1910. To him she was always Fritz. They had two children, Margaret and Ted. Margaret is now Mrs. Jack S. Gray of Austin and Ted and his family live in Houston. Their children have grown knowing the great spirit of this wonderful grandfather. It is probable that the youngest generation senses that here was a great and good man with a devotion greater than most to life, to his family, to his time. There was a strength that shown round his point of view that marked him as a special person, and contributed to the abiding astonishment of those who knew him that one man could have done so many things so well in the short span of 88 years.

Billy Amstead
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