

For Then and Forever:

The Story of the 1980 McMurry College Football Team

By: Reagan Sullivan

I

The Indians were seventeen minutes and twenty-six seconds away from their first Texas Intercollegiate Athletic Association football championship.

So far, the day had been outstanding, historic even: quarterback Mark Cox had amassed an impressive six touchdown passes, a number that would have made even Dan Fouts blush.¹ The stingy McMurry defense had held the Austin College Kangaroos to a mere fourteen points—a number that Texas A&M transfer quarterback Larry Shillings could not have been happy with.

All told, the Tribe led 47-14 with 2:26 left in the third quarter, and all available evidence seemed to point to a McMurry win.² The season had been their most dominant in school history. This squad possessed the most rushing yards in a single season, tied for the most wins, and on this early-November afternoon they had a chance to do something that no team had done before: win nine games, collect a TIAA title, and possibly advance to the playoffs.

It certainly seemed like it was coming. McMurry Head Coach Spud Aldridge paced up and down the sideline—he knew that some would accuse him of trying to run up the score, but he would not feel safe until he knew the ‘Roos had been put away. He certainly knew what was riding on this game. He was aware of his reputation. Just earlier that week, the *Abilene-Reporter News* had spit out this headline: “Spud Still Searching for First Title.”³ Aldridge had won more games than any other conference coach since the formation of the TIAA in 1976. His record of 21-8 over four seasons was quite impressive, but he was missing the ring.⁴

The Indians held a thirty-three point advantage with seventeen minutes and some change left to play. That had to be too big of a lead and too little time for Austin College to mount a comeback. McMurry’s David Lynn booted the kickoff. Austin College would begin their drive at

their own twenty-five yard-line. Shillings took the field facing a thirty-three point deficit. He quickly moved the 'Roos down the field, capping off an eleven-play drive by rifling a six-yard pass into the hands of Rory Dukes in the end-zone. The two-point attempt failed, but with ten seconds remaining in the third quarter, the lead had been cut to 47-20.

The Austin College defense began the fourth quarter with a stop, allowing Shillings to retake the field. The 'Roos scored again. The two-point try failed yet again, but nonetheless, the score was now 47-26 with 11:42 left to play. After a touchback, the Indians took the field at their own twenty yard-line. Mark Cox had to leave the game due to a "woozy head," so capable back-up Ricky Sells took the field.⁵ Sure, the 'Roos had scored a couple of touchdowns. They were the 1979 conference champions, and had defeated the Indians just five weeks prior to this game. Still, down by twenty-one points, there was simply no way they could close the gap. Their fireworks show was over. All McMurry needed to do was protect the ball and run out the clock.

On first down, Sells went under center and called for the ball. He fumbled the snap. Austin College recovered the loose ball at the McMurry nineteen yard-line. Three plays later, Shillings threw a twenty-one yard touchdown pass. The extra-point was good. Austin College had now brought it to 47-33 with just north of ten minutes left to play. Aldridge continued to pace.

The top-ranked Austin College defense forced an Indian punt. This time, it took Shillings nine plays to get his team in scoring position, and on the tenth, they did. The two-point try failed, but with 3:59 left to play, McMurry was holding on to just an eight-point lead: 47-39.

Thirteen minutes, twenty-seven seconds. That is how long it took Austin College to score twenty-five points. The McMurry sideline's dreams of the post-game celebration, that had

seemed so certain in the late-third quarter, were gone. The high of a record-setting performance and a sure-fire win was replaced with apprehension. The Indians had battled this reputation all year. In the first game, they had gone down 14-0 at halftime, and battled back in the second half for a win. In the second game, they had gone up 21-2 at halftime, only to stumble in the second half, and escape with a 21-11 win. The *Abilene-Reporter News*' Art Lawler had even questioned when Coach Aldridge would correct his team's "mistaken assumption that football is a 30-minute game."⁶

Despite the struggles, though, the 1980 season had been a dream. They were a team of misfits, filled with non-scholarship players who certainly had not grown up dreaming of playing for McMurry College. They had all been, however, "too-something:" too slow, too short, or too light. Their head coach looked as though he belonged in the computer science department, not on the sideline. Their school was not even the highlight of their own town: no, Abilene Christian held that honor.

Yet, anyone who played them knew: this was a football team. Their success in 1980 was not really logical. That was not to say that it just happened, or that it did not require quite a bit of effort from all involved. Rather, despite the talent that the team undoubtedly displayed, they still did not quite fit the classic football story of high-profile athletes led by a thick-necked, bulging-veins coach.

They were simply different.

On that early-November afternoon in Sherman, Texas, the Indians' dreams were hanging in the balance. The year 1980 would either be one of champions, or one of "should-have-been."

To understand 1980, however, one must first understand 1923.

II

In 1923, McMurry College opened its doors, and along with the new institution came the school's inaugural football season. They were led by Coach Randolph Marmaduke (R.M.) Medley, who took over the reins of all of McMurry's athletic teams at the age of twenty-five.¹ The 1924 edition of *The Totem*, the school's annual yearbook, had this to say about the young leader:

Coach Medley comes to us from Missouri Wesleyan College, being the first man in that institution to win all four athletic letters. The same fighting spirit and ability that won for him such an enviable athletic record in his Alma Mater has been repeatedly manifested through the past seasons in the teams he has given McMurry College. His achievement are truly remarkable when consideration is taken of the obstacles which he had to overcome.⁷

A rough first year it was. McMurry won just two games: a twenty-five-to-zero battle with Thorp Spring on October 27 and a twelve-to-zero slug-fest with Sul Ross State on November 17—the beginning of McMurry Football's longest-standing rivalry.⁸ Tough losses to the Breckenridge American Legion, Dallas University, and Clifton College, as well as a tie with Weatherford College, left the Indians with a final record of two wins, three losses, and one tie. Coach Medley had made the best out of what he had, though: "Beginning the football season with at least half the men knowing absolutely nothing about the game and with only three who had won letters in high schools or colleges, he formed a squad that performed wonders, and laid the foundation for a second year that promises great things."⁹

The 1924 team finished five-and-two, marking the first winning football season in the young school's history.¹⁰ Medley would go on to lead the Indian's until 1939, becoming the

¹ The McMurry Football Fieldhouse and Weight Room is named in Medley's Honor.

longest-tenured football coach that has ever graced the corner of Ross Avenue and Hunt Street. During his sixteen seasons, he managed sixty-one wins, another record that has stood the test of time.¹¹ He oversaw the kindling of age-old rivalries. Medley was a part of the first battle with the aforementioned Lobos of Sul Ross State, but he also was at the helm for McMurry's first duel with the Austin College Kangaroos, an early season bout in 1935 that resulted in a six-to-six tie, as well as a late-season contest against the Trinity University Tigers in 1937, which ended with a six-to-zero Indian victory.¹² Sul Ross, Austin College, and Trinity would go on to become long-standing opponents.

In 1939, the Medley era came to an end. That year's Totem had this to say of the man who jump-started athletics at McMurry: "Standing on the threshold of his seventeenth year as generalissimo of the reservation athletic forces. R.M. Medley, known by every full-blooded Red-skin as the "Old Man," has annually placed contending teams on the gridiron or in the gym."¹³ The "Old Man" was merely forty-one, and he was leaving for the same post at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas.¹⁴ The tradition of collegiate football on the south-side of Abilene, however, had been established.

McMurry had several different head coaches after Medley. In 1943, however, a global war placed the Indians' gridiron history on hold; nearly the entire squad enlisted to aid in the United States' effort in World War II.¹⁵ Football would not return to the campus until 1946.¹⁶

The three-year hiatus was snapped by a four win, four loss, and one tie season in 1946.¹⁷ Assistant Coach Wilford Moore, who had enjoyed an illustrious playing career at cross-town Hardin-Simmons, took over the head job in 1947.¹⁸ ² Moore remained at McMurry for eight

² McMurry's current football stadium is named in Moore's honor.

seasons, tabbing two Texas Conference Championships and battling the likes of the University of Houston, Texas A&I (Now Texas A&M-Kingsville), and New Mexico State, at a time where there was less separation between big and small schools.¹⁹

McMurry's rich football tradition continued. From 1960 to 1965, Grant Teaff was the Tribe's head coach.²⁰ Teaff, a Snyder, Texas, native and former McMurry football player was involved in one of the most terrifying moments in Indian history. On September 28, 1963, while flying back to Abilene, the team's chartered DC-3 airliner crash-landed at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana.²¹ Twenty-five Indians and six others were on the plane. All thirty-one survived, and it led to the establishment of the "B.I.B.LE. Club" (Brotherhood of Indian Belly Landing Experts), where McMurry coaches Teaff, Hershel Kimbrell, and Buddy Fornes gave thanks to God for their safe return.²²

Although Teaff's six-year tenure only resulted in a modest 23-35 record, he is most famous for going on to become the head football coach at Baylor University, a post he held for twenty-one years, amassing a 128-105 record.²³ Teaff's time at Baylor brought quite a bit of notoriety to McMurry. People began to realize that despite playing at a lower level, the men who coached at McMurry College could stand with anyone, anywhere.

In 1966, Teaff's assistant Buddy Fornes took over as the head coach at McMurry. After six seasons, he took the same job at Tarleton State University.²⁴ The Indians would go on to battle Fornes's Texans year-after-year.

In 1973, Don Newsom took charge of the Tribe.²⁵ The team won three games and lost six.²⁶ In 1974, Head Basketball Coach and Athletic Director Hershel Kimbrell was looking to make a change. The Indian football team was coming off of their fifth-straight losing season, and he knew they needed help. So, Kimbrell reached out to an unlikely source, a local junior-high coach: Jessie William “Spud” Aldridge.

He did not look like a football coach. He did not talk like a football coach. He was, as the *Abilene-Reporter News* put it, a “short little man,” with “wavy silver locks” and “Coke-bottle glasses.”²⁷ His vocabulary included words like “malarkey.” He considered “crap” a curse-word. He did not fit the mold.

Nonetheless, in the spring of 1974, Aldridge took over as the offensive coordinator as well head track and field coach. There was immediate improvement. The 1974 team went 6-4, and, under Aldridge’s guidance, the offense scored 177 points—a sixty-seven point increase from the previous season.²⁸

After the 1975 season, Newsom decided to leave Abilene and accept the head coaching job at Conroe McCullough High School.²⁹ Kimbrell then made a decision that sparked one of the best five-year runs in McMurry football history: he promoted Aldridge to the position of head football coach.

Aldridge was no R.M. Medley. He was no Wilford Moore. He was no Grant Teaff. Those men were stars on the field before grabbing the headset. Aldridge’s playing career had ended in high school. But, he loved football.

He was not the typical college football coach. There might have been some who questioned what this junior-high coach was doing in charge of a program that had once been run by the likes Medley, Moore, and Teaff.

Regardless, in the spring of 1976, Spud Aldridge got his chance.

III

“Y’all tell me, how many college football players do you think we have?”³⁰

This was the question that Spud Aldridge asked his assistant coaches as they began spring practice in 1976. The coaches all agreed that they probably had four, possibly even five. They were “good kids,” Aldridge insisted. But, there just were not many college football players in the bunch—and the McMurry Indians desperately needed college football players.

It would not be easy. In 1971, McMurry College President Dr. Thomas Kim and the Board of Trustees decided to end scholarships for football and track.³¹ Thus, Aldridge would have to build his team with volunteers.

The fall of 1976 was rough. The Indians went 2-8, and were still playing in the Lone Star Conference, where they squared up with bigger scholarship schools.³² In 1977, though, the Indians would begin playing in the revived-TIAA: a non-scholarship conference in the National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) Division II. McMurry had a chance to be successful, but Aldridge would have to get them there.

He knew he could. Eighteen years as a high school coach had given him a bevy of connections, and he used them. The first order of business was to recruit every all-district player at a Class 5A high school in Texas.³³ The Indians had to get bigger.

They did. Some of the size came from the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Fort Worth Western Hills’ Ricky Nolley, Lewisville’s Mark Wilcoxson, Everman’s Mark Behrens, and Garland’s LeRoy Duncan proved to be stalwarts on the offensive and defensive lines, respectively.³⁴ He

also heavily recruited West Texas, where the famed “Little Southwest Conference” was still the heart of Texas high school football.

The “Little Southwest,” a nod to the powerful collegiate Southwest Conference, was comprised of Midland High, Midland Lee, Odessa High, Odessa Permian, Abilene High, Abilene Cooper, and San Angelo Central.³⁵ Aldridge knew that if a boy was all-district in the Little Southwest, he was a “player.”³⁶ Lee’s Stan Carter and Abilene’s Steve Reimschuessel found their way to McMurry, and were bookends on the 1980 offensive line.³⁷ Another West Texas kid, Luke Taylor, a 240-pound center, decided to transfer from Howard Payne to McMurry ahead of the 1980 season.³⁸

Aldridge had found his size, but he knew that he also needed as much speed as he could get. The boys in West Texas were tough, and he loved that—but they “didn’t have a ton of speed.”³⁹ Nate Dyles, a Fort Worth Dunbar product, had gone to state in the hurdles, and could cover a receiver like he had a rope attached to them.⁴⁰ Horace Robins, a Houston Jack Yates defensive-back, was as good of an athlete as one could find.⁴¹ Mark Cox, Lester Lavalias, Dudley Woodard, Brad Woods, Kat Mayes—they could all run, so Aldridge made them Indians. In fact, the Indians had so much speed, that a rival coach once called Aldridge and asked, “Are you sure all those black kids are eligible?”⁴² Aldridge was not one to hold grudges, but he made it a point to pour it on that team every time they played each other.

Some might question how Aldridge was able to recruit so well. To hear him tell it, though, it was actually quite simple: high school coaches just helped him out. Take, for example, this story about the recruitment of the 1980 team’s star runningback, Dudley Woodard: “I was on the phone with [Fort Worth Paschal Head Coach Bill Allen], and he said, ‘Spud, the best runningback in Fort Worth is here, and nobody is talking to him.’ I said, ‘Why?’ He said, ‘Well,

because he's little...' But, I knew that he was a tough coach, and a good coach, and I took him for his word...'”⁴³ When he went to visit with Coach Allen, he was convinced:

Well, he just grabbed that film... he didn't even know which one he was grabbing... and he put it on that ol' 16 milimeter. Paschal is down inside the 4-yard line with Fort Worth Eastern Hills... [the defense] knew [Woodard] was gonna get that ball. He took that football four straight times, with no blocking, and scored a touchdown.⁴⁴

That is how he got kids. Often times, he simply took a high school coach's word. He trusted those men, because he had been one of those men. By judging the talent he was able to accumulate at the little Methodist school in West Texas, it seemed to work out just fine.

In his four years as the head coach, Aldridge had built a winner. Going into the 1980 season, the expectations were quite high. The 1979 team had gone 8-3, and a late-season loss to Austin College, whom they had defeated earlier that year, eliminated the Indians' title hopes.⁴⁵ The 1980 team, however, had every piece needed to make a run at the TIAA championship.

First of all, they had the right coaching staff in place. Aldridge's right-hand was Tommy Estes. Estes joined the McMurry coaching staff in 1970 as the defensive secondary coach, and in 1976 Aldridge promoted him to defensive coordinator.⁴⁶ In the early-1950s, Estes had been an all-sports letterman at Abilene High, and then went on to play basketball at the University of Texas.⁴⁷ He, like so many of McMurry's coaches, wore multiple hats, as he also served as an assistant basketball coach and head golf coach.⁴⁸ Coach Aldridge insisted that Estes' specialty was calling the defense, and when it came to defensive backs, he “knew how to find them.”⁴⁹

Don Eiland, who came to McMurry from Muleshoe High School that June and had worked with Aldridge at Jefferson Junior High, coached the offensive and defensive line.⁵⁰ He and trainer Mike Chase, who took care of all injuries and ran the team's conditioning, rounded out the staff.⁵¹ Three coaches and an athletic trainer would handle more than one-hundred players.

Then, there was the team. Aldridge insisted publicly that his team had lost more players than anyone in the conference.⁵² The Tribe had indeed lost a few key stalwarts. For starters, quarterback Brett Lang was gone.⁵³ Tight end Rickie Williams, who was good enough to sign a free-agent contract with the Houston Oilers, had also graduated.⁵⁴ Specialists Robert Pittard and Bob Cervetto, who punted and kicked, respectively, for the Indians, were out of eligibility—as well as defensive-back Frank Andrews, who had eight interceptions in 1979.⁵⁵ All had been major contributors on a good 1979 squad, and all were gone. Opposing coaches were ready to sell the Indians short, an error Aldridge encouraged—because he knew what he had.

The TIAA crown typically went to the team that had the best defense. Well, the Indians had a defense. 230-pound LeRoy Duncan, 255-pound Mark “Red” Behrens, and 245-pound Mark Alexander comprised the defensive line.⁵⁶ Duncan was a potential All-American, Behrens was a “massive red-head with surprising quickness,” and Alexander, although the youngest of the bunch, had made an immediate impact during his freshman season in 1979.⁵⁷ On the back end, defensive-backs Robins, whom Aldridge called “one of the best in the country,” and Dyles could stick with any wide receiver in the conference.⁵⁸

McMurry had the potential to score points, too. Dudley Woodard, the Tribe's leading rusher in 1979, was returning for his senior season.⁵⁹ The 5'11, 185-pounder from Fort Worth, Texas, could bench 360 pounds.⁶⁰ His backfield mate Lester Lavalais, who could run a 4.6

second forty-yard dash at almost two-hundred pounds, was returning as well.⁶¹ David Davee, who had played center the previous two seasons, was moving over to tight end.⁶² He was not expected to be the playmaker that Williams had been, but he was a veteran and a fine blocker.

The offensive line looked ferocious. Left tackle Stan Carter and right tackle Steve “Rocket” Reimschuessel were both returning.⁶³ Guards Ricky Nolly and Mark Wilcoxson were back in the interior.⁶⁴ The only question, however, was at center. Davee had held the position for two seasons, but was severely undersized and moving out to tight end. Veterans Mike Wilde and Steve Keenum were expected to battle for the position, as well as a new guy: transfer Luke Taylor from Howard Payne.⁶⁵

Possibly the greatest question mark, though, was at quarterback. Lang had not just been the starter—he was a star. He had thrown fifteen touchdown passes and broken the McMurry single-season total offense record, one that had stood for thirty years.⁶⁶ Looking to replace him were Mark Cox and Ricky Sells. Cox, the six-foot, two-inch junior from Weatherford, Texas, ran a 4.6 second forty-yard dash, but could not stay healthy: both his freshman and sophomore years were marred by injury.⁶⁷ Sells was a talented sophomore with little experience.

Publicly, Aldridge acted as though he was concerned about the upcoming season. “I really don’t know how to call the 1980 season,” he said. “Realistically, we shouldn’t be considered among the favorites for the conference title...our inexperience factor is very unnerving to me.”⁶⁸

Privately, Aldridge harbored different thoughts. He, Estes, and Eiland all agreed that if this group could stay healthy, they would be dangerous.⁶⁹ Aldridge was convinced that his boys

could win the TIAA title in 1980, and he was not stopping there—he thought they could win a national championship.⁷⁰

He just did not want anyone else to know that.

IV

On Friday, August 15, fall practice began. The team trained twice a day for a week-and-a-half, and finished the camp period with a team scrimmage on August 23.⁷¹ The practices brought a multitude of feelings with them. For the coaches, there was the belief that this team could be special. Coach Aldridge noted that his veteran players showed up in great physical condition, proving to him how badly they wanted to win that year. The days brought excitement—they brought destiny.

For the players, camp carried somewhat different feelings. They had to go through long, hot, two-a-day practices. Trainer Mike Chase handled the team's conditioning. He was, as offensive linemen Ricky Nolly noted, "an old man... who wore our butts out."⁷² Chase commandeered the wind sprints at the end of every practice, and was determined to get the boys into shape. Sometimes that meant more running and sometimes it meant less—but, most of the time, more. There was some excitement, of course—the older guys knew that this was their opportunity to "kick the door in" and win a TIAA crown—but, mostly, the week-and-a-half period was marked by heat, fatigue, and beating each other up.⁷³

On August 28, that would change. The Indians were set to meet their crosstown rival, Abilene Christian University, for a scrimmage. The match would not count towards either team's record, but would serve as a great opportunity for both squads to see what kind of team they had, and give the players a chance to hit someone in a different colored jersey.

ACU used to be a familiar opponent. Between 1930 and 1971, the Indians and the Wildcats battled thirty-nine times, with the former winning fifteen of those matches, and the

latter taking twenty-four.⁷⁴ After McMurry phased out of scholarship-play in 1971, they no longer met their Abilene neighbors on the gridiron—formally, at least.

In 1979, McMurry and ACU organized a scrimmage with each other. The move made sense: the two teams would not have to leave Abilene for their “tune-up” game; they would be able to play it right in their own backyard at the famous P.E. Shotwell Stadium. So, they decided to do it again in 1980.

ACU, a NAIA Division I scholarship school, had the obvious advantage. Their school was bigger. Their facilities were nicer. Their players were more highly-recruited. They had even won a national championship a few years prior in 1977. By all available metrics, McMurry was the little brother.

On a warm Thursday evening in late-August, the Indians would get a chance to alter that narrative.

Luke Taylor had played Abilene Christian before. The six-foot, two-inch, 240-pound transfer from Howard Payne University had been thumped by the Wildcats a couple of times during his two years in Brownwood—losing 38-7 in 1978, and 34-0 in 1979.⁷⁵ This was not an unusual occurrence for the Howard Payne football team. In fact, Taylor did not experience much winning at all during his time as a Yellowjacket: HPU suffered through consecutive 2-8 seasons in 1978 and 1979.⁷⁶

In 1979, Howard Payne faced off with McMurry in a pre-season scrimmage. As Taylor recalled, “[McMurry] kicked the shit out of us.”⁷⁷ During the beat-down, Taylor saw a team that was having fun, something he had not felt in his two years as a Yellow Jacket.

So, when that season ended, Taylor called Coach Aldridge and asked if he could come join the team.⁷⁸ The move represented a bit of a homecoming. He was raised in Clyde, a small town just outside of Abilene, so he would not only get to be near family, but also join a football program that was on a roll.

