

## Chapter 5. Southern Methodist University

*At that moment of four in the afternoon, the Pendulum was slowing at one end of its swing, then falling back lazily toward the center, regaining speed along the way, slashing confidently through the parallelogram of forces that were its destiny*

-Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*<sup>2</sup>, Ballantine Books, 1988, p. 4

I entered Southern Methodist University in Dallas in January 1953. I had graduated from Highland Park High School in January because I was still on the mid-year schedule that was initiated in 1942 when I was moved ahead half a year at University Park Elementary School. These three education institutions lie but a long stone's throw from one another. Strong bonds existed with SMU, which lies at the northern border of the towns of Highland Park and University Park, where many SMU faculty members lived. Large numbers of Highland Park graduates entered SMU almost as an extension of the life of that northern Dallas incorporated city. At SMU our most famous Highland Park footballer, Doak Walker, had become a state and a national hero, filling the Cotton Bowl on Saturday afternoons. The Cotton Bowl on the Fairgrounds of the State Fair of Texas was commonly called "the house that Doak built". I attended every Saturday home game in the Cotton Bowl during 1953-56.

It is almost impossible to overestimate the influence and impact that Doak Walker had on Highland Park, SMU and Dallas. What is true today was also true in the 1940s—society's heroes are for the most part military heroes, business heroes, war heroes, or sports heroes. Doak Walker was the preeminent sports hero. Even his name carries a heroic ring—*Doak*. In 1943-44, while I was in University Park Elementary School, Doak led Highland Park High School to contend for the Texas state football championship, which was a far bigger event in the 1940s than today when professional athletes hold center stage. After serving in WWII Doak Walker led SMU to national prominence in football for the first time. Operating as tailback in coach Matty Bell's single-and-double-wing offense, Doak did it all. He was Time Magazine cover boy in 1948. He was three times an All American selection at SMU, winning tight football games repeatedly with inexhaustible heroics, and winning the Heismann Trophy as a junior, and later chosen all-Pro four times while he was scoring leader for professional football. But Doak was also a typical Highland Park boy, loved and respected for his humility and spiritual character. Parents loved him. Friends worshipped him. Younger schoolboys such as myself held his name in awe. In addition to football heroics, he cemented the Highland Park-SMU axis as no one had before or since.

Highland Park High School and the entire school district of the Park Cities has become a Texas legend of its own. People compete strenuously to become residents, because only in that way can children attend its celebrated school district. There is an interesting point for today, while 21<sup>st</sup> century society debates our schools and their relationship to economic wealth and productivity. Namely, there is no strong reason other than its schools to explain why people pay far more for a home there than for comparable homes outside the Park Cities (University Park and Highland Park). Houses from 1940 are today purchased for the lot on which they sit; the house is sometimes razed and replaced by a theme mansion. In the year 2005 the *Dallas Morning News* reported on

January 27, 2006 that the school district raised 2.5 million dollars of private support for its schools in the annual drive called “Mad for Plaid”--*plaid* in reference to the Scot Highlander school theme. This amount equals the money raised annually by many universities from their alumni and community. These drives are to counter so-called “Robin-Hood” laws that redistribute school-tax money based on property values to other less affluent districts. That practice may or may not be socially justifiable, but there is little question that it is education and community devotion to superior schools that makes Highland Park a destination for many seeking the best environment for their children.

All of this I inherited, a simple itinerant farm boy from Iowa whose family was absorbed into the margins of that school district in 1941. Spurred on by that advantage, I entered SMU in January 1953. Had my high school been ordinary, I might not have attended college at all. This realization, as with so many others of like kind, seems almost frightening as I look back today on a charmed life.

SMU was but forty-two years old in 1953. Its Georgian red-brick buildings sat on a campus that had the look of freshly cleared flat lawns at the broad top of a large hill. It had been founded in 1911 by the United Methodist Church, which established what is today one of that church’s leading seminaries, Perkins School of Theology, on the southern edge of its campus. The founding establishment was cooperatively assisted by leaders of Dallas and Highland Park, whose citizens pledged \$300,000 to secure its beginnings. In appreciation, SMU named its first building Dallas Hall. With its grand central dome and majestic columned entrance steps and lovely interior rotunda, Dallas Hall has been from the beginning the very symbol of SMU. This building is the first that one will see by checking their web site, [www.smu.edu](http://www.smu.edu). The original building was constructed in 1915 and was designed by the architectural firm Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge. The building's architectural style was particularly influenced by Thomas Jefferson’s interpretation of the Roman Pantheon. The 3-story rotunda and flanking wings are typical of Georgian Revival architecture. The rotunda is topped with brilliant stained glass, and the dome is copper with a rich green patina. In 1978 Dallas Hall received the first plaque in the Park Cities from the National Register of Historic Places. Like any other student in 1953, I took for granted having my English classes being held in Dallas Hall. There I was charmed, even shocked, by David Ruffin’s chanting of Elizabethan ballads in class. It was all so grand and solid and new to a socially backward boy of eighteen years. Little did I dream when I entered SMU that I would one day be designated *Distinguished Alumnus*; nor could I possibly have foreseen the reasons for that.