Football had always been a part of his life. His father played football at Clyde High School, then at Baylor University before getting the opportunity to go play professionally.⁷⁹ In fact, Taylor was actually born in Canada, while his father was playing football there.⁸⁰ The elder Taylor would bring the family back to Clyde during the offseason, where—rather coincidentally—they lived next door to the high school’s head coach: Spud Aldridge.⁸¹ Taylor recalled playing with Coach Aldridge’s children while his father and Aldridge got together and talked football.⁸² Thus, his relationship with his future coach began many, many years prior.

Taylor never felt pressured by his father to play football, but once he decided that he was going to, their relationship evolved. His father had been a center at Baylor under offensive line Coach Clyde Douglas “Bulldog” Turner, a former NFL player and member of the Professional Football Hall of Fame.⁸³ Turner taught him how to snap the football. So, the elder Taylor taught his son to snap the same way that Bulldog Turner had taught him—not a bad second-hand mentor for a kid from Clyde.

His dad had gone on to coach after his playing career ended, and he imparted his knowledge of the game onto his son. Taylor grew into a fine athlete. He could run a 4.7 second

forty-yard dash and bench press 400 pounds.⁸⁴ Luke Taylor was a college coach's dream: a big, mean kid who knew a little bit about the game and how to play it.

He had his fair share of collegiate opportunities. Aldridge had recruited the local product, but Taylor had turned him down for a scholarship. "I thought, 'You know what? I'm a superstar, I deserve a scholarship,'" said Taylor, "so, I went to Howard Payne."⁸⁵ After finding nothing but losing seasons in Brownwood, he changed his mind, and luckily Aldridge was willing to give him a shot at McMurry,

The timing could not have been better. The 1980 McMurry College Football Pre-Season Program, written before Taylor's decision to transfer, had this to say about the team's offensive line:

Center, however, is a major question... Aldridge leans toward Mike Wilde at the moment but he has never played the position before. Steve Keenum has been around but his size is a hindrance. Were it not for the pressing problem at center the offensive line play would probably be the team's strongest point. It still may be, but a weakness in the middle certainly would complicate matters.⁸⁶

There was a "weakness in the middle." The undersized David Davee had played center for the Indians in 1979, but he was moving out to tight end, where he could better help the team. Mike Wilde and Steve Keenum were veterans without much experience. Taylor, though, had a chance to turn that weakness into a strength.

He had a pretty solid fall camp. "I never lacked in confidence," said Taylor, "... when I came in, I thought I was going to be the starter."⁸⁷ He was a tough and gritty West-Texas kid. When line coach Don Eiland would call for one-on-ones between the offensive and defensive linemen, Taylor always wanted to match up with the stout LeRoy Duncan or Mark Behrens—and he won his fair share of those battles.⁸⁸ His combination of ability, toughness, and confidence made him a welcome addition.

He made an immediate impression on his new teammates. Nolly, who played next to him on the offensive line, recalled that he knew pretty quickly that the “country-strong” Taylor was the answer at center, and added simply that “Luke Taylor was a bad man.”⁸⁹ Another one of his fellow offensive linemen, Mark Wilcoxson, pointed out to the *Abilene-Reporter News* that Taylor was “always doing strange stuff... Like, we’ll let the second-team line get in and block sometimes in practice, and you’ll look up and Luke will be right in there with them. He just loves to hit.”⁹⁰ John Hotchkin, a young defensive linemen on that squad, remembered Taylor showing up to McMurry with forty mysterious stitches in his arm, and playing with them: “The trainers tried to tell him he couldn’t play, and he said ‘Like hell I can’t play... they kept taping it back up, and he kept ripping it open... he was very tough.’”⁹¹

Taylor felt like he was the center. His teammates felt like he was too, as well as the new leader of the offensive line. Now, the question was whether or not Abilene Christian would agree.

The teams met on Thursday, August 28 at 7:00 P.M. The opposing coaches agreed on this format: ACU’s first offense would get to run twenty plays against McMurry’s first defense. If after three plays they did not get a first down, they would punt, and then reset at the thirty yard-line and try again.⁹² If, however, they were able to advance the ball past the McMurry forty yard-line, then they would be in “four-down” territory and would not have to punt. After the twenty plays, McMurry’s first offense would get their shot against ACU’s first defense. After that set of

twenty plays, the team's second units would do the same. After the two's got their reps, the first units would return, this time with fifteen plays each. Finally, the freshmen from both teams would get to run about fifteen plays apiece.

The circumstances were, as would become usual in the 1980 season, somewhat peculiar. Ted Sitton, the head coach for ACU, would miss the scrimmage due to a stomach ulcer.⁹³ After undergoing five days of treatment, he was released from the West Texas Medical Center on the Wednesday before the scrimmage, and would be attending the contest as a spectator.⁹⁴ "It's not anything anyone else hasn't had. It's nothing to be alarmed about," said Sitton. "The coaches and our players have gone a great job while I was gone."⁹⁵ Offensive Coordinator Don Smith would serve in his place. When asked about his thoughts on the upcoming meeting, Smith simply noted that after the 1979 scrimmage, the Indians had gotten "their attention."⁹⁶

As the Wildcats rolled out their first offense that evening, they looked like everything that McMurry did not. Quarterback Keith Pappas was a big-time transfer from the University of Missouri.⁹⁷ Coming in at six-foot, three-inches, and two-hundred pounds, he had, according to Sitton, "as fine a throwing arm as anyone" he had coached.⁹⁸ The Wildcat offensive line was monstrous, with Joe Hardin and Kriss Hansen each weighing in at six-foot, four-inches, and 240 pounds.⁹⁹ McMurry's defense could have passed as the ACU junior varsity squad.

The Indians did not care. ACU began the night by fumbling the ball three times in the opening minutes of the scrimmage.¹⁰⁰ Defensive linemen Mark Behrens and LeRoy Duncan sufficiently handled the ACU offensive line. Pappas was intercepted twice on the opening possession, with McMurry's Horace Robbins being on the receiving end both times.¹⁰¹ Overall, it was a dominant opening possession for the McMurry defense, which looked to shutout the Wildcats.

On the nineteenth play for the first-string ACU offense, the Wildcats punted the ball to McMurry's Willie Joe.¹⁰² Joe muffed the punt, and ACU wide receiver Bobby Scheihing recovered it.¹⁰³ The referees gave Abilene Christian the ball on the McMurry seventeen-yard line.¹⁰⁴ Aldridge could not believe it. Before the scrimmage, the two teams had agreed that they would not return punts, only field them.¹⁰⁵ He protested vehemently, but it was of no use: the Wildcats put the ball down on the seventeen, and on their twentieth and final play Pappas hit Scheihing for a touchdown.¹⁰⁶ The hope of a shutout was lost.

Aldridge regained his composure and sent his first offense out for their set of plays. Much like their offense, the ACU defense was filled with studs. Defensive linemen Greg Adams and Scott Goen, were 6'3", 225 pounds and 6'4" 235 pounds, respectively.¹⁰⁷ Linebacker Steve Freeman was 6'0", 220 pounds.¹⁰⁸ On offense, McMurry's starting tackle Steve Rhemschussel was 217 pounds. The Indians had the "forever injured" Mark Cox at quarterback, a shy and quiet kid from Weatherford, Texas—a far-cry from the highly-recruited Pappas.¹⁰⁹ Running back Dudley Woodard did not exactly look like Walter Payton.

Yet, the under-recruited, under-sized, and underestimated Indians promptly took the ball seventy yards in seven plays and scored a touchdown.¹¹⁰ Cox connected on his first five passes and found Leslie Wyche for an eighteen-yard score.¹¹¹ McMurry then reset at the thirty yard-line, and advanced again to the Wildcat eighteen yard-line.¹¹² The drive stalled when Cox was intercepted by ACU linebacker Jimmy Tuttle, but the opening possessions for McMurry's offense and defense had made a statement: the Indians were there to play, and they did not care who lined up against them.¹¹³

When ACU's first-team offense returned for fifteen more plays, the McMurry defense turned up the gas. The Indians did not allow an ACU score, and linebacker Jimmy Lynn added

an interception to the defense's list of accomplishments.¹¹⁴ All told, the ACU first-string offense accounted for six points and six turnovers.¹¹⁵ McMurry's first-team offense then returned for their fifteen and added a pair of thirty-seven yard field goals from kicker David Lynn.¹¹⁶ The match seemed to be sufficiently in McMurry's hands when defensive-tackle Mark Behrens returned to the sideline and placed a tiny Texas Rangers batting helmet over his head, signaling that he and the Indians were done for the evening.¹¹⁷

The scrimmage ended with a score of 12-6 in favor of McMurry. ACU's Sitton sat on a bench the whole night and watched his Wildcats take a thumping at the hands of a team that should not have delivered it. As Art Lawler of the *Abilene-Reporter News* pointed out: "Anyway you look at it, [Sitton's] team was outscored by McMurry, a school which isn't supposed to play the same class of football as the perennial Lone Star Conference contenders."¹¹⁸ Sitton, in a mixture of disbelief and ulcer-induced discomfort, stated:

I don't feel good. [Pappas] has a long, long, long, long way to go. I'm a little disappointed, but I'm not surprised. This is about what I expected. The effort was good. We've just got to get back to fundamentals. [McMurry is] not as good offensively, but as good, if not better defensively. But that's what they've been saying all along. Spud and his staff do a great job.¹¹⁹

Aldridge, not one to boast or brag after a good showing, was still upset about the muffed punt, and explained to reporters that he thought that the two squads had agreed that fumbles on punts would not count, since the kicking was just for practice. After holding court on that issue, Aldridge summed up the evening: "It was a good, hard scrimmage. [ACU] gave us a lot of competition," and added, rather slyly: "I hope we helped them by giving them a little competition."¹²⁰

It had been an impressive day for the McMurry offense, but specifically for the offensive line. It was the first opportunity for Luke Taylor to play as an Indian, and he did not disappoint.

“We just beat ‘em,” said Taylor, who, along with his fellow offensive linemen, routinely drove the ACU defenders five, six, or seven yards and then on to their backs.¹²¹ The ACU defense did not particularly care for that kind of man-handling, and resorted to pinching, twisting, and whatever other “cheap” methods that could free them from the wrath of McMurry front five.¹²² The new McMurry center concluded: “[The ACU players] were a bunch of cheap shot sons-of-bitches... and we kicked their ass.”¹²³ Taylor even went to the Upstairs Club, a local college bar, after the game, with the purpose of doing it again. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, for Taylor, no ACU players showed up. Nonetheless, the ACU scrimmage cemented what seemed to be a perfect fit for Taylor and the McMurry football team. As Taylor later stated: “They needed a center, I needed a team.”¹²⁴

Now, he and the Indians would turn their focus to the real challenge. They had a ten-game TIAA schedule ahead of them, and every single one of those matches would count. There were no more scrimmages. There were no more tune-ups.

If McMurry wanted to win a championship, the road would be long, and the room for error would be razor-thin.

V

The TIAA was a six-team conference, consisting of McMurry, Austin College, Sul Ross State, Tarleton State, Lubbock Christian, and Trinity University.¹²⁵ The teams played a round-robin schedule, meaning that each squad would play each other twice. Up first on McMurry's regular season schedule was Sul Ross.

Of all of the teams in the TIAA, Sul Ross was McMurry's oldest foe. The famed "I-20 Shootout" had been being played since the fall of 1923.¹²⁶ The history between the two teams was rich, and the Lobos had quite a formidable team in the fall of 1980.

Joe George, the head coach for Sul Ross, was a lot like Spud Aldridge. He was high-school-turned-small-college-coach who had an interest in challenges—and the Sul Ross job was a challenge.³ It was tough to get kids to come to Alpine, a town of about 5,500 people out in Far-West Texas. He had come to Sul Ross as the defensive coordinator in 1977, and after two seasons as an assistant, he became the head coach in 1979, leading the Lobos to a respectable 4-6 season.¹²⁷

George, for his part, knew the challenge that was ahead of him. "We played everybody in the conference tough last year except McMurry," he told the *Abilene-Reporter News*, and added that "We know they're going to be tough."¹²⁸ In 1979, McMurry had beaten Sul Ross twice, 37-11 and 43-14.¹²⁹ The Lobos, however, were looking to turn that around. All-American safety

³ George would go on to become McMurry's head football coach from 1991 to 1994, where he posted an 18-21 record.

Bernie Weems, First-Team All-TIAA linebacker David Sanchez, and Second-Team All-TIAA quarterback Larry Hill were all back to help steer the ship.¹³⁰⁴

Aldridge was expecting a tough game. Based on the scrimmage film he watched between Sul Ross and Cisco Junior College, Aldridge felt that this was the best Lobo team he had seen in his six years at McMurry.¹³¹ He knew that George was “an outstanding coach,” and that his boys would have to play really hard to beat the Lobos in Alpine.¹³² He also knew that the Lobos had been picked to finish ahead of his Indians in the TIAA Coaches’ Poll, which had Sul Ross landing third, and McMurry fourth.¹³³ Although Aldridge did not want to show his hand, he felt as though the ranking was disrespectful—and he was ready to make a statement.

Saturday, September 6, 1980. At 7:30 P.M., the Lobos hosted the Indians at Jackson Field in Alpine. Sul Ross dominated the first-half. The Lobos went on a sixty-seven yard drive in the first quarter, capped off by a one-yard touchdown touch-down run by running-back Willie Rodriguez.¹³⁴ After a failed extra point, the score was 6-0 in favor of Sul Ross.¹³⁵

In the second quarter, the struggling McMurry offense seemed to get a boost when Larry Isaac took a screen pass from Mark Cox fifty-two yards to the end-zone, but the score was called back due to a clipping penalty.¹³⁶ Sul Ross then received the ball at their own sixteen yard-line, and preceded to drive eighty-four yards in ten plays, scoring when quarterback Larry Hill found tight-end Jimbo Anderson for a sixteen-yard touchdown—making it 12-0.¹³⁷ On the ensuing McMurry possession, punter Jay Schoenfield fumbled the snap in his own end-zone, giving the Lobos a safety and an extra two points.¹³⁸ The alarms began sounding on the McMurry sideline.

⁴ After his playing days were over, Larry Hill embarked on a high school coaching career that has seen him become one of the winningest coaches in Texas High School Football history. As of 2022, Hill has 297 career wins.

McMurry went into halftime down 14-0. Aldridge went into a locker-room full of players who were experiencing their first dance with the feeling that kills teams of destiny: doubt. He chewed his boys out, calmed them down, and then sent them back out to play the second half.

In the third quarter, McMurry linebacker Richard Olson intercepted Hill at the Sul Ross sixteen yard-line, and managed to return the ball to the thirteen.¹³⁹ It took McMurry five plays to score, but finally Dudley Woodard was able to pound it in from two yards out.¹⁴⁰ Aldridge dialed up the same play for a two-point conversion, and it was successful.¹⁴¹ McMurry had cut the lead to 14-8.

Quarterback Ricky Sells had replaced an injured Mark Cox at halftime, and near the beginning of the fourth quarter he ignited the offense with a fifty-one yard run.¹⁴² The comeback effort seemed like it was falling perfectly into place. Plays later, however, the Lobos stopped the Indians on fourth down near the Sul Ross goal-line.¹⁴³

Estes' defense had to get a stop—and they did. Sul Ross could not advance the ball past their own five yard-line, and George opted to send the punt team onto the field. Bernie Weems, who doubled as the Sul Ross punter, led the nation in punting average in 1979 with 43.9 yards per-boot.¹⁴⁴ McMurry needed a break, and they got one: Weems only managed a thirty-four-yard kick, and the Indians got the ball at the Sul Ross thirty-nine yard-line.¹⁴⁵

McMurry drove down to the Sul Ross ten yard-line. This time, the comeback was completed. With about four minutes left, Sells faked the option to Woodard, found a hole in the middle, and cut to his right for the tying score.¹⁴⁶ David Lynn's extra point gave McMurry a 15-14 lead.

Hill and the Lobos were not done yet. Sul Ross' Hollis Durham fielded the David Lynn kickoff at his own fourteen yard-line and returned it out to the Lobo forty.¹⁴⁷ Two plays later, Hill found Wes Overton for a seventeen-yard gain, moving his team to the McMurry forty-three.¹⁴⁸ A few plays later, both sidelines held their breath on a fourth-down-and-one at the McMurry twenty-two.¹⁴⁹ If Sul Ross converted, then they would be in chip-shot field goal range, and would likely hand the Indians a loss that would be difficult to recover from.

A Sul Ross offensive linemen jumped off-sides, and the penalty prevented the Lobos from converting.¹⁵⁰ McMurry got the ball back and ran out the clock, narrowly escaping Alpine with a 15-14 victory. Art Lawler of the *Abilene-Reporter News* could only figure that “Coach Spud Aldridge must be some kind of evangelist when it comes to delivering sermons at halftime.”¹⁵¹

Divinely driven or not, the Indians were riding back to Abilene in their Trailways Transportation Bus with a win—and hope was still alive.

The Indian football team was off to a great start, but so was the school year. In 1980, McMurry College was a unique place to be. The school had survived plenty of turmoil: a world war, financial crisis, up-and-down-enrollment, and more.¹⁵² Despite all of those challenges, the small, Methodist institution still existed, and with it a firm base of students, faculty, and alumni who were extremely proud to be Indians—and that passion revealed itself on-campus.

McMurry had a rich tradition of wild activities by various “social clubs”—the euphemism given to the school’s fraternities and sororities. Despite being a relatively small institution, students took the clubs extremely seriously—and nothing was taken more seriously than “pledging.” Pledging was the period in which new students were recruited to join social clubs, and then had to perform various tasks to ensure their entry.

In the 1950s, Spud Aldridge himself had been an IHR pledge—McMurry’s oldest, and now defunct, social club—, along with his roommate, Royse King.¹⁵³¹⁵⁴ During pledging season, King decided to have some fun with a fellow men’s group, Kiva. Kiva’s mascot was a bird, and they required their pledges to climb a tree and simply act like a bird.¹⁵⁵ So, King, at the behest of his IHR cronies, decided to go and chop down the tree that Kiva was using.¹⁵⁶ Aldridge, although amused, was not involved. For every mild story such as that, there are five others that are even more audacious.

In 1980, the “Fall Rush” for social clubs was set to begin on September 15, but all freshmen were encouraged to participate in the annual “Slime Olympics”—an event designed to “unite” the campus and “start off an exciting year in the spirit of McMurry tradition.”¹⁵⁷ The affair was set for September 13 at 10:00 A.M. in Wah-Wahtaysee Park on-campus, and would feature an assortment of odd games, such as tug-of-war over a mud pit.¹⁵⁸ The students mingled, competed, and established friendships. It was a time long ago, where, without the comfort of an internet bubble in which one could hide, students were forced to associate with one another and with their school for entertainment. The result was a student-body that ardently supported their institution.

The faculty, which was filled with long-tenured professors, also helped cultivate the McMurry tradition. Nowadays, professors may not speak with each other unless absolutely

necessary. In 1980, the McMurry faculty lounge was inhabited every day at noon by professors with brown-bag lunches who would sit, eat, and discuss the day before heading to their 1:00 P.M. classes.¹⁵⁹ Dr. Pug Parris, who spent forty-two years as a professor at McMurry, recalled that the faculty lounge lunches became such a ritual that the faculty began having “P-I-G-O-U-T’s”—“Personable Interdisciplinary Gourmets on unusual Thursdays.”¹⁶⁰ Professors would bring casseroles and various other dishes, and frequent topics of discussion were items like how to improve the school, and the performance of the various sports teams.

The student body and faculty’s passion for their school extended to sports—specifically football. On Friday, September 13, the pep-rally for the first home football game began at 6:00 P.M. in the Hunt P.E. Center, with a “Get Ready to Roll” theme.¹⁶¹ The gatherings were always enthusiastic. All the social clubs were heavily involved in the football games—they packed the stands and brought signs to support. “If you didn’t get [to the game] early, you were not sitting down,” recalled then-Lori Snowden, Coach Aldridge’s step-daughter, who was a freshman at McMurry in 1980.¹⁶²

Thus, it is easy to see why a young high school athlete looking for a place to continue his career might look to McMurry College. There was enough to do, enough people to meet, and enough support to make the prairie school just right for young men from all different kinds of backgrounds that were looking for a place to continue their careers.

One of those young men was Richard Nolly. He was born in Fort Worth, Texas, and was raised in the West-side neighborhood of Como.¹⁶³ Nolly, an African-American, went to the predominantly black schools of Como Elementary and Como Middle School.¹⁶⁴

In the early 1970s, however, Como Middle School and High School were closed as part of the desegregation effort, and Nolly was part of the first integrated class at Fort Worth's Western Hills High School.¹⁶⁵ He recalled the experience: "It was the best of times and worst of times... [closing Como Middle and High] really did a number on our community... but, by going to Western Hills, I feel like I got a better education, and... it taught me how to get along with all different types of people."¹⁶⁶

The racial divisions were vicious at Western Hills. "I had to fight every day at Western Hills... [The white kids] didn't want us there, and we didn't wanna be there... they had put us in this place, they were bussing us there," remembered Nolly.¹⁶⁷ On one occasion, he got into a fight in the cafeteria with the son of the man who donated the land that Western Hills was built on—a kid he played right next to on the offensive line.

The football field was a release for Nolly, who developed into a great interior-offensive lineman for the Cougars. "I played the game," Nolly said, "like that man in front of me hit my momma in the mouth with a two-by-four."¹⁶⁸ That mindset earned him a scholarship offer from Texas Southern, a Historically-Black college in Houston, but he did not want to be that far from home. Then, on a whim, he and a friend decided to drive out to McMurry for a weekend visit.

He liked the atmosphere that existed on-campus, and especially liked the fact that, at McMurry, he would not be "a number," but rather, an "individual."¹⁶⁹ He came from a low-

income family, and he was going to be able to pay for much of his school through grants-and-aid. So, he decided to become an Indian.

Nolly quickly worked his way up, becoming a starter during his sophomore year in 1978, and earning First-Team All-Conference honors in 1979.¹⁷⁰ The six-foot, two-inch, 240-pound guard was a great athlete. He could pull, run-block, and pass-block. He was the only offensive lineman who could routinely get some push against the fearsome pair of LeRoy Duncan and Mark Behrens at practice. Some of his teammates considered him to be the best player on the team.

At McMurry, contrary to the stigmas that surrounded West Texas, Nolly found the opposite of what he had faced at Western Hills. “At McMurry, race wasn’t an issue,” Nolly stated.¹⁷¹ He developed great friendships with some of his fellow African-American teammates, but insisted that he spent just as much time off-the-field with white teammates such as David Davee or Steve Reihmschussel. As a freshman, he would ride home during school breaks with Mark Behrens, another white teammate. McMurry was a place where he did not have to fight to be himself.

The environment at McMurry, combined with his tireless work ethic, had allowed him to succeed and become a leader on the team. Nolly had the potential to be an All-American in 1980, but his mind was on winning. He had spent three years battling for a ring, and he and his teammates finally felt like they could get one. The offensive line was an experienced group, and with Luke Taylor added into the mix, Nolly hoped that the unit was complete: “[Our offensive line] was a well-oiled machine... we came up with our own signals with how we were gonna block... we got along great.”¹⁷²

After claiming their first victory against Sul Ross, Nolly and the Indians ripped off two more wins against Tarleton State and Trinity. With a 3-0 record, McMurry debuted at number-nine in the NAIA Division II Top Twenty poll.¹⁷³ The team was looking two weeks ahead to their match-up with the 1979 TIAA champions, Austin College. It was hard not to. Conversely, their week four opponent, Lubbock Christian, had not scored a single point through their first three games.¹⁷⁴ The Chaparrals were a laughingstock, and the Indians knew that the road to a TIAA title ran through Austin College. Underestimating their opponent, however, could have dire consequences.

The responsibility was on a veteran leader like Nolly to try and refocus the team.

Nolly knew what looking ahead could lead to. Two years prior, in 1978, the Indians were 3-0, and were set to play a hapless Sul Ross team in week four. McMurry was the number-six NAIA Division II team in the nation, and anticipated the match-up with the 1977 conference champions, Tarleton State, in week five.¹⁷⁵ During their lapse of focus, McMurry lost to Sul Ross, 3-0. The loss haunted Coach Aldridge, who remembered the game forever: “[You] remember when you had better teams and you lost... I remember [the 1978 Sul Ross game] like it was yesterday.”¹⁷⁶

It haunted Nolly, too. ““We can’t afford to [look ahead]... I don’t let anybody forget [the 1978 Sul Ross game]. I bring it up at practice every day,” he told the *Abilene Reporter-News*, and added that “People are kinda thinking about Austin College, but we’ve gotta go out and play

LCC.”¹⁷⁷ The team traveled to Lubbock on Friday, September 26, with mature leaders, like Nolly, anxiously hoped to avoid an upset.

Saturday, September 27, 1980. Nolly’s leadership prevailed. A rainy day saved Lubbock Christian. The field was turned into a muddy pool, and the Indians, whose option offense was hurt by the slick conditions, were only able to get a 27-6 win. The score did not indicate what McMurry could have done. Dudley Woodard noted that if had been dry, McMurry would have had a “field day.”¹⁷⁸ Coach Aldridge had little to say besides that he was happy with the win given the circumstances: “When you’re playing where there’s water standing on the field, the ball’s sloppy and you can’t get your footing... man, that’s tough... I’d have been tickled to death with a 3-0 win.”¹⁷⁹

Nolly had a day as well. The lone bright spot on the LCC team had be an All-TIAA defensive linemen, who gave him some trouble in 1979.¹⁸⁰ Nolly might have no longer had to fight off-the-field, but on it, he carried the same mentality he always had: “I was whooping that boy’s ass so much that it looked like I was abusing him... I was unloading it on him.”¹⁸¹ That chip was still on his shoulder—except now, his teammates praised him instead of hating him. His coaches loved him instead of distrusting him. Nolly’s performance and guidance were major factors in the Indians 4-0 start.

Aldridge was extremely pleased with his team’s record. In fact, the Indians had made history: it had not been since 1936 that a McMurry football team had won its first four games.¹⁸² McMurry was leading the TIAA in total offense, and largely thanks to the work of Nolly and his fellow offensive linemen, they were averaging 287.5 rushing yards per game, more than double that of any other team in the conference.¹⁸³ The Indians had outscored their opponents 105-31, and were looking every bit the part of a top-ten team in the nation.

The team had made it out of September unblemished, and that is exactly where they wanted to be going into week five.

But, October was coming—and with it, their toughest opponent yet.

VI

“This [is] no ordinary week on the McMurry campus,” declared Art Lawler. “In plain and simple terms, Saturday’s showdown with Austin College is the biggest football game the school has been involved in since the formation of the TIAA in 1976. In fact, it may be the biggest game ever involving two teams from [the TIAA].”¹⁸⁴

If there was a team that the Indians wanted to beat, it was the Austin College Kangaroos. “They were our nemesis,” a player recalled.¹⁸⁵ To win a TIAA crown, the road ran through Austin College, and the players’ belief in their mission was at an all-time high. “We’re thinking about going all the way [to the national championship]... we think it’s about time that something good started happening to us,” defensive back Horace Robins told the *Abilene-Reporter News* days ahead of the heavyweight bout.¹⁸⁶

Amongst the McMurry coaches the mood was tense. Austin College’s head coach Larry Kramer, a former All-American at the University of Nebraska, had built a fearsome squad in Sherman, and his ‘Roos were 4-0.¹⁸⁷ Tribe Defensive Coordinator Tommy Estes knew the key to victory was “stopping the passing game,” and stressed to his players that it was not as important how many passes the Kangaroos completed, but how many yards they gained from them.¹⁸⁸ The previous week, Austin College quarterback Larry Shillings had thrown for a TIAA-record 290 yards against Tarleton State. Estes and his defense had a tall-task ahead of them.¹⁸⁹

Kramer had also lost some sleep over the upcoming contest. The Indians, he noted, had the water-mark of a Spud Aldridge team: speed. “Their speed is what worries me the most... They’ve got good speed and good coaching,” Kramer said. “We don’t have that kind of speed...

They can break from anywhere on the field. There's not a team in the conference that has the collective speed that McMurry has."¹⁹⁰

The two teams were as evenly-matched, on paper, as one could find. Both were 4-0 against the same four opponents. Both were ranked in the NAIA Division II top-five, with Austin College coming in at second, and McMurry at fifth. The Indians were first in the TIAA in total offense and scoring offense, and second in total defense. The Kangaroos were third in total offense, second in scoring offense, and first in total defense.¹⁹¹ Even the year before could not give a spectator any indication: the schools had split their 1979 games, one-to-one. It was just the kind of football game that a coach dreamed to be a part of but dreaded when it actually came about. The tilt was just too-close-to-call.

It was not just the McMurry players and coaches who were anxiously anticipating the game. Former McMurry football player Randy Stinnett penned a letter to Aldridge on September 29, five days before the game. Stinnett congratulated Aldridge and the team on making it through the first four games unblemished, but added that he and others wanted to see the Indians go farther: "Even though they may not be around, I know that many people will be watching and counting on a victory against Austin College on Saturday..."¹⁹²

Stinnett was not alone. Bill Sudbury, another former McMurry football player and then-coach at Abilene High School, wrote to Aldridge as well, stating:

More people are getting excited and following the Indians instead of the other college across town. The opportunity is coming up to put the Indians in national headlines. Everyone must play against Austin College in the atmosphere of playing for a national championship. The winner of our conference could very well be that champion.¹⁹³

Present and past Indians agreed: this game meant everything.

In 1980, the Indians had something else besides a stalwart defense and an elite rushing attack. The team had “chemistry.” Groups of all kinds—businesses, athletic teams, bands—search for that harmonious feeling, but often find it to be quite elusive. It is not something that can be forced; it simply has to happen, and it was happening for the Tribe.

Coach Aldridge knew the importance of the intangible. “See, people don’t understand about chemistry. Your football team has to have the right chemistry,” Aldridge mused decades later.¹⁹⁴ “They don’t have to be best buddies, but they’ve got to respect one another and have a feeling for one another.”¹⁹⁵ The 1980 team embodied this. Ricky Nolly and LeRoy Duncan, referred to by teammates as “Yogi and Boo-Boo,” were inseparable.¹⁹⁶ Corner-backs Horace Robins and Nate Dyles, who shared the defensive backfield together, were like “oil and water”—but they found a way to gel on the field, and were having great success.¹⁹⁷

Luke Taylor, Mark Wilcoxson and Steve Reimschuessel were so close that they decided to get matching hair-cuts. On the Wednesday before the Tarleton State game, the three offensive linemen decided to come together in a show of unity—by shaving their heads.¹⁹⁸ Wilcoxson said that none of the three wanted to be the one to go first, but that “Finally, Luke just sat down and said ‘Let’s do it.’”¹⁹⁹ Wilcoxson recalled the make-shift barber shop: “We got after [Luke Taylor] with the shears. Then I sat down, and they worked on me. That was before we got the [trimming] attachment. Up ‘til then we just had the bared shears and they kinda grabbed.”²⁰⁰ As for the results, Wilcoxson was brutally-honest: “I looked like I had mange... Luke’s looked OK,

but I had some bald spots. I thought it was a good idea until I looked in the mirror.”²⁰¹ Aldridge, always comedic, told his boys that if they were not the best offensive line in the league, then they would “certainly be the ugliest.”²⁰²

The 1980 squad was working hard, winning, and having fun; which was all the result of that powerful “chemistry.” Although it could not be bought or mandated, it could be grown, and Spud Aldridge was a guru when it came to bringing young men together. It started with his positivity. “[Spud] was always so sincere that everything was going to work out good, and everybody was going to grow up to be healthy and happy,” said Dr. Pug Parris, “He always had a twinkle in his eye, smile on his face, [and] a joke to tell.”²⁰³

That positivity carried over to the football field. In a profession dominated by chiseled-jawed men who berated their players with sentences in which a curse-word could be the noun, verb, and adjective, Aldridge stood out. “Back then, a-lot of coaches were ra-ra coaches, loud coaches, if you screwed up [they would cuss you out],” said kicker David Lynn. “[Coach Aldridge] never cussed.”²⁰⁴ “I don’t think I ever heard him curse,” said Taylor.²⁰⁵ “He didn’t curse... I don’t think I ever remember hearing Spud curse,” recalled Nolly.²⁰⁶ “I never heard him cuss,” John Hotchkin recollected.²⁰⁷ Rather, all of his players viewed him as a motivator; a man who inspired them to dig deeper and give more than they thought they could.

If Aldridge ever found himself in a situation where he was angry enough to let a four-letter word slip out, though, it was one of the worst of them all. At the first team-meeting of each season, Aldridge would go over the program rules with his players—one of which was no cussing. Each year, after the “no cussing” rule had been enumerated, Coach Estes would stand up and say “And crap is not a cuss word!”²⁰⁸ This was because “crap” was Aldridge’s go-to word when he was upset. Players knew they had done something wrong when they heard Aldridge

moan “crap!” He could get creative with it, too: players who just could not figure something out were “crappin’ mullets.”²⁰⁹ On game-day, “crap” was often accompanied with a throw of his ball-cap and the stomping of his feet—a show that players and fans alike found to be entertaining.

Aldridge was different. His positivity was infectious, and he had built a program based on personal relationships with his players. Lynn claimed that Aldridge’s hand-written letters during his recruitment was what sold him on McMurry.²¹⁰ At a time when most college coaches had their secretaries send recruits typed letters, Aldridge wrote:

Dear David,

The McMurry finance office said that you would probably qualify for everything so I am sending you a letter of intent. We sure hope to get you up here to play for us and I believe you would love going to school and playing ball here.

Call me collect at school (915) 692-4130 or at home 915-692-2921 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Spud Aldridge²¹¹

Aldridge wanted the boys he was recruiting to know that they mattered to him; he wanted them to know that they were more than just another number.

Odom remembered that Aldridge had made a three-by-five-inch notecard for every recruit and player currently on the team, and kept them in a file folder.²¹² The notecard had their sizing information, hometowns, and other details. Aldridge could go down the line and list the sizes and hometowns of every player, from memory.²¹³ The notecards were a mere formality; Aldridge was intentional about getting to know his players.

That intentionality meant that the players he coached were more than human pawns that he could use to win games; instead, they were his family. In a profession where so many men, at

the time, chose to motivate their players through fear, he simply loved them. “He was very caring towards his players,” Odom affirmed.²¹⁴ “[His players] knew he loved them,” Frymire said. “[Spud] wanted relationships... [his players] became family.”²¹⁵ She recalled several times when recruits coming from the Houston area had to take a bus up to Abilene, and Aldridge would go and pick them up at any hour of the day—often in the wee hours of the morning. Aldridge did not do it for any reason, insisted Frymire, other than for the simple fact that “from the minute he laid eyes on [a player],” he loved him.²¹⁶

For Aldridge, loving the players was the only way he believed a coach could be successful: “You gotta have a coach that loves the kids, and treats them like they’re his sons. You’re going to put them through a lot of work, you’re gonna jump on to them when they mess up, but they know you love ‘em.”²¹⁷ His players felt that love, and they reciprocated it. “Everybody loved Spud,” insisted Nolly, “Man, we played for him because we loved him.”²¹⁸

The chemistry that existed on that team, then, was largely driven by a coach who had created an environment where it was okay to love one another and have fun. He treated the players like they were his own children—and some of them needed fathers.

One of those players was Red Behrens. John Hotchkin recalled the first time he met “Big Red.” Hotchkin, a freshman in the fall of 1979, was moving his items into his dorm room on the McMurry campus with the help of some of the older football players when he first laid eyes on him: “[Red] came walking up, and he was the biggest human I had ever seen to that point in my

life.”²¹⁹ Hotchkin, a small-town kid from Andrews, Texas, was shocked when the other vets began greeting the giant: “they all said, ‘Hey! Big Red! You’ve lost weight!’”²²⁰

Big Red had indeed trimmed down. When he came in as a freshman in 1977, he was six-foot, 278 pounds. As a sophomore in 1978, he had dropped down to 265. At the start of his junior year, when Hotchkin met him, he was 255. By 1980, as Art Lawler of the *Abilene-Reporter News* noted, Red was an “emaciated” 247 pounds.²²¹ When asked just how he did it, the always-humorous defensive-tackle answered honestly: “I’ve sweated a-lot... stopped eating and drinking so much.”²²²

Red was the life of the team. Pug Parris, who had the cheerful defensive-lineman in class, recalled his demeanor: “Big Red: red hair, red face... [he was] jovial. [He] always had a smile on his face.”²²³ “Everybody loved Mark...,” recalled David Lynn. “[He was] a fun guy.”²²⁴ “His personality [was infectious]... everybody loved Red,” Frymire avowed.²²⁵

He brought joy to a game that was often played and coached by far-too-serious men. As previously noted, during the scrimmage with Abilene Christian at the start of the season, while the second-team defense was on the field, Red could be found sauntering up-and-down the sideline wearing a small Texas Rangers batting helmet over his head. After the Indians had drubbed the Trinity Tigers 42-0 in week three, he went to straight to Art Lawler, who was down in San Antonio covering the game, and made sure he got his credit in the paper: “Don’t forget to put in my three sacks. That’s three,” as he waved three fingers around the journalist.²²⁶

Red may have been a good comedian, but he was an even better football player. After arriving on McMurry’s campus in the fall of 1977, he essentially started every football game he was a part of. Nolly, who was an All-American on the offensive line, knew just how good he

was: “[Red] was tough... the first time I hit Red coming off the ball, it was like hitting a bus... I realized at that point I was going to have to go for my guns to block Big Red.”²²⁷ His accolades reflected his reputation. In 1978, he set the McMurry single-game tackle record, with twenty-four against Tarleton State.²²⁸ In 1979, he was a first-team All-TIAA defensive tackle, and in 1980, he was aiming to be an All-American—but, more importantly, a champion.²²⁹

Yet, despite his breezy nature and success on the field, Behrens had not had the easiest of childhoods. Born Mark Behrens, he was raised in Everman, Texas, a community in South-Fort Worth. “I came from a broken home,” he related.²³⁰ His parents divorced when he was young, and Behrens bounced around from family members to friends. He settled in with his father, who worked long hours for a concrete company. All the time to himself allowed the young Behrens to get into a bit of trouble. He lacked a consistent family structure.

But, he did have football. His freshman year of high school, Bob Blevins, the head coach at Everman High School, sat him down and told him: “You’re either gonna run with [the trouble-makers], or you’re gonna run with us.”²³¹ In that moment, Behrens made the choice to stick the game—and it paid off for him.

Behrens was an all-district defensive linemen for the Everman Bulldogs. He was good enough to have a couple of opportunities to go play at the collegiate level, but had not made his mind up on where he wanted to go. One afternoon, he was in his backyard playing basketball while his father was away at work. Two men walked down the long drive-way and approached him. “I thought they were salesmen,” said Behrens. “I said, ‘Hey, nobody is here.’”²³² The two men ensured Behrens that they had nothing to sell, and introduced themselves as Spud Aldridge and Dwayne Finley. They said that they were football coaches at McMurry College, and they were looking for a kid named Red Behrens.

Aldridge was not sure that he had come to the right place. He had been told that Behrens was All-District, All-Tarrant County, and Honorable Mention All-State. So, he got an address, and he and Coach Finley decided to pay Behrens a visit. They were expecting a fearsome-looking prospect, but found something totally different. “He didn’t look like a football player,” recalled a chuckling Aldridge. “He had a little belly, or a big belly; he had a holey t-shirt on, and was shooting a basketball in the backyard.”²³³ Aldridge had been assured that Behrens was the real deal, but when the two coaches left that afternoon, Finley, who was the line coach at the time, was not convinced. “[Coach Finley] said ‘Coach, you mind if we get some film on him?’ And I said ‘Well, I’ve seen him play, but I know you wanna see if he can play, in your opinion,’” Aldridge recalled.²³⁴

So, the two coaches paid a visit to Coach Blevins at Everman and got the sixteen-millimeter film on Red Behrens and took it back to their motel room in Fort Worth. The rest, according to Aldridge, was history:

We put that film on, and they’re playing Eastern Hills... and Eastern Hills has some football players. Their offensive line probably averaged over 200 pounds in those days. This ol’ tall Eastern Hills quarterback took the ball back to pass, and [Behrens] went right through that offensive tackle like he wasn’t even there. Ol’ Big Red tackled [the Quarterback] for an eight-yard loss. One play on that film and [Coach Finley] said ‘You’re right, he can play.’²³⁵

From that moment forward, Aldridge and Finley stayed on Behrens until they were able to get him to take a visit out to McMurry. “It was a ‘go’ after [my visit],” remembered Behrens. “It was just something I needed in life at that time. [McMurry was] very family-oriented.”²³⁶

In Abilene, Behrens found the family structure that he had missed growing up. After arriving in the fall of 1977, he had grown close with his teammates, and together they had worked towards winning a TIAA championship. He developed an extremely special relationship

with Coach Aldridge and his family.²³⁷ Aldridge recognized a capable young man who needed a bit of help; Behrens was willing to take it. Aldridge's wife, Marilyn, cooked meals for him. Spud talked to him often and stayed on him about his grades. Behrens became close with Spud's children. Frymire noted that Behrens was like a "brother."²³⁸ "I love that family... they were special people," Behrens reminisced. "I say they were like my second family, but they were almost like my first family."²³⁹

Aldridge's investment in Behrens had nothing to do with his ability as a player. It did not hurt, however, that Behrens had turned into one of the Tribe's leaders and was the most feared defensive-tackle in the TIAA. After a strong 4-0 start, Behrens was leading the conference in sacks, and he and his coach had a chance to make history by becoming the first McMurry team to go 5-0—one step closer to the championship they had long-dreamed about.

Austin College was all that stood in the way.

Saturday, October 4, 1980. At 2:00 P.M., the Indians would look to defend their home turf and perfect record against the mighty Kangaroos of Austin College. There was bad-blood between these two teams.

Behrens was ready. He liked to be off by himself before games. Most of the time, he would wander into Old Indian Gym and find legendary McMurry basketball coach Hershel Kimbrell, and the two would sit and talk about "nothing."²⁴⁰ He did not want to be in the middle

of all the hype and all of the noise; instead, he wanted to be off by himself. Yet, this was no ordinary game. This was the biggest one of the season, and maybe that excited him just a bit more than usual.

So, just before kick-off, Behrens called the local radio station that was blaring through the speakers at Indian Stadium, and requested that they play Queen's "Another One Bites The Dust."²⁴¹ The radio station acquiesced, and the song boomed through the metal bleachers in South Abilene. Behrens was ready, and so were the rest of the Indians.

Austin College took the field first on offense. The tough McMurry defense had heard all week about just how great of a passing attack the Kangaroos had. For the first two downs, Austin College went nowhere. On third-down, a busted defensive assignment allowed Austin College's tight-end to catch a pass and get close to a first-down.²⁴² It was extremely close—too close for the officials to tell. So, they called for a measurement. The chains were brought out onto the field, and the answer was finally revealed: the Kangaroo's had gained a first down by a quarter-of-an-inch.²⁴³

On the next play, Behrens lined up in a five-technique, shaded just outside the offensive-tackle, like he had done so many times before. When the ball was snapped, he engaged Austin College's Ty Quick, and stood him up. The ball carrier, Kelly Hyde, disappeared into the interior of the offensive-line. Behrens began to disengage and peak inside, and Hyde disappeared again—which he knew meant that Hyde would quickly be coming back off-tackle. Behrens slung Quick to the ground, and swallowed Hyde. As he was going down, however, his foot was tangled up with Quick, who was still on the ground.²⁴⁴ A pile-up ensued.

As players were slowly peeled off of the pile, “an anxious silence” fell over the McMurry side of the field.²⁴⁵ Coaches, players, and fans dreadfully witnessed Behrens writhing in pain at the bottom. His foot had stuck, and his knee was shredded. “I knew right-off what it was,” said Behrens.²⁴⁶ He was helped off of the field, and many on the sideline and in the stands that afternoon knew what that meant. The echo of “Another One Bites The Dust” seemed more now like a dirge rather than a rallying-cry.

Once the emotional shock of what had just occurred wore-off, the Indians remembered that they still had a game to play. The Tribe was able to get their bearings, and Lester Lavalais punched in a score from nine yards out late in the first quarter. Lynn added on the extra point, making it 7-0 McMurry. With 12:50 left in the second quarter, Austin College responded with a Shillings touchdown pass over Horace Robins, making it 7-7.

Then began “The Great McMurry Give-Away.”²⁴⁷ The Indians drove down to the Austin College thirty yard-line, only for an errant Cox pass to be intercepted by Austin College’s Mark Howeth. The McMurry defense pushed the Kangaroos back, and on third-down from the Austin College twelve yard-line, Indian linebacker Richard Spencer intercepted the ball—and then fumbled it, which Shillings was able to recover. Austin College then began driving again. McMurry defensive-back Nate Dyles intercepted the ball, and was able to hold onto it. The Indian offense was back on the field. It had been a wild sequence, but at 7-7, McMurry had a chance to take the lead before the half.

Two plays later, however, the Indians fumbled again. The Kangaroo offense retook the field. Just before halftime, Shillings rifled another touchdown past Horace Robins—McMurry’s lockdown defender had now allowed two scores in the first half of the game.

The Indians went into the half down by seven points and emotionally-drained. Big Red's injury had hit the team hard. No one wanted to say anything, but a cloud was hanging over the locker room. Aldridge did what he could: he rallied his players and sent them out to win the ball game.

It was a battle. Through most of the third quarter, the teams remained deadlocked at 14-7. Late in the third period, McMurry had forced the Austin College offense into a fourth-down situation. At the McMurry seven, with one yard to go, Coach Larry Kramer opted to go for it instead of kick a field goal. Quarterback Larry Shillings went under center. The Indian defense was piled in to stop what was sure to be a simple dive play. If they could hold, it might generate enough momentum for the offense to go and tie the game. Shillings took the snap and stuck the ball into the running back's stomach—exactly what the Indians had prepared for. Then, in a show of gamesmanship by Kramer, Shillings yanked the ball out, and ran around the left end into the end-zone for a touchdown. He walked in untouched.²⁴⁸ Heading into the fourth quarter, the Kangaroos held a commanding 21-7 lead over the Indians.

The Kangaroos began the fourth quarter with a field goal, extending their lead to 24-7. Aldridge, feeling the most important game of his coaching career slipping away, decided to pull Mark Cox and insert Ricky Sells in at quarterback. Immediately the Indians had life. With 13:35 left to play, Sells found Randy Tarrant for a forty-nine-yard touchdown. Following the Lynn extra-point, the Tribe was now within ten points, 24-14.

The Indian defense dug-deep and got a stop. Sells led the offense back onto the field, but the drive sputtered at the Austin College thirty-one. For the first time in 1980, Aldridge sent David Lynn out to kick a field goal. If he could connect from forty-one yards out, the Indians would be within a touchdown. Lynn lined it up and booted it. The ball went wide-right. On the

ensuing possession, Shillings threw a seventy-one-yard touchdown pass. Austin College led 31-14, and McMurry's shot at a comeback was over.

The game ended. Shock and disappointment reverberated throughout Abilene. The fans were stunned. The players were stunned. The coaches were stunned. 1980 was supposed to be the year of destiny—but during the late-afternoon of October 4, all the Indians felt was despair. Spud Aldridge was at a loss for words, but managed to string together some coach-speak: "Both teams wanted to play, and when both teams come out ready to play, somebody usually wins. These things don't usually end up in a tie. Today, they just played better than we did. We get [Austin College] again... We don't plan to lose any more."²⁴⁹

As the fog of the heart-breaking loss began to fade, the other discouraging outcome from that afternoon began to set in: Big Red was hurt. No one knew yet the severity of his injury, but they did not have to; they could feel it. The dominant player whom lightened every room he entered would no longer be with the Indians. As he was carried off the field toward the McMurry training room, Behrens' pain could be felt with every word he muttered to the *Abilene-Reporter News*'s Bruce Unrue: "I'm not so concerned that I'm going to miss the rest of this game... It bothers me I'm going to have to miss all of this. I've never played on a championship team before."²⁵⁰

Aldridge was asked after the game about Red's condition, and first he answered like a coach: "We lost the best defensive lineman in the conference today... He was having his best year for us and he'll be tough to replace."²⁵¹ Then, he answered like a father: "I feel sorry for Mark. There's not many players around who love to play football more than Red. To a kid who didn't love the game very much, something like this might not matter. But to Red, it matters a lot."²⁵²

The team doctor gave Behrens the diagnosis: he had torn ligaments in his knee, and he would need season-ending surgery immediately. Big Red was interviewed by Robert Vernon of the *Abilene Reporter-News* the next day, and recalled the scene: “I was hoping it wasn’t as bad as I thought it was. Then the doctor told me it loosened up too much. Well I’ve taken enough P.E. classes to know what that means. It’s over.”²⁵³ He then added: “After 12 years, it’s going to be hard to watch from the sidelines... especially when you’ve never won it all.”²⁵⁴ The team’s heart-and-soul was done. Vernon then asked Behrens what his plans for the future were, as if a young man who had just had the truest family he had ever known torn from him could answer that. Yet, he did, and he kept his witty humor:

I’m gonna go ahead and try to get my degree next semester then get out and try to make some money. Maybe in a couple of years I can open my own machine shop or something. I’m getting my degree in physical education, but there’s no money in it right now. Who knows, maybe in a couple of years I’ll get into coaching. Maybe [Tom] Landry needs some help.²⁵⁵

In the immediate future though, Behrens had to recover surgery. The next day, Monday, October 6, he went under for his knee operation. They put him in a large cast, and he went back home to Everman. Red planned to recover from the surgery the only way he knew how: “I’m gonna sit around, eat and get big.”²⁵⁶

Underneath his glibness was an injured kid, who would have to spend the rest of the season at a distance from his teammates and coaches. The season would not be the same for him. For the rest of the Indians, however, there were still five games left to play. If they wanted a chance at redemption, they would have to win-out the rest of the way. It was on them to pick up the pieces and salvage the 1980 season.

VII

Here was the scenario: to have a shot at winning the TIAA title, the Indians would have to win their next four games, and Austin College would have to lose one of their next four. If those two things happened, then when McMurry traveled to Sherman on November 8, they would be playing for the TIAA crown. Winning the next four was within their control, but Austin College losing one was not. That would be up to Fate.

As the Indians began the second-half of their round-robin schedule, Sul Ross was the first opponent on the docket. The Lobos had McMurry against the ropes in week one, and since then they had played everyone else extremely tough: following their loss to the Indians, Sul Ross lost to Austin College 21-13, shut-out Tarleton State 12-0, picked up a win over Lubbock Christian and dropped one to Trinity—a game in which three of their top linemen had been suspended for disciplinary reasons.²⁵⁷

The match with Sul Ross would be a tough game. Although the Indians' and Lobos' respective records indicated disparities, Sul Ross had outscored opponents 111-59 through the first five weeks, compared to McMurry's 119-62. Larry Hill, the Lobos' quarterback, was leading the TIAA in passing yards per game with 164.2, and had thrown eight touchdown passes. Sul Ross was ornery; the Indians were wounded. If the Lobos were going to steal a win, this was the week to do it.

But, McMurry had something to prove.

David Lynn had always had something to prove. He was born in Wichita Falls, Texas, on July 20, 1960. He moved around a bit growing up, but settled in the Dallas suburb of Farmer's Branch. Between his sophomore and junior year, his mother and stepfather decided they wanted to get out of the city, so they bought thirty acres of land out in Lone Oak, Texas—a small town about one hour east of Dallas.

He was a good athlete growing up. He loved sports. The only problem was that he was half-the-size of everyone else. Lynn's older brothers had been baseball players, and from them he learned to catch and throw. When he got old enough to play, he was a catcher, but faced doubt from every opponent: "In t-shirt league, you can't leave first [base] until the ball crosses home plate," explained Lynn.²⁵⁸ "Well, [opponents] would look at me and say, 'There's no way this guy can throw the ball to second base.'"²⁵⁹ Lynn, rather than being bitter, relished the doubt: "I loved that moment. Sure enough, [the runner on first base would] take off, and I'd throw the ball down there—and they'd be halfway between first and second."²⁶⁰

He grew up in a period where the world of athletics demanded that players fit a certain physical description, and was not very tolerant or accepting of those who did not meet the requirements. Lynn almost never met the mark. He did not make the seventh-grade basketball team—entirely, he was told, because he just was not big enough. "Those are the things that motivated me," he recalled, "People telling me I couldn't do things because I was too small."²⁶¹

There was one sport, however, that Lynn was able to play without fear of being cut-out due to his stature: soccer. In his youth, he played with various select organizations and got to

travel around the country. He loved the game and certainly loved being able to play without being doubted for his size.

Lynn naturally drifted away from the sport. Organized soccer in the early-to-mid 1970s was not prominent, and between the start of his high school career and moving out to Lone Oak, he had stopped playing. One day, Lynn showed up to school wearing a soccer jersey. A coach stopped him and asked if he had ever kicked a football before. There were only 135 people at the school, and only thirty in his class, the coach explained—and the team needed a kicker.²⁶² There had not been many times in Lynn's young life in which a coach had asked him to play something, so he decided to go for it.

Lynn enjoyed immediate success. His junior year, the team went 9-1, and just barely missed the playoffs. During his senior year, Lone Oak went 13-1, and lost the Class 2A State Championship game against Wheeler.²⁶³ Lynn had made a name for himself as a pretty good kicker on those teams, and due to Lone Oak's run to a state title game, college coaches were paying more attention to the east-Texas school's football players.

David Lynn had never envisioned himself playing college football, but he began to get some interest from a couple of schools. The University of Colorado-Boulder sent him a letter in the spring of his junior year, but after filling out the questionnaire that was attached, he never heard back from the coaching staff.²⁶⁴ Tarleton State also sent him a letter, but that did not go anywhere.²⁶⁵ After all, Lynn was only 5'6", 140 pounds—not the ideal size any college football coach was looking for.

One day, during the spring of his senior year, an admissions officer from McMurry came out to Lone Oak, and Lynn got more acquainted with the institution. A Methodist preacher that

Lynn spent some time living with that year was an alumnus, and advocated heavily for the school. In addition, David's cousin, Jimmie, was playing linebacker for the Indians.

Lynn decided to pay a visit. At the time, the Indians kicker was Bob Cervetto, and Lynn became acquainted with him. Unbeknownst to Lynn, Cervetto had been tasked by Coach Aldridge to find out if the kid from Lone Oak was any good. "[Cervetto] asked me, 'Hey, you want to go out and kick some footballs while you're here?'" and in the back of my mind, I'm thinking 'Coach [Aldridge] doesn't think I can kick a football very far,'" Lynn remembered.²⁶⁶ He performed well enough to earn Aldridge's approval, and from that point forward, McMurry pursued him like no other school did. Aldridge, as previously noted, wrote to Lynn often to make sure that he knew that he was meant to be an Indian.

The decision was easy. In the fall of 1978, Lynn enrolled at McMurry, and spent two years backing up Cervetto. At the start of the 1979 season, Lynn was playing with the Indians' junior-varsity squad. The first game on their schedule was out in Cisco, Texas, against the Cisco College Rangers. Lynn was given the kick-off duties, and took the field for the opening boot. It was a fine kick, but Cisco's return-man blew by the Indians' first-wave and was steadily advancing towards Lynn. He began to get in position to make a possible tackle, and at that moment his foot went down into a hole in the less-than-well-kept-field. He snapped his right ankle, and right there on a hot, dry field in Cisco, Lynn's 1979 season ended.²⁶⁷

That was not the end of Lynn's misery. As he hobbled off the field, Aldridge greeted him with a "Crap man! Why'd you get yourself hurt on the first play!?"²⁶⁸ As Lynn was getting his ankle examined on the sideline, he was asked to remove his uniform. The third-string kicker, who was in the stands watching the game, was called down to the sideline, and given Lynn's jersey and pants to play the rest of the game in. Lynn watched on as his reserve hit three extra-

points, and his heart sank further—not only was he injured, but his back-up was doing exactly what he should have done that afternoon. “Then we had to take the bus ride back to [Abilene],” recalled Lynn, “Man, that’s only forty miles, [but it felt like] six hours.”²⁶⁹

Lynn recovered, though, and became the Indians’ starting kicker in 1980. Cervetto, an All-TIAA performer in 1979, had graduated, and Lynn was next-in-line.²⁷⁰ His first opportunity to kick came on August 28, when McMurry met ACU at Shotwell Stadium for a scrimmage. Kickers do not usually kick field goals during scrimmages, but that night, the coaches of the respective squads had decided they would. Lynn nailed two thirty-seven yard field goals, and he left Shotwell feeling ready for the TIAA: “The year started off right... That gave me a-lot of confidence.”²⁷¹

During the first game against Sul Ross, Lynn’s extra-point secured an Indian victory, 15-14. Although it was only an extra-point, it was his first game-winning kick in college; he was feeling pretty good about himself. The following Monday, Aldridge approached Lynn and asked, “Is your leg okay? When you kicked [the ball], it just didn’t seem like you kicked it very hard.”²⁷² Lynn, then back-on-earth, realized he would have to do much more to earn Aldridge’s trust.

Lynn tried to do just that, and he kept making extra-points. In fact, his goal at the beginning of the year was to not miss a single extra-point, and through his five games, he was perfect. An impressive feat, for sure—but his missed field goal against Austin College the week before had come at the worst possible time. After the game, quarterback Ricky Sells summed up what many of his teammates were thinking: “I think if we had scored on [the possession that we missed the field goal], we’d have won the game... I really believe that.”²⁷³ Aldridge felt the same

way: “If we’d got that field goal, shoot, we’d only been down a touchdown, and with the way our defense was playing then...”²⁷⁴

Such was the reality of being a kicker. Lynn would be the hero if he made it, and the scape-goat if he missed it—an unfair but age-old standard. Yet, an opportunity for redemption presented itself as the second-half of the season began. Sul Ross was coming to Abilene, and McMurry had a chance to get back on the right track.

And David Lynn had something to prove.

Saturday, October 11, 1980. The Indians and the Lobos began their second match-up at 2:00 P.M. The cooler fall temperatures had finally set in, and the wind at Indian Stadium reminded everyone that they were indeed in West Texas. Sul Ross scored first, with running-back Willie Rodriguez punching one in late in the first quarter, making it 7-0 in favor of the Lobos heading into the second period.²⁷⁵

The Indians responded. Horace Robins, who had allowed two touchdowns in the first-half of the Austin College game, intercepted Lobo quarterback Larry Hill. A few moments later, Mark Cox ran it in from six yards out. Following the Lynn extra-point, the game was knotted at 7-7. Sul Ross was able to add a field-goal just before the end of the second quarter, and once again, the Indians found themselves trailing their I-20 bunkmates at halftime. McMurry would need to come out firing in the third quarter—after all, their season was on-the-line.

The Lobos, however, were not in Abilene to save the Tribe's season; no, they had come to spoil it. Aldridge, who had experimented all year with the two-quarterback system, decided to roll with Ricky Sells in the third quarter. Sells orchestrated a long-drive down to the Sul Ross five-yard line. He dropped back to throw the go-ahead touchdown, but the Sul Ross defense had other plans. Henry Paige, a Lobo defensive back, intercepted Sells' pass. Hill then retook the field and led a sixty-one yard touchdown drive, giving Sul Ross a 17-7 lead going into the fourth quarter. McMurry was not just stumbling—they were sliding toward certain defeat.

Aldridge knew that the fate of the 1980 season rested on the next fifteen minutes. Sells began the fourth quarter, but with 8:44 left to play, Cox was back in the game.²⁷⁶ He quickly led the Indians down to the Sul Ross fifteen yard-line, where he was intercepted. Aldridge's bunch just could not catch a break.

Finally, after the Estes' defense made a crucial stop, the Indians were able to put together a decent drive and get down within the Sul Ross ten yard-line. Cox lined up under center at the eight-yard line, and with 2:54 left on the play-clock, he was able to find Randy Tarrant for a score, cutting the deficit down to 17-13. The two-point conversion attempt failed, but the Indians had life with a little less than three minutes to play.

What occurred in the next 180 seconds was a sequence of events that possibly no one who witnessed the game could have predicted, or ever forget. There was little time left, and Aldridge knew the potent Sul Ross offense could end their championship push if his defense did not play perfectly. So, he gambled—he sent Lynn out to attempt an onside-kick. Every member of the McMurry sideline held their breath. If it worked, it would be the biggest play of 1980. If it failed, the season was essentially over.

Lynn, with the dreams of everyone at Indian Stadium on his leg, came through. The ball was recovered by McMurry's David Spencer at the Sul Ross forty-five yard line.²⁷⁷ The Indians had life. Now, it was on Mark Cox and the offense to find the end-zone.

Cox began the drive with an eleven-yard completion. His next pass was incomplete, but on the third play, Dudley Woodard took a draw down to the Sul Ross thirteen-yard line. It was at that point that the stat-keepers for the game noted on the McMurry play-by-play sheet that Aldridge called a timeout. Joe George, the Sul Ross head coach, also believed that the Indians had called a timeout.²⁷⁸ At the moment, whether Aldridge had or had not did not seem too important—what was for sure was that the clock was stopped.

Cox ran and gained four yards. On second-down, he threw the ball to Woodard, who picked up three more yards. On third-down, Cox pitched the ball to the tough runner, but he only managed two yards.

That made it fourth-down with less than twelve inches remaining to move the chains. Being down by four points, the Indians could not kick a field goal. They were forced to go for it. Lester Lavalais came into the game for Woodard, and Cox handed him the ball. McMurry had run out of breaks. Lavalais was slung down, and the Lobos had just ended the Indians hopes at a comeback.

Or so they believed. As the Lobo offense took the field with 1:00 remaining, George believed his bunch had sealed the deal. It was simply a matter of logistics. McMurry had taken their first timeout on the previous drive. This meant that Aldridge only had two to work with. George's Lobos would run two plays, and McMurry would call two time-outs. Even if those two plays only took off three-seconds apiece before the Indians were able to stop the clock, the

Lobos would be able to run their third-down play with no stoppage. The play-clock was forty seconds long. So, the Lobos would simply take a delay-of-game at that point, and on fourth-down Sul Ross could punt or take a safety—regardless, the Indians would have the ball with just seconds remaining in the game, at which point all they would have time for would be a desperate heave to the end-zone. If the Lobos were lucky enough to get a first-down on any of those plays, of course, the game would be over.

The first two downs went according to plan. Larry Hill slammed into the line-of-scrimmage twice, and twice McMurry called for a timeout. George and his boys were less than sixty seconds away from ending the Indians' TIAA title-run. On third-down, Hill once again crashed into the McMurry defensive front. Now, it would be a waiting-game.

But, Aldridge signaled for a time-out. The referees obliged. George was furious. He protested vehemently.²⁷⁹ He was certain that the Indians had called a timeout earlier in the fourth quarter. The referees said that McMurry had just used their final timeout, and they were not budging.

The entire game, in a split-second, had changed. Now, George was facing fourth-and-long from his own four-yard line with over fifty-seconds remaining—and a stopped clock. Rather than risk a blocked punt, which would allow the Indians to recover the ball in the end-zone for a game-winning touchdown, the Sul Ross tutor decided to take a safety. The Lobos would give the Indians two-points, and then rely on their defense to win the game. The center shot the ball over All-American punter Bernie Weems' head, spotting the Indians two points.²⁸⁰ With fifty-two seconds left, Sul Ross was leading 17-15—and, as was customary after incurring a safety, would have to kick the ball off to the Indians.

Willie Joe took the kickoff twenty-two yards, setting the Indians up at the Sul Ross forty-six yard-line. Cox then found Kat Mays for a twenty-five yard completion, getting the ball down to the Sul Ross twenty-one. After throwing an incomplete pass, Aldridge opted to hand the ball off to Lavalais on a draw, which gained about nine yards. The clock was running. Aldridge, rather shrewdly, asked for a first-down measurement.²⁸¹ With nineteen seconds remaining, the clock was stopped so the chains crew could run onto the field and measure the distance. David Lynn, however, was already on the field.

This was the moment that he had waited for. Really, it was the moment that all kickers wait for. The game was on his back. He had been doubted plenty of times before. He was too small to be playing college football. In fact, he had been considered too small to play anything his whole life. The week before, he had missed a field goal that could have given his team momentum—maybe even could have led to a win against Austin College. He had yet to make a field goal in an official college football game, and this one would be for the win.

None of that mattered, though, to David Lynn. He had trained for this moment. Before each practice, he would warm his leg up out on the “North Forty”, the field located on McMurry’s campus just north of what was then Old Indian Gym. Tommy Estes would watch him, and Lynn felt like he could feel his eyes burning into him every time he kicked.²⁸² Or, maybe Estes was not really paying attention; that was just how Lynn motivated himself. At practice, Aldridge would put his team through various game situations, one of which was having to rush the field-goal unit out onto the field for a last-second kick. The echo of teammates and coaches chanting “Five! Four! Three! Two! One!” reverberated in his mind. He was ready for this moment, and he had something to prove.

As he set up for his kick, Lynn knew the seconds were ticking off. Indian Stadium was silent. The clock was now down to fifteen seconds. Within the next collective deep breath of everyone wearing maroon in Abilene that afternoon, the game would either be won or lost. “As a field goal kicker,” Lynn insisted. “You know whether you made or missed a field goal when you walk to the sideline, because it parts when you miss it, and when you make it, everybody jumps on you.”²⁸³

The ball was snapped with around twelve seconds left. Cox was holding. Lynn’s foot punched the ball. He knew to look to the sideline—they would tell him whether or not he had succeeded. The sea did not part. Instead, there was a tidal wave. Lynn’s teammates swarmed him. He even got a little banged up during the celebration. That did not matter. With ten seconds remaining in the game, the Indians had taken an 18-17 lead over the Lobos, and David Lynn had proven himself.

Sul Ross fumbled the ensuing kick-off, and McMurry had won the football game. Lynn kept his composure while being interviewed after the game: “I knew what the situation was, but I wasn’t getting nervous before the kick... Actually, it wasn’t that difficult of a kick. I should be able to make that. The rest of the team had done its job. It was time for me to do mine.”²⁸⁴ On the inside though, Lynn felt “jubilation.”²⁸⁵ The short kid from a small town was the hero that day: “That was the biggest game I played at McMurry,” said Lynn. “Everybody was so excited and happy.”²⁸⁶

The Indians had needed some breaks, and they had gotten them. Whether McMurry had been allotted an extra timeout was still a mystery. The coaches’ lips were sealed. “It wouldn’t have mattered,” Estes explained to the *Abilene-Reporter News*’ Bill Hart. “[Because] we would

have kicked the field goal with a second or two left instead of ten.”²⁸⁷ Coach Aldridge, who had a slight grin on his face, said: “I don’t keep up with ‘em, that’s the referees’ job.”²⁸⁸

Aldridge had reason to smile. His team was now 5-1, and that was all that he could ask for. McMurry had escaped, however, by the thinnest of margins—and had maybe even been aided by a bit of luck. Austin College had taken care of business that afternoon as well, defeating Lubbock Christian by forty-two points. The Indians had to win their next three, and someone had to beat Austin College.

Or, it would be all for nothing.

VIII

At 5-1, McMurry had no time for distractions. Their next opponent was a tough Tarleton State football team. Although the Texans were just 2-4 through their first six games, Spud Aldridge refused to discount them. “You can just toss out the records when we play,” mused Aldridge. “They play better against us than anybody they’ll play against all year.”²⁸⁹

TSU did have some extra motivation for taking down the Indians. Their head coach, Buddy Fornes, had a connection to the little school on Sayles Boulevard. Fornes had been an all-Texas Conference football player at McMurry during the mid-1950s.²⁹⁰ After his graduation in 1957, Fornes went to Seminole, Texas, where he spent four years as a coach.²⁹¹ In 1961, he returned to McMurry when he accepted a position as backfield coach under former teammate Grant Teaff.

Fornes stayed around, and became the head coach at McMurry in 1966.²⁹² In 1973, after going 27-42 over seven years, Fornes left to become the head football coach at Tarleton State.²⁹³ In 1977, he directed the Texans to a 7-3 TIAA Championship.²⁹⁴ In 1978, his Texans repeated as TIAA champions and made the NAIA playoffs.²⁹⁵ He had built a respectable program in Stephenville.

Yet, the 1980 season had been tough on the Texans. “We coaches are kind of frustrated...,” Fornes told the *Abilene-Reporter News*. “We just don’t know where to look. The kids know that we’re out of the race and we can just let it all hang out now. We’ll just try to beat the best people on our schedule and be a spoiler.”²⁹⁶ Fornes knew his team was not going to win a title, but pride was on the line, and he would certainly have his bunch prepared to give his alma mater everything they could. The Texans could, just maybe, spoil the Indians’ dream season.

Saturday, October, 18, 1980. At 2:00 P.M., McMurry squared off with Tarleton in Stephenville. Early in the second quarter, Nate Dyles delivered a big hit to TSU tight end David Riegel, who fumbled. LeRoy Duncan recovered the loose ball, and Mark Cox led a fifty-one yard-drive capped off by a Dudley Woodard touchdown, making it 7-0 McMurry. With fifty-three seconds to go in the first-half, TSU fumbled again. Dyles, who had been responsible for forcing the first fumble, recovered the ball, and the Indian offense returned to the field. With thirteen seconds to go, Cox threw a touchdown pass to Randy Tarrant. McMurry went into halftime with a commanding 14-0 lead.²⁹⁷

After a quiet third quarter, the Indians began the final period with a bang. The Texans were forced to punt on a fourth-down-and-long from their own seventeen. The ball was snapped, and punter Ronnie Heller bobbled it. Horace Robins came flying off the edge and got a hand on it as it was leaving the punter's foot. McMurry's David Spencer corralled the rolling ball in the end-zone, making it 21-0 with 14:34 left to play.²⁹⁸

The Indians and Texans traded scoreless possessions. Around the middle of the fourth quarter, Cox was able to orchestrate a drive down into Tarleton territory. Lester Lavalais slipped into the end-zone with 5:55 left on the clock, and the game was over. McMurry had defeated the hapless Texans, 28-0.

Fornes had few words after the shut-out loss: "They just lined up and whipped our tails good. I was very, very disappointed in our performance. I don't know what [the problem] is."²⁹⁹ Aldridge, never one to boast, sympathized with the TSU staff, noting that he knew they had to be "frustrated."³⁰⁰ He then took issue with his offense's performance, after the Indians only managed forty-four passing yards: "We thought we could throw it better, but Mark [Cox] was hurrying his passes there early and he didn't hit his receivers... I think we'll keep working on

passing because I know we can throw the ball.”³⁰¹ Sure, the Indians had defeated the Texans, and avoided an upset—but Aldridge knew that it was not their best football. Regardless, a win was a win, and McMurry was 6-1.

While Aldridge and his Indians had been drubbing the Texans that afternoon, a prayer was answered: Sul Ross pulled off an upset victory against Austin College. The Kangaroos were now 6-1. The dream was still alive. If Aldridge could get his bunch to win the next two, then he would be coaching in a conference championship game in three weeks.

Trinity was the next team in the Indians’ way. The Tigers were sitting at 4-3, and Aldridge conceded that they were the “most improved team in the [TIAA].”³⁰² After several early-season losses, Head Coach Gene Norris decided to make a change at the quarterback position, swapping Karl Meisenbach for Bryan Rosenblum.³⁰³ The move paid off, and Trinity had climbed back into a winning record. Norris was also doing something with his offense that few other coaches had caught onto: he was using tight-end Paul Paveglio as what the modern game calls an “H-Back.”³⁰⁴ Paveglio was 6’3”, 215 pounds, and lined up in the backfield, in the slot, and on the line of scrimmage. His versatility made the Tiger offense a headache to defend.

It was more vital, then, that Aldridge’s bunch stayed focused throughout the new week as they prepared for Trinity.

But, this would be no ordinary week.

Homecoming at McMurry was not just an event—it was a celebration. The entire fall semester, like an orchestra building to a crescendo, was leading to the sacred week. At some small institutions, homecoming was not that big of a deal; at McMurry College, homecoming was everything.

At the center of it all, though, was a symbol that gave every tradition a unique flare: the Indian mascot. James Winford Hunt, the school's founder and first president, had spent some of his youth on a Native American reservation. So, when it came time to choose the school's mascot, it was decided that they would be the Indians.

Fifty-seven years later, it was evident that the school had bought into the icon wholesale. The Indian name was found on all kinds of apparel. The athlete's letter-jackets donned a patch depicting a Native American wearing a traditional headdress. The school newspaper was called *The War Whoop*. The annual yearbook was christened *The Totem*. Every sports team was often referred to, in the plural-sense, as "the Tribe." Even Indian Stadium, which already bore the mascot in its name, reminded all with its' big black letters under the press box on the home side of the field that spelled out "The Reservation." Pug Parris, who had been the first female captain of the cheer team during her time as a student at McMurry, explained just how powerful the symbol was: "[I loved] the Indian motif... [the cheerleaders] had fringe Indian leather vests; maroon leather with white trim. It was so cool. It really was."³⁰⁵

Many of those who had been a part of the rich tradition at McMurry College took a great deal of pride in the school's mascot. Whereas so many institutions had chosen to be represented by a four-legged-animal, the little Methodist school in West Texas had elected to be different—and its students, faculty and alumni appreciated that. "[That's] who we really were. We were the Indians," said John Hotchkin.³⁰⁶ David Lynn agreed: "The Indian connection... was special. It

was ingrained in everything.”³⁰⁷ “[The Indian symbol] was a very big deal,” concurred Mark Odom, the 1980 team’s equipment manager.³⁰⁸

The Indian connection was most present in the McMurry homecoming tradition. First, there was Tipi Village. During the week leading up to the homecoming game, each social club would construct a Native American Tipi in Wah Wahtaysee Park. All of the Tipis would be open for the public to view on that Friday, and would remain up through Sunday.³⁰⁹ Second, on the Friday night of homecoming week, there was the crowning of campus royalty, with prestigious titles such as “Reservation Princess” and “Chief McMurry,” followed by the campus bonfire.³¹⁰ Third, on the day of the game, mothers, girlfriends, or wives would line up on the field with their football player and adorn his face with Native American war paint.³¹¹ Homecoming simply captured the Indian essence.

Those traditions were a major part of what drew so many people to the little school on the chosen week each fall. In 1980, to accommodate the large amount of alumni and locals who were interested in the festivities on-campus, the administration had to block off parking zones. Students were asked to not park around Wah Wahtaysee, or between the Band Hall and Iris Graham Dining Hall.³¹²

The entire student-body was quite invested in the events. The superlatives given out just prior to the bonfire on Friday evening were highly sought-after. In 1980, Kevin Kirby and Mike Schafer were the two nominees for “Chief McMurry,” and Trendy Sharp and Allison Tuttle were competing for “Reservation Princess.”³¹³ Dozens more were nominated for freshman, sophomore, and junior class favorites. Possibly even more important, though, was finding a date to the dance on Saturday evening. In an anonymous article found in the October 23 edition of the *War Whoop* titled “Weekend Date,” a McMurry student prayed that, among other things, they

would find a partner to accompany them: “Dear God, well another week has come and gone. Help me make it through another week’s worth of classes and studying. And God, could you work it so that I’ll have a date this weekend? Amen.”³¹⁴

The McMurry Homecoming tradition was one like no other. The entire campus came alive—simply put, it was fun. The issue, though, was that it might have just been a little too much fun.

The festivities began on Thursday, October 23, as Aldridge and his Indians continued preparing for their bout with the Trinity Tigers. The entire student-body kicked off homecoming with the annual “Sunset Ceremony” in Wah Wahtaysee, which ended with the student-body president shooting the commencement arrow. As soon as the arrow hit the ground, the social clubs were allowed to begin building their tipis. While that was taking place, the “Alumni Artists of Distinction” were celebrated at the Ryan Fine Arts building in the southeast corner of the campus.³¹⁵

At 9:00 P.M. that evening, students, faculty, and staff gathered in front of the United Methodist Campus Center, which had been opened just a year prior in the fall of 1979. Onlookers, if unfamiliar with the tradition, might have thought that the excited bunch was about to partake in some sort of cultish ritual. Instead, it was just the annual “Torchlight Pep Rally,” where students marched across campus—with torches. *The War Whoop*, which was indeed the voice for the student-body, stressed that: “Many students claim the rally as the most electrifying

and inspiring event of the weekend.”³¹⁶ The students did not have to worry about staying out too late. In observation of homecoming, school was canceled on Friday.

The energy just kept building. The following morning at 9:30 A.M., Tipi Village opened for spectators. School children from local elementary schools, alumni, and others flooded the northeast corner of McMurry College to see the structures. At noon, the Presidential Dining Room in the Campus Center opened its’ doors for the “Golden Anniversary Luncheon,” which celebrated the class of 1930.³¹⁷

As midday turned into afternoon, the Alumni Family Golf Tournament got underway over at the Abilene Country Club, and would last until 6:00 P.M. For those who fancied something a bit more fast-paced, the Alumni Tennis Tournament was being hosted at Abilene Cooper High School at the exact same time. Later that evening, campus royalty was crowned in Radford Auditorium—perhaps the most well-known building on the McMurry campus. Trendy Sharp, a secondary education major from Abilene, walked away with “Reservation Princess,” while Kevin Kirby, a religion and psychology major from Hays, Kansas, was crowned “Chief McMurry.”³¹⁸

After all the titles had been awarded, McMurry’s president, Dr. Thomas Kim, began the customary “beating of the drum.”³¹⁹ Kim rhythmically pounded the barrel with the familiar cadence: “bum-bum-bum-bum.” McMurry’s longest-serving president then moved to the other side and kept the beat going, as the next person stepped up to match the pace.³²⁰ This cycle would continue until the first Indian touchdown during the game the following afternoon.

At 9:00 P.M., the bonfire was lit in Wah Wahtaysee. Aldridge and all his players were present. The flame blazed and illuminated the tipis that surrounded them. Traditions like that

were what made McMurry so unique—they were part of the story of the school. Everyone, but especially, the football team, drew strength from the ritual. In fact, from 1953 to 1964, McMurry amassed twelve straight homecoming victories.³²¹ The boys wanted to win the homecoming game. They wanted to give the alumni something to be proud of. That evening, they were Indians preparing for a game, and as they looked around through embers and rising smoke, they knew that they were not alone—with them would be all of the Indians that had come before, and the strong traditions that bound them.

All throughout the night, over in Tipi Village, the drum kept beating. The echo, some have claimed, could be heard through all of south Abilene. Maybe that same echo reverberated through the nearby hotel the Tigers were staying at, reminding them of what was to come the next day.

Saturday, October 25, 1980. The morning came and went. Kick-off inched closer and closer, and the anticipation built higher and higher. At 1:15 P.M., the players took the field with their mothers, wives, and girlfriends. After the ladies finished, every player had the face of a Native American brave ready to go to battle.

As Trinity took the field for warm-ups that afternoon, they witnessed the full might of the McMurry tradition. Alumni packed the stands of Indian Stadium chanting “Ala Cumba!” (On to Victory!)—with “The Reservation” beaming overhead. The Indian players glared at them with

faces full of war paint. The drum beat cut like a knife through all of the commotion, and its' eerily consistent cadence likely clogged the mind of every Tiger that afternoon.

Despite the powerful atmosphere, McMurry did not get off to the explosive start that they had hoped for. Late in the first quarter, the Indians were deep in Trinity territory. From the six-yard line, Cox gave the ball to Dudley Woodard, the TIAA's leading rusher. Woodard, who had to miss three practices that week after having a tooth extracted, fumbled, which was subsequently recovered by Trinity's Doug Kohnke.³²² After holding the Trinity offense scoreless, Cox and the Indians retook the field, and this time managed to drive down to the Tiger seventeen-yard line. Cox took the snap and fed the ball to Lester Lavalais, who gained seven yards—and then fumbled. Trinity recovered it, and their offense was able to string together a productive drive, which ended in a twenty-six-yard field goal. The Tigers led 3-0 early in the second quarter.³²³

The Indians, after some early woes, were finally able to get on the scoreboard. Woodard began the seventeen-play drive with runs of ten and eight yards, and after Cox found Randy Tarrant for gains of thirteen and eleven yards, the Tribe was in striking distance. Finally, on fourth-down-and-goal from the two-yard line, Lavalais barreled into the end-zone. It had not been pretty, but the Indians went into halftime with a 7-3 lead over the Tigers.³²⁴

What exactly Spud Aldridge told his team at halftime is a mystery, but it worked. Trinity started off the second-half with a decent drive. On fourth-down-and-three from the McMurry twenty-nine yard-line, Nate Dyles came up and blasted running back Ken Sykes, forcing a turnover-on-downs. From then on, the Indians had a field day. The offensive line, led by Taylor and Nolly, absolutely dominated. With their help, Cox directed a ten-play, sixty-nine yard drive,

capped off by another Lavalais touchdown, this time from three yards out. McMurry led 14-3 in the third period.³²⁵

The Indian defense got another stop, allowing Cox and his cohorts to retake the field. A clipping penalty pushed McMurry back to a first-and-thirty from their own fourteen-yard line, but that was of no concern to the Indians. Cox threw a screen pass to Woodard, who weaved in-and-out of Trinity defenders before being dragged down at the McMurry forty-nine. Four plays later, Woodard, who had to hold an icepack up against his face on the sideline to keep the swelling in his mouth down, took off for a thirty-six yard touchdown. The Indians had now taken a 21-3 lead heading into the fourth quarter.³²⁶

After Trinity punted the ball back to the Indians, Cox, working from his own twelve-yard line, burst for a sixty-six yard run on an option keeper. He was caught by Trinity linebacker Richard Williams at the Tiger fifteen-yard line. "I think old age set in there at about the [Trinity] thirty-yard line," the Indians' quarterback told reporters after the game. "I saw it open up and I thought I'd score. I didn't know they had anybody fast back there." Two plays later, Woodard found the end-zone after a pitch from Cox. Following the Lynn extra point, McMurry held a 28-3 lead with 14:23 left to play.³²⁷

Aldridge emptied the benches. On both sides of the ball, backups were in the game. For good measure, Lynn tacked on a forty-two yard field-goal with about four minutes left to play. Trinity was able to manage one more touchdown against the second-team defense before time ran out, but it might as well have not counted. The Indians were victorious, 31-10.³²⁸

McMurry had amassed 469 yards of total offense, 376 of those coming on the ground. The offensive line had simply dominated. "[McMurry's offensive line] was the difference," said

Trinity Head Coach Gene Norris. “They just whipped us... After a while, our defensive line just gave out and they were running right through us.”³²⁹ Luke Taylor agreed: “Our offensive line whipped ‘em all day. Then our second team got in and whipped ‘em, too. Sometimes we were pinning [Trinity defenders] on their backs.”³³⁰

Woodard, who had run for 137 yards and two touchdowns that afternoon, was just glad the game was over. “I got tired... I was out of shape... I’m not gonna miss practice next week no matter how much I hurt,” the TIAA’s leading rusher asserted to reporters after the game.³³¹ Aldridge, standing next to his exhausted running-back, joked that if Woodard played like that whenever he had a tooth pulled, “[the coaches] may just have one pulled every week.”³³²

Aldridge was not satisfied, but the win would suffice: “I really think if we hadn’t had those two fumbles we’d have gone into halftime with at least a 14-0 lead... But we came out and executed real well in the second half. It just took a little longer for our offense to come around today.”³³³ At 7-1, only one more game stood between his boys and the rematch with Austin College—a game in which the Indians would not be able to start slow.

The high of a homecoming win gave the Tribe that much more confidence that they could beat the Kangaroos. The belief was not just internal, however. Norris, whose team had been beaten badly by the Indians that afternoon, thought his bunch had just lost to the inevitable champions: “I’ve been telling people all along that McMurry’s the best team in the conference, and if they don’t go in there [in a couple of weeks] and beat Austin College, they ought to string Spud up by his thumb. No, don’t put that in the paper. I’m just kidding. But I do think McMurry’s the best team in the conference.”³³⁴

That evening, alumni gathered in the campus center for a meal and some entertainment. The students ended the long week with a dance. Some students from Hardin-Simmons and Abilene Christian even snuck in as well.³³⁵ Homecoming, easily the most sacred custom on the McMurry campus, had gone pretty well in 1980. For one week, people of all ages had come together, unified by one commonality—they were all McMurry College Indians. The energy from the week would, hopefully, carry the Indians through their next game and into a championship bout with Austin College.

Although homecoming was over, the identity that it celebrated would continue to endure—for the time being.

IX

McMurry had battled through eight weeks, and the only opponent left standing between the Indians and the Kangaroos was a pitiful Lubbock Christian squad. The Chaparrals, who stood at 0-8 and had been outscored 305-9, were racing towards a winless 1980 season.³³⁶ In two years of TIAA play, LCC had yet to win a conference game.

The Indians, on the other hand, were ranked as the fifth-best team in NAIA Division II.³³⁷ They boasted the TIAA's top offense and top scoring defense. In every sense of the word, this game was a mismatch. The challenge, once again, was to not overlook the Chaps, and instead stay focused—to take care of this game before worrying about Austin College.

In order to try and ensure good attendance for the contest, which was sure to be a shoo-in victory for the Indians, the McMurry Athletic Department decided to make admission free.³³⁸ “We hate to impose on anybody, but [fans] have to buy their own cokes and hot dogs,” joked Athletic Director Johnnie Ray, who drew the line at free tickets.³³⁹ Nonetheless, folks interested in watching a college football team that was ranked amongst the best in the nation would get to do so, free of charge.

For the players, it had been a long and grueling season. Week-in-and-week-out, their bodies took a beating, and after eight games, all of them were growing weary. Such is the life of a college football player. What kept them going, of course, was the prospect of winning a championship.

It was not just the players, though, who had to grind through the tough schedule. The coaches ached just as much, if not more than, the players. They worked long hours during the

week, regularly staying up at the fieldhouse until the latest parts of the evening, and missed valuable time with their families—and at McMurry, the situation for coaches was especially challenging.

For starters, they were not paid much. As one might have guessed, the McMurry College Athletic Department was not rolling in cash, and the salaries for coaches were modest at best. Secondly, there were not many of them: Spud Aldridge, Tommy Estes, and Don Eiland handled over one-hundred young men—a feat that was incredible in 1980 and seems even more incredible now. Third, almost all of them coached multiple sports or taught classes, something that a modern college football coach would scoff at. Estes coached golf and track.³⁴⁰ Aldridge taught a bowling class.³⁴¹ Fourth, because of the three factors listed, many of the coaches were McMurry alumni, the only people who were willing to be underpaid and undermanned. Hershel Kimbrell, who from 1989 to 2021 was the school's winningest coach across all sports, as well as the aforementioned Grant Teaff and Buddy Fornes, were all alumni.³⁴²

Spud Aldridge, too, was an alumnus. Being the head football coach at McMurry was not an easy task. He had to do more with less. He had to sacrifice precious time with his wife and children. Yet, he did. He was an accomplished coach on the verge of winning a title. What motivated him was a pure and child-like love of the game and for the little school that had given so much to him. He felt as though the least he could do was try to give back.

Jessie William Aldridge, Jr., was born on May 12, 1933, on a ranch in South Taylor County. The oldest of five, Aldridge and his siblings rode horses, played games, and worked together. His cousins gave him the nickname “Spud.” “I couldn’t have asked for a better childhood,” Aldridge stated. “There was never a dull moment.”³⁴³

The bigger towns of Abilene, Coleman, and Winters were twenty-five miles away from the ranch, so Aldridge went to school in Lawn—a classic Texas small-town with a population of just over 300 people. At Lawn, Aldridge played everything with a ball. Football, in particular though, was his true passion. The only problem was his size. “I love football. I wasn’t very big, I wasn’t very fast, but I love football,” said Aldridge.³⁴⁴

He was the salutatorian of the Lawn High School Class of 1950, and when it came time to decide where he would be attending college, the choice was pretty much made for him. “My grandma, my mother’s mother, she was a little old diehard Methodist. She wanted me at McMurry,” Aldridge explained. “She had a lot of interest in me going to McMurry.”³⁴⁵ In the fall of 1950, he stepped foot onto the McMurry College campus, and began a love affair that would last a lifetime.

He had wanted to play football in college, but after a flood of veterans returned from overseas, there was no room for him. Despite the initial disappointment, Aldridge realized he had found a place where he was genuinely cared for. An interaction with Jeannie Tate, a legendary McMurry College professor, revealed to Aldridge just how distinctive the institution was:

I took a trigonometry class at McMurry, and I had never taken that. I wasn’t dumb, but I didn’t know anything about math. My math teacher at McMurry was Jeannie Tate. She told me, ‘Mr. Aldridge, you are not failing this trigonometry class.’ I said, ‘I think I am!’ She said, ‘You are not failing. I will not let you fail... you can meet with me, and I’m going to teach you. You are going to pass this course.’ That happens at McMurry.³⁴⁶

Simply put, McMurry College loved Aldridge, and he loved it just as much. He hoped that maybe one day, long after he graduated, he would get to return in some capacity.

In 1954, just before his graduation, he had to serve two years in the military. Stationed in Fort Clayton, Panama, he was in the Inter American Geodetic Survey (IAGS) Unit, which made maps of Central America, and the Greater and Lesser Antilles.³⁴⁷ He then returned in 1956, and acquired his Bachelor's Degree. He knew he wanted to become a coach, because athletics had always been his passion, but he did not really know how to accomplish that goal. He immediately began working on a graduate degree when a life-changing opportunity fell into his lap.

The superintendent at Wall High School, located about ninety-six miles south of McMurry, came to Abilene on a mission: finding a head football coach. He knew there were three colleges in Abilene, and surely there was some young graduate in need of work. Jerome Vannoy, who at one time had been a coach at McMurry and was currently working in the Registrar Office, knew that Aldridge wanted to get into teaching and coaching, and told the superintendent that he had a man for the job. "Jerome Vannoy told a fib," recalled Aldridge, "because he stole that old superintendent and said 'I got a good one lined up. He will be a good one.' [Vannoy] just knew I was gonna coach, he had no idea how good I'd be. He cared for me for some reason, I don't know why... he had no idea how good I'd be—I had no idea how good I'd be."³⁴⁸ The rest, as has been said many times, was history: "So [the Wall superintendent] looked me up while I was back on the ranch in Lawn. He came to the ranch to talk to me, and hired me that night. Twenty-three years-old, single, not a day of coaching experience."³⁴⁹

At the youthful age of twenty-three, Aldridge was a head football coach. It was an eye-opening experience for the boy from Lawn. Obviously, he had to learn how to coach—but that

came easily, because Spud Aldridge was a natural. In the fall of 1956, the Hawks went 4-6, and the following year Aldridge churned out a winning record, finishing the 1957 season 7-3.³⁵⁰

In 1958, Aldridge left Wall—with more coaching and life experience than he had arrived with—and went to Clyde High School as Offensive Coordinator and Head Boys' Basketball Coach.³⁵¹ It was in Clyde, with the help of an international dilemma, that Aldridge truly became a coach.

He had envisioned himself merely calling the offensive plays in that little town just east of Abilene. In fact, it was an opportunity that he relished after going through the growing pains of being a first-time head coach in just his early-twenties. So, for three seasons, he was happy as could be as the Bulldogs offensive coordinator. Then, in August of 1961, everything changed.

On August 13, half-a-world away from West Texas, Soviet Union and East German military forces began closing the border between East and West Berlin. Tensions, which were already incredibly high during the thick of the Cold War, got that much higher, and now what many had feared for decades was on the verge of coming to fruition—a war with the U.S.S.R.³⁵² In response, on August 30, 1961, U.S. President John F. Kennedy mobilized 148,000 Guardsmen and Reservists to active duty.³⁵³

Thus, almost overnight, every coach at Clyde High School besides Spud Aldridge and one other was called into service. The school year was just getting underway, and so was the 1961 football season—and in Texas, not even a coaching shortage caused by a possible world war could lead to the cancellation of the high school football season. Clyde was going to play in the fall of 1961, and someone had to lead them. That someone was Spud Aldridge. Just like that, he was once again a head coach.³⁵⁴

The job was not an easy one. The Bulldogs had lost eighteen seniors the previous year, and with the coaching shake-up just before the kickoff of the 1961 season, expectations were low. Yet, the young coach who had come from Wall with his thick glasses was up to the challenge. Under his tutelage, Clyde went 9-1, losing to the mighty Albany Lions in the district championship game—who went on to win the 1961 Class-A State Championship.³⁵⁵³⁵⁶

That was not the extent of Aldridge's duties in 1961, however. He and the other coach handled all the sports teams in Clyde from seventh through twelfth grade, boys and girls. How they did it is a mystery, but Aldridge learned how to coach. Almost two decades before he had the Indians knocking on the door of a TIAA Championship, Spud Aldridge was twenty miles east in a cold, dark gym teaching middle-school kids how to shoot a basketball—and he loved every second of it.

In 1962, the Bulldogs were 8-2.³⁵⁷ After resuming his role as an assistant coach in 1963, Aldridge decided to take the position as Head Football Coach and principal at Three Way High School, located about thirty-two miles south of Muleshoe and seventy miles west of Lubbock in Bailey County. It was a great opportunity for his young family: he would get principal's pay, coach's pay, and the school district would let him drive the bus in the morning.³⁵⁸ There was never a role that Spud Aldridge was too good for; that is what made him so different.

In 1964 and 1965, his teams went 10-1 and 6-4, respectively.³⁵⁹ Success seemed to just follow Aldridge. He loved kids. He loved the places he coached. He loved God. He loved the game of football. It was a pretty simple formula, really. But, his success never made him lose perspective. He was always learning, and in his third season at Three Way, he learned a special lesson about the power of the game.

In 1966, his squad, who was picked to finish fifth in their district, had to play Cotton Center, who was predicted to finish first.³⁶⁰ He had a young team, and Aldridge, who was always honest, did not know if his boys could compete. What he saw that evening, though, convinced him that a united team with a strong, supportive community could accomplish almost anything:

We had to play [Cotton Center] at their place. And those people, they turn out for football. West Texas people, I mean, they shut a town down... All the fans from Three Way were at Cotton Center, they had our visitor side packed... We were picked to get beat by the *Lubbock-Avalanche Journal* by 2-3 touchdowns... Our kids are playing all seniors, and they know they're picked [to lose] ... we battled, oh my gosh... we were ahead five points. We finally had to punt, we were at our own thirty yard-line... well, they decided, with about three and a half minutes to go in the game, to play, and we couldn't stop them... we were fighting our hearts out... The men in the stands were all on the sideline, close to the field, some of 'em' begging, praying... [Cotton Center was] taking that ball down the field, and we couldn't stop them. They had taken up all that three minutes. They get inside the ten yard-line, and had a first and goal on the eight yard-line. They ran four plays, and couldn't score. It was amazing.³⁶¹

He was shocked, and extremely proud of his team. More than that, he was touched by the belief of the community in the Three Way Braves, and it helped him realize just how important football was in bringing people together. He already had a love for the game, but on that autumn evening the future head football coach at McMurry College came to understand something deeper—football was family; football was love.

His team's performance was good enough to earn Aldridge South Plains Coach of The Year in 1966. He left Three Way in 1967, and went to Mount Pleasant High School in East Texas as the Tigers' Offensive Coordinator. Mount Pleasant was a much bigger school at the time, and he thought it was a career move—but he quickly realized that he should have never left Three Way High School. The Tigers suffered through a 0-10 season, the first winless fall of his coaching career. "[Going to Mount Pleasant] was the biggest mistake I ever made coaching," Aldridge lamented. "I thought I had to go big-time."³⁶²

In 1968, Aldridge assumed the role of head coach at the high school in Cooper, Texas, about an hour west of Mount Pleasant. Once again, he found a way to produce a winner. Under his watch, the Bulldogs were 6-3-1.³⁶³ He had been coaching for a total of thirteen years, and in eight years as a head coach his record was an impressive 57-23. At thirty-five years old, the boy who had been told he was too small to play the game he loved had turned out to be an outstanding coach. He had strengthened his passion for the game and had seen just how powerful it could be. He seemed to be on his way up through the Texas high school coaching ranks—but, then again, Spud Aldridge had never been one for convention.

So, he decided to return to Abilene to become a junior high football coach. Under his tutelage, the Jefferson Junior High Coyotes went 9-0 in 1970, and in his four years at the school, Aldridge notched total of twenty-five wins and suffered just eleven losses.³⁶⁴ Spud Aldridge was simply a winner—put him anywhere, and he would find a way to win.

Thus, it actually made perfect sense why in 1974 McMurry Athletic Director Hershel Kimbrell went to one of the local middle-schools to help spark a struggling Indian offense. Aldridge, who had never really entertained the idea of being a college football coach, knew that he had a decision to make. He could either get back into the high school game, or he could take on a massive challenge at McMurry College, where he would be underpaid and overworked.

Like so many that had come before him, Aldridge heeded the call. His heart lay at the corner Sayles and South Fourteenth, and he could not help but return to the school that had given him the opportunity to embark on the journey he had been on so far. It was nearly two decades prior that Jerome Vannoy had told that Wall Superintendent about a young kid named Spud Aldridge—now that young kid was a man, and he was determined to help McMurry get over the hump.

Aldridge and learned a lot in his eighteen years as a coach, and he had forgotten some things too. Yet one thing that had always stuck with him was the intense pride that he took in being an Indian and wearing the maroon and white. So, he took his knowledge and combined it with a love for his alma mater, and immediately began producing. Few could understand what Aldridge and others found at McMurry College. To outsiders, it was an unimpressive campus and working there seemed to be a constant battle for help, funding, and time. But to those on the inside, McMurry was home.

Six years later, Spud Aldridge was the head football coach, and his boys were 7-1. As the team prepared for Lubbock Christian, their minds drifted into the following week, where their chance at a championship would be waiting in Sherman, Texas.

Aldridge, trying to keep his bunch focused on the Chaparrals, could not help but let his mind wander into next week too. After all, it was not just about this season. It was about nearly the past quarter-century of his life—the memories he had made, the lives he had touched, and the school he had fallen in love with.

He was coaching for much more than just 1980.

Saturday, November 1, 1980. The Chaparrals never stood a chance. The game began with McMurry linebacker Armando Morales leveling the Chaps' quarterback, causing the ball to hit

the turf, and LeRoy Duncan recovering the fumble in the end-zone for six points. The Indians, to ensure a victory, added fifty-two more.³⁶⁵

The 59-0 win was the largest margin of victory in the TIAA's history.³⁶⁶ McMurry's 537 yards of total offense was just twenty-seven yards shy of the school record.³⁶⁷ David Lynn set a TIAA record with eight extra-points, which brought him to thirty-two total on the year, also a school and conference record.³⁶⁸ Quarterback Mark Cox, who had been up-and-down as a starter, had played well—and had his finger bitten by an LCC player. “[LCC] played dirty,” Cox said, “but we didn’t lose our poise. That’s to our advantage.”³⁶⁹ Overall, it was a solid day to be an Indian.

Aldridge would have preferred a closer game to get ready for the Kangaroos. “We didn’t play our first unit after the first drive of the second half and we didn’t work some phases we needed to get ready for Austin College,” explained the McMurry tutor to the *Abilene-Reporter News*’ Bill Hart.³⁷⁰ Regardless, the Indians had won the game, and won big.

Late in the afternoon of November 1, everyone wearing maroon quickly forgot about the demolition of Lubbock Christian and fixed their hearts and minds on what was upon them.

It was championship week.

X

“Any kid who can’t get ready for this one shouldn’t be playing football,” quipped Austin College Head Coach Larry Kramer.³⁷¹ “Everybody will be ready,” said Spud Aldridge, “We have some guys with some bumps and bruises, but they’ll have to play with pain in this one.”³⁷² Art Lawler, who had spent the past three months closely covering the Indians, claimed that the “biggest of all McMurry football games” was in Sherman on Saturday, November 8, 1980.³⁷³

It was indeed the game of all games. Both teams were 8-1 and nationally ranked. The victor would not only be the TIAA champion, but would also almost certainly secure an invite to the NAIA Division II playoffs.

The Indians had done what they needed to do. They had battled to secure wins in their previous four games, and had put themselves in a position to swing for the trophy. McMurry had needed Austin College to lose one of their four—and, thanks to the Sul Ross State Lobos, the Indians’ wish had come true.

The Sul Ross game had also revealed a specific weakness in the Kangaroos. Austin College had begun the season with a dominating defense. They were elite in every statistical category—even McMurry, who had the best offense in the TIAA, was only able to manage fourteen points. So, it came as a shock when the Lobos beat Austin College 40-34—and questions quickly arose as to how Sul Ross had had that kind of offensive success against a team with as good of a defense as anyone in the nation.

When checking the box score to the game, the answer was obvious. Larry Hill, the TIAA’s leading passer, had thrown for nearly 300 yards in the shootout. Not only had the Lobos

done the Indians a massive favor by keeping their championship hopes alive, but they had also revealed to Aldridge and his staff that the Kangaroos struggled to defend the pass. Kramer, when speaking with the *Abilene Reporter-News* during the week leading up to the game, did not try and hide the truth: “Yeah, we’ve been having some trouble with the pass.”³⁷⁴

Aldridge, for his part, tried to keep a poker face: “I still think we can run on [Austin College]... I feel if we have to drop back and throw on ‘em 30 or 35 times, I think we’ll get beat because we’re doing something we’re not used to.”³⁷⁵ Yet, he knew that the Kangaroos had a chink in their armor. He watched the film. He mulled over his options. Sure, he loved his run-heavy offense.

But he had a championship to win.

To say there was pressure on Spud Aldridge would be an understatement. During the Lubbock Christian game, which was days before the 1980 presidential election, flyers were distributed in the stands that said: “Why have Carter? Why have Reagan? Why have Anderson... When you can have Aldridge?”³⁷⁶ His face was printed onto them, and just below his picture were the underlined words: “Aldridge for President.”

The McMurry Booster Club, whom Aldridge met with each week, planned a bus trip to the game in Sherman. “Our club feels that this may be McMurry’s biggest game ever and we want to give as many fans as possible the opportunity to attend,” said President David Nelson. “It

has been a great season for Indian fans and we think this bus trip would be a fine way to close out the regular season.”³⁷⁷ The expectation, of course, was that Aldridge would produce a win.

During the pep rally on Friday ahead of the game with Lubbock Christian, the team walked in with signs that donned phrases like: “Vote for a winner! Vote for Aldridge!” and “Spud for president—a proven success.” “So who did you vote for, Jimmy, Johnnie or Ronnie? According to McMurry supporters any of the above choices could prove to be disastrous,” wrote Art Lawler, after observing the scene. “The only logical choice, to hear them tell it, is Spud Aldridge.”³⁷⁸

The expectations were sky-high. The kids put Aldridge on a pedestal. The fans were counting on him. The players were counting on him. The community was counting on him. Whether or not he desired it, the spotlight was on him. The hopes and dreams of so many were on his back.

What comes with great expectations, naturally, is great cynicism as well. “Well maybe, maybe not,” continued Lawler. “Statistics will show [that Aldridge] has won more football games since the formation of the Texas Intercollegiate Athletic Association, but where are the titles?”³⁷⁹ Sure, Aldridge had won, but, as Lawler noted, he had yet to win the big one. So, not only was he facing the pressure to win this game to prove his supporters right, but he also had to prove his doubters wrong—he had to win a championship.

The rest of the TIAA’s coaches could not come to a consensus on whether McMurry would take the 1980 crown. “Austin College has a better overall team,” said TSU’s Buddy Fornes. “I don’t think McMurry has the passing game to beat Austin College.”³⁸⁰ “I would think McMurry would have the momentum,” argued Sul Ross’s Joe George. “It depends on the frame

of mind but I have to pick McMurry because they're playing well."³⁸¹ Lubbock Christian's Jerry Don Sanders had the Kangaroos: "Austin College, basically because of experience."³⁸² Gene Norris of Trinity favored the Indians: "McMurry—because they beat the hell out of us twice."³⁸³

By week's end, the mystery would be solved.

For any organization to function properly, there has to be someone behind the curtain, making sure all of the trains leave on time. These people are out of the spotlight, yet their role is just as critical as the head coach, starting quarterback, or defensive coordinator.

Mark Odom was the equipment manager for the Indians' football team. He and a group of other students toiled under Aldridge as part of McMurry College's work-study program. He maintained the field, repaired equipment, and kept the inventory. In addition, he filmed all of the games.

For the Snyder, Texas, native, being a McMurry Indian was a legacy. His father, older sister, and older brother were all graduates. In fact, being the football team's equipment manager was a legacy—his brother served in the same position when Odom arrived on-campus in 1978.³⁸⁴ With his brother's recommendation, he was able to secure a role in the same capacity, which began his working relationship with Spud Aldridge.

Odom had known Aldridge for quite a while. When he was going into ninth-grade, his family moved to Abilene. He attended Jefferson Junior High, where Aldridge was coaching the

football team. So, Odom became well-acquainted with his demeanor and his rather interesting “way of talking.”³⁸⁵ He had liked Aldridge then, so he decided working for him could not be that bad.

In December of 1978, Odom’s father passed away. Aldridge, whether he knew it or not, quickly filled that void for his young equipment manager—the coach’s wisdom, leadership, and counsel all left an impression on Odom. He, like so many others, saw Aldridge as a father-figure. Aldridge gave him the space to do his job, and in return, he did it well.

For three years, he put in countless hours working on helmets, passing out practice pants, and striping the field at Indian Stadium. He spent most of his autumn Saturday-afternoons standing behind an old sixteen-millimeter camera filming the football team’s games. He drove the van that contained all of the equipment to the road games. He had even once fashioned a make-shift kicking tee just before a game against Sul Ross in Alpine, for a certain McMurry kicker who had left his behind in Abilene. If the phrase “other duties as assigned” ever encapsulated someone’s job, it was Mark Odom.³⁸⁶

He was never going to score a touchdown. His name would never be known to everyone in the stands. He was never going to be interviewed by the local newspaper. Yet, Odom played as crucial of a role as anyone on the team, and he absolutely loved what he did. For three years he had worked tirelessly, but he had made great memories and even better friends.

The 1980 season had been an especially memorable, and Odom did not want to see it end. As he readied the van for travel to Sherman, he, just like any other member of the team, knew what was at stake. Spud Aldridge had to be ready to call the best game of his career. Mark Cox had to play like a championship quarterback. Ricky Nolly and Luke Taylor would have to ensure

that a fearsome Austin College defensive line did not interfere with the offense's progress. David Lynn's leg might have to win the game for the Indians. Horace Robins and the rest of the defensive crew would have to continue to hold steadfast in Red Behrens' absence. Odom, who worked largely in the shadows, had to make certain that every piece of equipment that was necessary to ensure that this bunch would return to Abilene as champions was accounted for. "Everyone was very conscious of what they had to do [to win the championship game]," Odom recalled.³⁸⁷

Now, all that was left was to do it.

Saturday, November 8, 1980. At 1:00 P.M., the McMurry College football team took the field in Sherman for warm-ups. The Indian faithful had filled the stands. In about three hours, the fate of an entire community would be decided.

Pug Parris, of course, was there. During that week's faculty "PIGOUT," Dr. Gerald McDaniel had stressed the importance of somebody going to take pictures for the War Whoop.³⁸⁸ Parris decided she would go. McDaniel, an English professor, was not known for being a huge sports fan—but this year, and this week, he cared.

As Ricky Nolly loosened up down on the field, the dreams of winning a championship flashed in his mind between every blink. He scanned all of his teammates—he wanted to see if they were ready. He caught the eyes of his quarterback, and with that gaze he found an omen.

“[Mark Cox and I] made eye contact, and it was just something magical,” Nolly recalled. “I knew at that moment we were about to do something special.”³⁸⁹

Austin College won the coin toss and elected to receive. Lynn pinned the Kangaroos down on their own twelve. Quarterback Larry Shillings and the Kangaroo offense were able to manage one first down, but the Indian defense got a stop on third down from the twenty-eight yard-line, forcing a punt.³⁹⁰

McMurry’s offense took the field at their own thirty-three with 12:18 left in the first quarter. After an incomplete pass on first down, Lavalais had back-to-back runs of nine and eight yards, respectively. Four plays later, with the Indians on the Austin College thirty-four, Cox threw an interception.

The Indian defense forced a three-and-out, and Cox retook the field. Sometime between throwing the interception and returning to the field, Mark Cox found something deep inside of himself—something magical. He completed five straight passes, the fifth being a touchdown to Brad Woods. After Lynn tacked on the extra point, the score was 7-0.

Heading into the second quarter, the Indians were right where they wanted to be. At the Austin College nineteen yard-line, Cox fired a touchdown pass to Leslie Wyche, giving his team a 14-0 lead. On the ensuing kickoff, Austin College fumbled. McMurry recovered, and four plays later Lynn drilled a twenty-four yard field goal. With about thirteen minutes left in the first half, the Indians were up 17-0.

The visions of celebrating in the locker room began to creep into the minds of the McMurry sideline. Spud Aldridge knew better, though. He knew his bunch had been labeled a

“thirty-minute” team.³⁹¹ He knew that no amount of scoring would put them safely ahead of a team like Austin College. He knew that he had to keep his foot on the pedal.

The McMurry defense forced yet another punt, but on the ensuing offensive drive, the Indians fumbled. Shillings took advantage. Taking the field at the McMurry forty-nine yard-line, he sailed a touchdown pass to Clint Oliphint. The Austin College defense then forced McMurry to punt from their own twenty-two yard-line. The Kangaroos ran two plays for no gain from Indian forty-three yard-line, but on third down Shillings threw a touchdown pass to Sullivan. Just like that, the game was 17-14 with about three minutes to go in the first-half.

The Indians seemed to be in a downhill slide. Aldridge was once again forced to punt the ball away. The Austin College offense took the field with Shillings in a groove. McMurry needed a break.

They got one. On the Kangaroos’ third offensive play, Sullivan fumbled, and the Indians recovered. Cox worked his group down to the Austin College twelve yard-line, and threw his third touchdown pass of the game to Woods with twenty-four seconds left in the first-half. Although Lynn missed the extra point, his first in 1980, the Indians were able to go into halftime with a 23-14 lead.

Aldridge had changed up the game-plan. The usually run-heavy offense had produced three passing touchdowns behind the arm of Mark Cox. The Kangaroos had battled back though, and it was clear that this game could come down to whomever had the ball last.

McMurry received the ball to begin the second-half. Cox commandeered an eleven-play drive that ended in a Lynn field goal to extend the lead to 26-14 with 11:57 left to play in the third quarter. The Indian defense forced Austin College to punt, and then Cox led another

successful drive, this time capping it off with a fifty-two yard touchdown pass to Lee Ray Boykin. Aldridge's group held a 33-14 lead.

Tommy Estes' defense once again held, and the Indian offense took the field with a chance to bury the Kangaroos. On first-down from the Austin College forty yard-line, Aldridge dialed up yet another play to Brad Woods, who caught the pass and glided past defenders on his way to the end-zone. When Austin College regained possession on the ensuing kickoff, they were only able to run two plays before Shillings was intercepted by Horace Robins.

The Indians and the Kangaroos then traded scoreless possessions. McMurry fumbled on their first offensive play, and Austin College fumbled the ball right back to them on fourth-down from the McMurry forty-eight. This time, Cox maneuvered the Tribe down to the Austin College forty yard-line, where he threw a touchdown pass to Randy Tarrant. After the Lynn extra-point, McMurry led 47-14 with just seventeen minutes left in the ball game.

The silence on the Austin College sideline was deafening. Not only did McMurry College seem surely on their way to winning a TIAA title, but they were doing it in style. Cox now had six touchdown passes that afternoon—a number that was almost unheard of across all levels of collegiate and professional football in 1980. The Kangaroos faced a thirty-three point mountain and did not have much time to climb. It appeared as though Spud Aldridge had done it. He was finally going to get one.

Somewhere around two minutes left to play in the third quarter, however, Austin College woke up, and remembered that they too could win a championship. Shillings took the field following the Tarrant touchdown and quickly led an eleven-play drive deep into McMurry

territory, capping it off with a touchdown pass to Rory Dukes. Although the two-point attempt failed, the lead was now cut down to twenty-seven points with a quarter left to play.

Cox and the offense stalled out at the Austin College forty-six, and Aldridge decided to punt it back to the Kangaroos. On second-down, Shillings threw a thirty-nine yard pass to Dukes to get down to the McMurry forty-one yard-line. Two plays later, Shillings launched a touchdown pass to Sullivan. The two-point attempt again failed, but with 11:42 left to play, the Indians' lead was now twenty-one points.

Following the kick-off, McMurry's offense retook the field. Cox had to leave the game with a "woozy head," so back-up Ricky Sells was sent out to lead the drive.³⁹² Austin College had scored a quick twelve points, but if Sells could lead the Indians down the field and get one more score, the game was going to be over.

Sells took the snap under center—and fumbled. Austin College recovered at the McMurry nineteen yard-line, and three plays later Shillings threw a dart to Richard Tarver for a touchdown. This time, Kramer elected to kick the extra-point, making it 47-33 with 10:39 left to play.

It was a football game now. The Kangaroos had put it into high-gear, and the Indians appeared to be in free-fall. The ensuing offensive possession for the Tribe ended in a punt, and when Shillings took the field, he orchestrated a ten-play drive down to the McMurry one yard-line, where running-back Kelly Hyde punched the ball over the goal-line. Kramer opted for another failed two-point conversion, but it was now just an eight-point ball game.

Cox, who had been having the game of his life, could not advance the Indians past their own twenty-three yard-line, and once again Aldridge was forced to punt. With 3:02 left to go, Shillings retook the field for what all of Sherman hoped to be the game-tying drive.

Operating from the McMurry forty-nine yard-line, Shillings threw back-to-back incomplete passes. On third-down, he was able to find Dukes for a gain of fifteen. On first and second down from the thirty-five, Shillings threw incomplete passes. On third-down, Estes dialed up a pressure, and Shillings was sacked for a loss of two.

It was fourth-down-and-twelve from the McMurry thirty-seven yard-line. This was the play of the game. It had not been a pretty fourth quarter. In fact, Aldridge's team had done nearly all they could to give up a thirty-three point lead. Yet with just a little over two minutes left on the clock, nothing mattered but this play. If the Indians could hold, they would be champions.

Shillings dropped back to pass. Estes again dialed up a pressure. The ball sailed. Both sidelines were still. The pass fell incomplete. Cox retook the field to run out the clock. For safe measure, he took the ball on third-down from the McMurry thirty-seven and ran sixty-one yards on an option-keeper to the Austin College two yard-line. With ten seconds remaining, Aldridge called for a victory formation, and Cox took the final knee. The game was over. McMurry College had won the TIAA Championship.

There was madness on the field. Players threw off their helmets and danced around. Aldridge embraced as many of them as he could. Eventually, his boys picked him up and carried him to the locker-room. Aldridge, riding on the shoulders of his players, was on top of the world.

The celebration continued in the locker-room. Someone's parent had brought champagne, and all the players began celebrating like they had seen Super Bowl champions do on T.V.³⁹³

Even Spud Aldridge, who never drank, sprayed a bottle. The Indians had won the biggest game in school history—if there was ever a time to have fun, it was now.

Somehow, Aldridge was pulled out of the mayhem and put in front of a group of reporters. “That’s as good of a small college football game as anybody’s ever seen,” Aldridge said, wiping off his champagne-spotted spectacles.³⁹⁴ He was right. The Indians had amassed 645 yards of total offense, shattering the school record. The Kangaroos had put up 441. All told, the two teams had scored eighty-six points and accumulated 1,086 yards.³⁹⁵

The *Abilene Reporter-News*’ Robert Vernon pressed Aldridge on his game-plan. The usually run-first Indians had thrown for 351 yards and six touchdowns. Aldridge had predicted earlier in the week that if his bunch had to throw the ball thirty-plus times they would most certainly lose. The ended up throwing thirty-nine passes, so Vernon wanted to know what happened. “Well,” Aldridge said. “Now Robert, I didn’t know we were going to throw that much. We ran on ‘em too, didn’t we?”³⁹⁶ When Vernon would not accept that answer, Aldridge gave in: “Well, we thought we could run on [Austin College], but I knew we were gonna throw. We planned to throw a lot on ‘em. We watched those films and the only thing we thought we might be able to do something on was their pass defense.”³⁹⁷

Even with Cox’s historic passing performance, the game had almost slipped away. Aldridge assessed the emotional roller-coaster that was the second-half: “You’d think with 47-14, we would’ve had the game won, but they are really dangerous. You see why we were still trying to get some points in the third quarter. I wasn’t trying to run up the score. I just knew what they could do. I didn’t feel safe ‘til six seconds to go and we had the ball on their two.”³⁹⁸

Larry Kramer did not have much to say. “We just couldn’t stop ‘em. Just couldn’t stop ‘em. We ran everything [on defense that] we’ve got,” said the Austin College tutor. The best defense in the conference had run out of answers.³⁹⁹

Every Indian player was thrilled. “We won. [Austin College] is a good team, but they had their shot [at a national championship],” said Nolly. “Now, we get ours.”⁴⁰⁰ “It’s nice to be with a winner,” Luke Taylor emphasized. “Our whole line whipped [the Kangaroo defense] and whipped them bad.”⁴⁰¹ “Last year [Austin College] came up [to Abilene] yelling ‘Roo Meat,’” Robins remembered. “Well, we ate that ‘Roos meat and then we chewed the bone the meat was on.”⁴⁰² Red Behrens, who had been on the sideline for the game, was elated as well: “I’ve been doing my part. I’ve been out here hollerin’ the whole game. I don’t know if it would matter if I were in [the game]. I’d probably have [Larry Shillings] running more.”⁴⁰³ David Lynn, who missed his first extra-point of the season, was happy that it did not matter: “I just missed it. It was all my fault. But I had to give the fans a run for their money.”⁴⁰⁴

Aldridge and his players continued their celebration. The idea of the playoffs was a distant thought. What mattered, for now, was enjoying being a champion. The players, who had worked so hard, had rewarded the coach they loved so much with a title.

The hollering could be heard 240 miles away in Abilene.

Aldridge, after talking with the media, walked back in to the champagne-soaked locker room. Maybe some of the immediate buzz of celebration was wearing off, or maybe he had just wiped off his glasses—whichever it was, Aldridge could see more clearly. “You could see the light-bulb above his head,” said Mark Odom.⁴⁰⁵ Aldridge began frantically instructing players to clean up the locker-room and get the bottles all together. He warned them that a team had been disqualified from the playoffs by the NAIA for the crime of having alcohol involved in a post-game celebration.

Odom was tasked with the clean-up. He gathered up all of the bottles and took them out to the van; the case was wrapped in a towel so no one could tell what the equipment manager was carrying. Aldridge, still worried, gave Odom one final instruction: he was to go and find Austin College’s Athletic Director, Robert Mason, apologize for the incident, and assure him that the coaches had nothing to do with it.⁴⁰⁶ Odom, of course, dreaded the assignment.

Odom, with the help of some Austin College coaches, found Mason. Nervously, he began explaining that there had been alcohol in the locker-room, but he and the coaches had cleaned it up. He assured Mason, as he had been instructed, that every bottle had been accounted for, and that the coaching staff had had nothing to do with it. Odom anxiously awaited his reply. Not only was he being tasked with taking the brunt of Mason’s potential rage, but the Indians could be out of the playoffs if Austin College decided to report the episode to the NAIA.

Odom waited. What was only a few seconds seemed like an hour. All of the sudden, Mason’s face lit up, and he simply said, “Isn’t this place great? That’s how you ought to celebrate.”⁴⁰⁷ Austin College, unlike McMurry, did not have a dry campus. Alcohol was allowed on the premises. Aldridge’s worry had been for nothing. The Indians packed up the bus, and headed back to Abilene.

Later that evening, Odom was rolling down I-20, with the champagne bottles clanging in the passenger seat.

They may as well have been championship rings.

XI

As the celebration began to wear off, the waiting-game began. On Sunday, November 16, the NAIA Playoff Committee was to decide the team's fate. The latest NAIA Division II Poll had the Indians as the seventh-best team in the nation.⁴⁰⁸ McMurry College was the champion of one of the best leagues in the country. If they were to get snubbed, Art Lawler counted on hearing a "verbal explosion from the school on South 14th and Sayles."⁴⁰⁹

The playoff format was simple: the top team in each of the four respective regions would receive an automatic bid.⁴¹⁰ Then, the next four highest-ranked teams would receive a bid, regardless of region. As luck would have it, the top four teams in the country were all from different regions. This meant that, barring some massive change, the Indians had a pretty good shot to get into the playoffs.

There was still, however, one week left to play. McMurry, who did not have a bye week, had wrapped up their regular season schedule on November 8, but on November 15, teams all across the country would get a chance to play one more game. Those teams had one more opportunity to impress the pollsters, whereas the Tribe had to hope that they had done enough. Although it was inconceivable that the Indians would drop to ninth-place after their magical year, it was not impossible.

The waiting period of seven full days was excruciating. At the weekly "Indian Club" meeting, Aldridge breezed through the film of his team's huge win over Austin College with little excitement and less talking.⁴¹¹ He was stiff, trying to assure himself and his team that they were going to get in.

McMurry's Athletic Director, Johnnie Ray, was certainly concerned. "You never know, some team that's ranked below us could win real big and end up being ranked ahead of us, knocking us out, or a team ranked ahead of us could lose," said Ray.⁴¹² Despite the possibility of falling out of the race, he was working feverishly to ensure that McMurry would get to host the playoff game. Abilene's Shotwell Stadium would be the most ideal site, but Abilene Christian and Howard Payne were scheduled to play there at 2:00 P.M. on Saturday, November 22—the date of the first round of the NAIA Playoffs. Ray had also looked into playing the game at Indian Stadium, but nothing could really be decided until November 16.

Everyone would just have to keep on waiting.

Often forgotten during the highs and lows of the autumn football season are the families whom coaches leave behind. For about three months or so, men at all levels of the game spend upwards of ninety hours a week away from their loved ones. Sure, the coaches become exhausted from the workload—but the tougher job falls on the spouses that they leave behind to handle life.

It was no different for Spud and Marilyn Aldridge. The two had married in June of 1977 after a mutual friend had paired them at a party, where they both claimed to have been "in love at first-sight."⁴¹³ Marilyn was the "perfect balance" for Spud.⁴¹⁴ "She was the woman in the Bible that they talk about," said Lori Frymire.⁴¹⁵ Marilyn took pride in taking care of the house, the children, and making her husband proud. Marilyn was a teacher; Spud was a coach. They both

had a heart to serve. They understood each other. They were both strong Christians, and together they vowed to raise their blended family just like the Bible commanded: God first, the children second, and themselves third.⁴¹⁶

It was no easy task, though. Spud himself had two children before marrying Marilyn, and she had three—and while he was gone during the season, she picked up the slack. With five teens and pre-teens, the house could get a bit crazy. “She was super-woman,” asserted Frymire.⁴¹⁷ Every Sunday, Marilyn would do the laundry, and organize the piles of clothes into sections corresponding with whom they belonged to. Each week, she would sit down and create a menu outlining each and every meal, and then go buy the groceries. She made sure the children had all that they needed to succeed at school. In all the years Spud had coached at McMurry, she had missed just one game. She was the glue.

Marilyn’s help allowed Spud to be a great coach, but also a great father as well. Frymire recalled Aldridge as a parent: “He was a perfect dad... He disciplined us, he loved us, and he was an example.”⁴¹⁸ Aldridge was well-versed in biblical history, and he quoted scripture often. His background as a teacher made him a great tutor for all of his children. On top of all of that, he was hilarious and a joy to be around. His children knew he was a coach, to be sure; but, before that, he was their dad.

So, as the long season wore on, Spud and Marilyn continued to support and love one another and their family. The season had been equally exhilarating and monotonous—each week, Spud would stay at the fieldhouse until the late evening hours working on the team’s upcoming game, coach the game on Saturday, and then be back in the office after church Sunday morning working on the next one. Throughout the week, Marilyn would work, take care of the children, and make sure everyone was at the game on Saturday, and then do it all again starting the next

day. If Spud Aldridge was excited to be a TIAA champion, Marilyn Aldridge was floored—not only because she was proud of her husband, but also because she played a critical role in that feat.

She and her husband had earned it together—and now they anxiously awaited the NAIA's decision.

The mood on Sunday, November 16, was extremely tense. Hanover College, the eleventh-ranked team in the nation, had defeated fifth-ranked Anderson College on the previous day.⁴¹⁹ The NAIA could decide to keep Anderson in the top-eight, and move Hanover up as well, bumping the Indians out of playoff contention.

Word finally came through. Anderson fell out of the top eight, and McMurry held their spot. The NAIA informed Ray and Aldridge that the Indians had made the playoffs, and that they would also host the game in Abilene. “I was really worried,” Ray told the *Abilene-Reporter News*. “I thought [Hanover beating Anderson] might knock us out.”⁴²⁰

Aldridge received the call at his home at 3018 San Miguel Drive. He was informed that his team would square off against Valley City State, located about sixty miles west of Fargo, North Dakota. Aldridge, beaming, talked to the *Abilene-Reporter News*' Robert Vernon about the exciting news: “I'm just tickled to death to be playing the first game at home... If we can win, then we'll be ready to go on the road because we knew we'd have to anyway.”⁴²¹

Ray and Aldridge had wanted to play the game, which was scheduled for Saturday, November 22, at Shotwell Stadium, but with Abilene Christian and Howard Payne squaring off at 2:00 P.M., and Odessa Permian High School and Sherman High School meeting there for a Bi-District playoff game that evening at 7:00 P.M., there was not much chance of a triple-header. So, Ray offered Indian Stadium as the site. Valley City State and the NAIA agreed. The humble arena would have to grow by about 600 seats prior to the game—which Ray would accomplish by importing portable bleachers to bump the capacity up to about 3,000.⁴²²

On Monday, November 17, the front page of the *Abilene-Reporter News* adorned the headline: “McM Given NAIA Div. II Playoff Bid.”⁴²³ It had been settled. At 11:00 A.M. on November 22, the McMurry College Indians would take on the Valley City State Vikings.

If the Indians could defend “The Reservation,” they would have a chance to win a national title.

XII

Valley City State was formidable. Aldridge believed that, in terms of size, the Indians and Vikings were about even.⁴²⁴ The North Dakota College Athletic Conference champions ran a pro-style offense, commanded by quarterback Mark Smetana, who was all-conference as well as the league's most valuable player.⁴²⁵ "We called the coaches of the teams they've played, and they all say [Valley City State's] defense is outstanding," remarked Aldridge, who was slightly worried about the unit that had only given up 9.8 points per game.⁴²⁶

While the Vikings were 9-0, they were only 7-0 in NAIA play, with two of their victories coming over junior college teams.⁴²⁷ As a matter of fact, Valley City State had actually lost a game on the scoreboard—a 21-6 battle with Bemidji State—but were awarded the win after it was discovered that Bemidji used an ineligible player.⁴²⁸

Nonetheless, head coach Jim Dew, who was 52-11 in seven seasons with the Vikings, had built a very respectable program. He was familiar with the TIAA, after having applied for the Austin College job in the early 1970s, and he knew that McMurry presented a unique challenge.⁴²⁹ "[McMurry's] got a much larger football team than we've got and whole lot more speed..." assessed Dew, who disagreed with Aldridge's estimation that the two teams were even. Maybe he was trying to hide his cards, but during his phone interview with the *Abilene-Reporter News*, Dew—answering with an awkwardly-employed Texas metaphor—did not seem too optimistic about his team's chances: "We've just got to hope the Alamo fails and that a lot of their boys feel the call of duty in honor of their country."⁴³⁰

Aldridge and his boys planned on proving those concerns right. But first, they needed a good week of practice.

There was just one problem. On Sunday evening, a snowstorm had blown into Abilene. With the frigid temperatures and frosty ground, the Indians could not practice on their field. The coaching staff, three men who hated the idea of not being able to pad up and get a physical practice in, had to keep the players inside Indian Gym on Monday. “I sure hope it clears up,” said Aldridge. “We need to practice... We can get some work inside, but I hate [practicing] inside more than anybody... Anytime you work out you’ve got to get something accomplished, and I think that’s hard to do inside.”⁴³¹ Ironically, in North Dakota it was sunny and in the mid-sixties for most of the week.⁴³²

By Tuesday, although the weather had cleared up a little, the field at Indian Stadium was still too wet to practice on. So, Aldridge had to take his team across the street to Aldersgate United Methodist Church, whose parking lot would serve as a makeshift practice field for the rest of the week.⁴³³ The Indians would not be able to get a normal, physical workout in preparation for the Vikings.

The weather did not only affect practice. The film from Valley City State was supposed to arrive by 2:30 P.M. on Monday, but because of canceled flights due to the inclement weather, it did not arrive until 10:00 P.M. that evening.⁴³⁴ Aldridge was not happy with the quality of the videos. “It’s real blurry,” Aldridge complained. “I think the guy shooting it was real cold and was shivering and it made the pictures jump up and down.”⁴³⁵ On the most important week of the season, McMurry was left with bad practice conditions and even worse scouting tape.

The struggle went both ways. As Tuesday came and went, Dew had still not received the film from McMurry. “The same company that’s flying us to Abilene [later this week] is the one flying the film from there to here. So you may never see us,” Dew half-joked to Art Lawler.⁴³⁶

Regardless of the less-than-desirable circumstances, the Indians held a firm belief that they could win the football game. Aldridge and his coaching staff felt like the 1980 squad had the intangibles required to go all the way. “I honestly believe that when it comes down to these playoff games it’s a matter of which team’s hungriest,” he explained to the *Abilene-Reporter News*. “Some teams are satisfied with a conference championship, and that’s a big accomplishment. But the teams that go on want more. I think our kids want more—a lot more.”⁴³⁷

Aldridge thought his team had another good quality: perseverance mixed with a bit of luck. Aldridge mused on his team’s determination: “When our kids came back against Sul Ross in that first game, I told Tommy [Estes] these kids are fighters. This bunch of players don’t give up. They’ve just proved it so many times. We’ve had our backs to the wall several times and we’ve always come through.”⁴³⁸ For Aldridge, it was always about the kids. If the players believed, then it did not matter who McMurry College squared off against, nor what the circumstances were.

Aldridge believed in his boys, but plenty of people believed in him too. Aldridge received a letter from his pastor at Aldersgate United Methodist Church, H. Weldon McCormick, congratulating him and the team. “We’re proud of you and this fine McMurry Indian football team,” McCormick wrote. “And wish you the very best in the playoff game.”⁴³⁹ Dr. Kim, McMurry’s president, also wrote to Aldridge that week: “What a great pleasure it is for McMurry College to have you as the head football coach.”⁴⁴⁰ James Griffith, a friend of

Aldridge's, reached out as well: "Congratulations on winning your conference. Good luck in the playoffs... Spud, you and your staff did a great job this year."⁴⁴¹ Finally, Ted Sitton, the head football coach at Abilene Christian, penned this letter to Coach Aldridge:

Dear Spud:

Congratulations to you and your staff on a great season and the championship of the Conference. I am very happy for you, your coaches, and your team for the great job you have done this year. Good luck Saturday and for the rest of the playoffs. I know you will go all the way!

Sincerely,

Ted Sitton

Head Football Coach

P.S. This summer I am coming over to your place for a clinic.⁴⁴²

Not bad for little old Spud Aldridge at little old McMurry. Not bad at all.

About 2:45 A.M. on Friday, November 21, the Valley City State football team flew into Abilene. The Vikings checked into the Royal Inn, where the team slept until about noon, got up for breakfast, and went and practiced at Indian Stadium.

The Indians had their walk-through practice earlier in the day, and a pep rally for the playoff game that afternoon. Indian Gym was as loud as it had ever been. The team was announced, Aldridge said a few words, and the cheerleaders made a presentation to Marilyn, inviting her to be an honorary member of the cheerleading team through a poem:

Listen, dear Indians, and you shall hear

About the lady that Spud calls dear.
 Her name is Marilyn, and life isn't a dud
 When you're married to a man as crazy as Spud.
 Marilyn sits at the games, wringing her hands,
 Watching the Indians and watching her man.
 Smoke after smoke, the worries they say.
 "The great smokeout" isn't exactly her day.
 And so Mrs. Aldridge, since you are so concerned
 About Spud and the Tribe and the victories they earn,
 We've decided to make you an honorary member of the cheerleading team!
 And now on Saturday when you're a bundle of jitters
 And you're so shaky, you're all in a flutter,
 Don't worry about the defense, the field goals, or fakes,
 Just get out your pom-poms and shake, shake, shake!⁴⁴³

The pep rally was a family affair—Aldridge, his wife, his players, the students, the faculty.
 Everyone involved was having fun. It was an invigorating time to be an Indian.

At 6:30 P.M. that evening, the two teams gathered for a banquet in the Mabree Room of McMurry's United Methodist Campus Center.⁴⁴⁴ After a meal, the ceremony began with an invocation from Roy Don Dudgeon, an offensive linemen for the Indians as well as the president of McMurry's Fellowship of Christian Athletes program. Then, the Valley City State football team was welcomed to Abilene by Fred Aycock, the city's Assistant Director of Community Services.

After Aycock's monologue, Dr. Thomas Kim, McMurry's president, greeted the Vikings as well. Dr. Ted DeVries, the president at Valley City State, gave a response, extending his gratitude to both Aycock and Kim for opening their city and college for the game.

Then it was time for Spud Aldridge and Jim Dew to present their respective teams. Speaking from the front of the Mabee Room with a large banner behind them that read “HOWDY, Y’ALL,” with the NAIA’s logo and the two squad’s mascots, Aldridge and Dew expressed how excited they were for the game, and introduced their players.⁴⁴⁵ Dew—donning a cowboy hat—and Aldridge shook hands, embraced, and the banquet concluded. The niceties were now over. In a little over fourteen hours, the players and coaches who had mingled and laughed amongst each other in the heart of McMurry’s campus would attempt to end the other’s season.

As everyone went home that evening, Spud Aldridge went over to Indian Stadium. Luke Taylor caught a glimpse of his head coach. “Spud was out there on the football field getting it ready for the game,” recalled Taylor. “Like a little Class A high school coach... making sure the lines were right, that the field was mowed.”⁴⁴⁶ An extremely successful college football coach who had just won his conference and was preparing for his institution’s first playoff game was making sure the field was taken care of. Maybe it was just his attention to detail. Maybe it was a nervous tick. Maybe it was because, at McMurry College, the head football coach had to teach a bowling class, lead the track team, and make sure the gridiron was striped.

Regardless, underneath an Abilene moon, Aldridge meditated on the quiet field at Indian Stadium. “I don’t know that he slept that night,” theorized Taylor.⁴⁴⁷

No one could have expected him to.

Saturday, November 22, 1980. At 10:00 A.M., McMurry College took the field for warm-ups at a sloshy Indian Stadium. The snowstorm was gone, but it had left ice, which by that point had melted. The field at “The Reservation” stood no chance. The Indians and the Vikings would play each other in a muddy pool of grass.

The 11:00 A.M. kick-off was unusually early. The NAIA wanted the results of the playoff games as quickly as possible, in order to be able to create the schedule for the next round of post-season matches, so the late-morning start time was a rule.⁴⁴⁸ Both teams were accustomed to playing games in the early afternoon, so the morning tilt had the chance to cause issues on both sides.

Aldridge and his boys knew what needed to be done. All season, he and his players had been faced with adversity, yet had come through. This week had been no different. The formula for this team’s success was simple: play well and catch a couple of breaks. If that happened against Valley City State, the Indians would be well on their way to a national championship.

The first quarter, though, was ugly. The muddy conditions created a tough environment for Aldridge’s veer offense. The usually high-scoring Indians were held to zero points. McMurry’s stout defense returned the favor by forcing a couple of punts. Then, Horace Robins intercepted Mark Smetana, the Vikings’ star quarterback. Heading into the second quarter, the game was deadlocked at 0-0.⁴⁴⁹

Mark Cox was able to move the Indians down the field just a bit, but at the McMurry forty-five yard-line, he was intercepted by Valley City State’s Jon Bolstad. Smetana and the Viking offense took advantage, getting down to the McMurry twenty yard-line, where kicker Jeff

Pederson was able to make a twenty-seven yard field-goal. Valley City State led the ball game 3-0.⁴⁵⁰

Cox and the Indian offense responded with a forty-five yard drive, but it came to an abrupt end when Valley City State's Scott Radloff intercepted one of his passes. The McMurry defense was able to get another stop, however, and with under five minutes to play in the first-half, the offense had a chance to give the Indians a lead.

The ensuing Vikings' kick-off pinned the Indians down at their own fifteen yard-line. On first-down, Dudley Woodard was able to run for eight yards. On second-down, Lester Lavailas pitched in four, which was enough to move the chains for the Indians. Then, on first-and-ten from his own twenty-seven, Cox fired a rocket into the hands of Brad Woods, who had snuck behind the Vikings' secondary. No one caught him. The seventy-three yard touchdown was the second-longest in NAIA playoff history. Although McMurry had gotten off to a slow start, with 2:13 left in the first-half, the score was now 7-3 in favor of the Tribe.⁴⁵¹

The Vikings used two minutes and twelve seconds to get the ball to their own forty-five yard-line. The stingy Indian defense was allowing very little progress. With one second left in the half, all Jim Dew and his offense could do was throw up a prayer and hope that it worked. If not, there was still a half of football to play.

McMurry needed to prevent a big play. The Indians had played so well on defense in the first-half, and all that was necessary to ensure that they held the lead going into halftime was to thwart a miracle attempt from Valley City State—or, given the slim odds of success on “hail Mary” attempts, simply let the Vikings fail.

What happened next changed the course of the McMurry College football season. Dew put four players out wide to the right, and sent them all sailing down the field. Smetana rolled out, and launched the ball to the mob of Vikings and Indians that were set-up at about the McMurry ten yard-line. The crowd of opposing players went up for the ball. Valley City State's tight-end, Mike Beckwith, got to it first. But, he did not try and catch it. Instead, he tipped the ball toward Viking wide receiver Doug Black, who was lagging about ten yards behind of his other three teammates. McMurry's Nate Dyles tried to recover and make a tackle, but Black caught the ball in stride and strutted into the end-zone.⁴⁵²

"It was either a trick-play, or a really lucky play," asserted Luke Taylor.⁴⁵³ Art Lawler simply referred to the score as "unbelievable."⁴⁵⁴ Rickey Parris, husband of Pug, who was in the stands at Indian Stadium that day, could not believe his eyes: "It was one of those [kind of plays] that just don't happen."⁴⁵⁵ Mark Odom agreed: "I don't think I've ever seen a play like it."⁴⁵⁶ The Indians, who had grown so accustomed to lucky breaks, watched in pain as the Vikings got one. Valley City State's kicker Jeff Pederson missed the extra-point, but that did not seem to matter—the Vikings now held a two-point lead, 9-7, and all of the momentum.

The second-half began with scoreless possessions for both teams. The Indians' second offensive drive ended with a thirty-one yard punt from David Lynn. Valley City State's Bolstad fielded the kick, then promptly returned it sixty-two yards for a touchdown. This time, Pederson hit the extra-point. The Vikings now led 16-7 halfway through the third quarter.⁴⁵⁷

The Indian offense could not advance down the field. Both squads played outstanding defense, keeping the other from getting in scoring range. Mark Cox had thrown four interceptions by the middle of the fourth quarter. Although the Tribe's defense was battling, Aldridge's bunch was down by nine points with little time remaining.

Yet, Cox found some measure of strength, and with less than five minutes to play, he orchestrated a drive deep into Viking territory. If the Indians could score a touchdown, then there would be plenty of time for the defense to get a stop and give the offense one more chance to go win the game.

With 4:16 left to play, Cox dropped back to pass. He rifled the ball to receiver Leslie Wyche. Valley City State's Radloff leapt over the back of Wyche and intercepted the ball.⁴⁵⁸ Aldridge went ballistic, and demanded that defensive pass-interference be called.⁴⁵⁹ If the referees had obliged, the Tribe would have moved up the Valley City State one yard-line. The officials refused. There was no flag. The Indians had run out of breaks.

The Vikings simply ran out the clock, and the game ended. The 1980 season, which had been so historic, was now over. The Indians were 9-2, the best record in program history, but out of the playoffs.⁴⁶⁰

The *Abilene-Reporter News* interviewed both coaches after the game, and the first question was about the miracle play before halftime. Valley City State's Jim Dew was honest: "You have about one chance in 100 of making it work — but what the hell?"⁴⁶¹ Aldridge, hurting from the loss, agreed: "You might complete that play about one out of 2,000 times."⁴⁶²

The players, who had dreamed of winning a national championship, shared Aldridge's pain. "They whipped us," admitted Horace Robins.⁴⁶³ Ricky Nolly, who had spent the waning seconds of the game wiping away the tears from his face and mud from his uniform, summarized the mass of emotions: "We were dejected."⁴⁶⁴ "It was almost like the Twilight Zone—just disappointment," recalled David Lynn.⁴⁶⁵

Aldridge, who was forced to stand in front of reporters and attempt to break down the end of his team's season, did his best:

We just didn't play well. What makes me absolutely sick is when you lose and you're the better team. But that's the way it is. Just because you've got a touchdown or two better ballclub doesn't mean you'll win. I felt like we were one or two touchdowns better. But that doesn't mean you're gonna win. You know, I see these guys driving garbage trucks and they live a long time. Now you know why coaches don't live so long. [Garbage truck drivers] don't have bleeding ulcers and headaches.⁴⁶⁶

When asked if he was considering driving a garbage truck, he added: "I'm thinking about it."⁴⁶⁷ There was little else that could be said. As the sun set on the evening of November 22, 1980, so did the greatest season in McMurry College history.

As the shock and disappointment of a season lost began to wear off, the McMurry football team was able to meditate on its' accomplishments. Five players had been named to the NAIA District 8 All-District Team: LeRoy Duncan, Luke Taylor, Ricky Nolly, Dudley Woodard, and Horace Robins.⁴⁶⁸ Aldridge was named District 8's "Coach of the Year."⁴⁶⁹ Fifteen Indians made the TIAA All-Conference Team.⁴⁷⁰⁵ LeRoy Duncan was the conference's Co-Defensive Player of the Year, and Spud Aldridge was the TIAA's "Coach of the Year."⁴⁷¹

⁵ The fifteen Indians who made All-TIAA in 1980 were: running back Dudley Woodard, tackle Steve Reimschuessel, guard Ricky Nolly, center Luke Taylor, kicker David Lynn, defensive-tackle LeRoy Duncan, defensive-tackle Mark Alexander, linebacker Jimmy Lynn, quarterback Mark Cox, running back Lester Lavalais, tight end David Davee, defensive-tackle Mark Behrens, linebacker Armando Morales, defensive-back Horace Robins, and defensive-back Nate Dyles.

Finally, four Indians were named NAIA All-Americans. Luke Taylor garnered First-Team honors, while Dudley Woodard, Ricky Nolly, and LeRoy Duncan were Honorable Mentions.⁴⁷²

The 1980 season had been a dominant one for the Tribe. They had set a multitude of school records, won a championship, and earned recognition for their efforts. The only downside of the fairy-tale season was that it had to end.

XIII

Forty-two years later, the 1980 McMurry College football season still stands as one of, if not the best, season in the school's history. That squad was the first to win a TIAA championship, win nine games, and advance to the playoffs. The team's 2,756 rushing yards is still the most in a single-season in program history.⁴⁷³

Individually, the accolades were just as impressive. The 1980 squad produced four All-Americans, fifteen All-TIAA honorees, and a head coach who was named conference Coach of the Year, proving to be the most talented and deepest team that has ever called south Abilene home.

Yet, the most remarkable fact about the 1980 team is the success that the individuals involved went on to have in the four decades that have followed that season.

Luke Taylor played his senior season for the Indians in 1981. In the spring of 1982, he found himself on a negotiation list to go and play professional football in Canada. "I was [in Canada] for about three or four weeks before they cut me," recalled Taylor. He came back to McMurry to finish his student-teaching in the fall of 1982, and then at Christmas-time he got a coaching and teaching job at Merkel High School, fifteen miles west of Abilene.

Taylor spent the next thirty-two years in education, with stops at Merkel, Abilene Cooper, and Abilene High. He retired from Cooper in 2014, and still resides in Abilene. Taylor believes that Spud Aldridge had a major influence on his coaching career: “I talked to Spud every time I could.”⁴⁷⁴

David Lynn went on to kick for the Indians for one more season. He then graduated in the spring of 1983, and became a CPA. Lynn began his professional career as the Chief Financial Officer for a retirement system before becoming the CFO at BML, an independent oil gathering company in West Texas, a position that he has held for the last twenty years.

Lynn has stayed active. He took up competitive soccer and softball as soon as his playing days were over. He began running recreationally when he turned 34, and ran a couple of marathons in the 1990s. In 2015, he got an opportunity to run in the Boston Marathon for charity. “I wasn’t in shape, but somehow I finished running it,” Lynn remarked.⁴⁷⁵ He not only finished, but qualified to run it the following year for his age bracket. Lynn has now run seven Boston Marathon’s, and has received five achievement plaques.

He has remained driven to prove himself. Now sixty-one years old, Lynn has the same fire that he had when he was a twenty year-old kicker for the Indians. “Our biggest limitations are between our ears,” he emphasized. “Nobody out there can keep you from doing what you can do.”⁴⁷⁶ Lynn is married and has one daughter. He still holds the record for the longest field goal in McMurry football history—a fifty-five yarder he kicked against Lubbock Christian in 1982.⁴⁷⁷

Ricky Nolly graduated in December 1981. Nolly, almost as though there was a trend, went into education. He got a teaching job in Rawls, Texas, where he stayed for a year. He then came back to Abilene, where he worked as an educational diagnostician. The former Indian

offensive linemen then went back home to Fort Worth, where he held teaching and coaching jobs at Carter-Riverside High School, Arlington Heights High School, and his alma mater, Western Hills.

Old Indians, though, tend to find a way back to each other. In 1988, Nolly left Fort Worth to help start a new program at Garland Naaman-Forest High School, where he worked for fellow McMurry Indian football player Cliff Odenwald. He worked alongside other Indians as well—Harvey Oaxaca, Steve Lopez, and his teammate, Red Behrens. “That was the time of my life,” remembered Nolly. “Opening up that school with all those guys I played football with.”⁴⁷⁸

Nolly then took a coaching job at Irving MacArthur High School, before deciding to get out of coaching and into administration. He was an assistant principal for two years, and then became the principal at Irving Nimitz High School, where he remained for four years. He then became a principal at Irving’s Sam Houston Middle School, before retiring in 2012. He returned to Irving to be a principal at the district’s reassignment center, a post he held for two years. Nolly then became the Executive Director for Campus Operations for Irving ISD. He retired, for good, in 2019. “I’ve had a good career man, and I can attribute that to my time at McMurry,” he affirmed.⁴⁷⁹

Mark “Red” Behrens has changed in some ways, but remained who he always was. “When I got out of school, I didn’t know what I was going to do—I didn’t even know I had a degree,” said Behrens.⁴⁸⁰ Luckily, he was hired over the phone out to “Clyde, America,” a term he claims to have coined in the early 1980s as a young coach for the Bulldogs. He spent six years coaching at Clyde High School, where he worked his way up from defensive line coach to defensive coordinator. “I think I could have stayed forever at Clyde, I really do,” Behrens remarked. “West Texas people are fantastic.”⁴⁸¹

In 1988, however, he got a phone call from fellow Indian Cliff Odenwald. Odenwald was opening Garland Naaman-Forest High School, and he wanted Behrens to come be his defensive coordinator. So, after over a decade spent out in West Texas, Big Red returned home to the Dallas-Fort Worth area to work with his fellow Indians.

The Naaman-Forest Rangers did not have immediate success. Behrens saw the writing on the wall: “I went to Cliff after about two or three years and said ‘Cliff, you know we’re not gonna be here [whenever the talent shows up].”⁴⁸² Following the 1993 season, the staff was let go, and Behrens was out of a job. Garland ISD’s Athletic Director, Homer Johnson, who served the district for an incredible sixty-eight years, did not want Behrens to leave the district, so he moved him over to South Garland High School.⁴⁸³ Behrens served the Colonels as Defensive Coordinator and Assistant Head Coach. Then, in 2004 Behrens got his opportunity to be a head football coach at GISD’s new Sachse High School.

Behrens has spent the last eighteen years leading the Mustangs, and has accumulated 118 wins along with five district championships, including four straight from 2016-2019.⁴⁸⁴ “It’s the longest I’ve ever been at a school without [the administration] saying, ‘Hey, you might need to leave,’” the still-jovial Behrens half-joked.⁴⁸⁵ With eleven winning seasons and multiple former players at the professional level, one might think that Behrens has discovered the complex formula that leads to success. He argues, though, that it is actually pretty simple: “My coordinators take care of [their sides of the ball], and I teach people. And people say ‘Well, what do you do?’ ... and I say I’m kind of like a Seven-Eleven manager—just making sure nothing is stolen on the way out. That’s my philosophy.”⁴⁸⁶

Behrens, who is in his early-sixties, has now been coaching for thirty-nine years. He believes that it all started with his injury during that 1980 season: “All this came off of my

injury, because my path changed,” remarked Behrens. “People talk about ‘everything happens for a reason,’ and whether or not that’s true I don’t know. But I do know that my path was changed.”⁴⁸⁷

It certainly was. The-once wild Behrens now has a wife, two children, and a legacy of success and service—and he does not plan on stopping. “People ask me all the time, ‘Hey, when are you going to retire?’” said Behrens. “I tell them ‘I don’t know,’ because this isn’t work to me. It’s just something I’ve done for a bunch of years. I enjoy it—I enjoy the relationships.”⁴⁸⁸

Behrens still holds McMurry’s single-game record for tackles, with twenty-four in a 1978 match-up with Tarleton State.⁴⁸⁹

Mark Odom never got too far. By the time he graduated, Odom was serving as the equipment manager for all sports. McMurry decided that he could not be lost, so a full-time position was created for him. He oversaw the equipment for all sports, as well as athletic facility maintenance. Like most McMurry employees, Odom was given “other duties as assigned,” such as handling the school’s work-study program. He served in this capacity from 1982-1992.

Odom also drove the bus that took athletic teams to away games. In 1992, Odom parked the bus by the R.M. Medley Fieldhouse on the west side of McMurry’s campus at 3:00 A.M., following a sporting event. As he got out, he saw the vice president of the university standing outside of the fieldhouse. He told Odom that he wanted to talk. “I’m thinking ‘what did I do wrong now?’” remembered Odom.⁴⁹⁰ He then asked Odom to ride with him in his truck—a request that unnerved the still-young McMurry employee even more.

The two drove around the campus, and the vice president explained to him that the university was becoming more and more concerned with security. Up until that point, McMurry

had been using a rental security company, but the institution was looking to bring it in-house.

“He said they wanted me to start the [security] department,” said Odom. “I’m thinking, you know ‘I mow grass and drive busses. I have no idea about this security stuff.’”⁴⁹¹ The vice president, though, would not take no for an answer. He told Odom to sleep on it for a day or two and then come back to him.

Odom decided he would take the offer. Within two weeks, he had a security staff hired. It was a complete career shift. Odom, who had spent the last fourteen years assisting McMurry Athletics would now turn his focus to protecting the entire campus. But, he was the perfect fit for the job. “I tease, but I’m sort of telling the truth—he was the first director of security because he already had the keys to everything,” joked Pug Parris. “So, rather than get [the keys] back, we just said, ‘Tag! You’re it!’”⁴⁹²

Odom spent twenty-nine years overseeing the security at McMurry University until his retirement in December 2021. In January 2022, Odom made local news by returning a sixteen millimeter camera that he had used to film the 1980 squad’s football games over four decades prior to Abilene’s KRBC. The camera, weighing nearly fifteen pounds, was donated to McMurry in 1978. After he stopped filming the football games in 1992, the camera went to his house. Upon retiring, he decided to return it. “At the station it might have a place, it might mean something to somebody to have it back there,” Odom told *BigCountryHomepage*’s Noah McKinney.⁴⁹³

Pug Parris’s career can only be summed up with one word: legendary. Parris, who spent four years as a student at McMurry returned in 1978 as a professor, after a five-year stint as a teacher at Abilene High. She then spent the next forty-two years teaching physical education at her alma mater.

She decided to retire in the spring of 2020, putting her just one year short of the school's record, held by Vernie Newman—and she was just fine with that. “I thought, ‘I don’t want to have the record, because Vernie Newman deserves the record,’” Parris avowed. “She went through the Great Depression. She lived in the dorm. She never married. She had no children... She sacrificed... I did not sacrifice.”⁴⁹⁴

Nonetheless, in her forty-two years, she saw plenty of McMurry football teams, and she remains unequivocal that 1980 was one of the most exciting football seasons she ever witnessed during her time at the corner of Sayles and South 14th.

So many other players from that team had great success. Cornerback Horace Robins was called into the ministry, and has spent many years as a pastor in the Houston-area. Center Steve Keenum embarked on a coaching career that saw him return to McMurry, where he is one of the winningest coaches in program history. Tight-end David Davee runs a successful custom-home building company in the Austin-area. Defensive lineman John Hotchkin went into coaching, and had a long career in the high school ranks before retiring as an assistant coach at McMurry. Numerous others went into similar careers—coaching, business, and ministry—and have made a large impact on the world.

That is what made their coach so proud. **Spud Aldridge** spent one more season coaching at McMurry before deciding to change paths. “It was burning me out,” said Aldridge. “My two assistants [were coaching other sports in the spring]. I was doing all the recruiting by myself. It’ll take its toll on you after six years.”⁴⁹⁵ The last game of the 1981 season was against Austin College in Sherman. After the game, a tough loss for the Indians that finished off a 3-7 season, the referees went to Aldridge with a note from a former player who had been in the stands that day. This particular player had a “big-time” job with a major oil and chemical company, and had

an offer for his former coach: when he got tired of coaching, he could come run a plant in Carlsbaad, New Mexico.

Aldridge, who had coached for nearly thirty years, decided to take him up on the offer. The money was right, and the situation was better; running a plant would be far less stressful than running the McMurry College football team. “The only bad thing [was that] I had to leave Abilene,” Aldridge lamented.⁴⁹⁶

Once in New Mexico, Aldridge was shocked by the numbers. “My budget at McMurry was \$85,000: for equipment, transportation, motels, all that,” said Aldridge. “I went to work [at the plant] and my budget, monthly, was \$680,000... my first Christmas bonus was more than my annual McMurry salary.”⁴⁹⁷ The money was better, but that did not change Spud Aldridge. Just like he had always done, he did his absolute best.

He did so well that after five years, he received a phone call. The company wanted to move him to a much larger plant in Chicago, where he would make quite a bit more money and be responsible for many more people. “I told my wife, and boy, she didn’t wanna go to Chicago,” said Aldridge.⁴⁹⁸ Two hours later, though, he got a phone call from his mother—a call that brought him back home: “My mother, who lived on Amarillo Street, just catty-cornered from McMurry’s campus, called me and said ‘Spud, the athletic director at McMurry has taken the athletic director’s job of Abilene Public Schools.’ I said ‘I’d be interested, because I’m not going to Chicago.’”⁴⁹⁹ Aldridge had enjoyed being in business, but he knew that he belonged on a field or in a gym, around young men and women passionate about a sport that involved a ball. So, he immediately called McMurry’s president, Dr. Kim, and told him that he intended on applying for the job. Kim told him that he was hired, and that he expected to see him at 8:00 A.M. the following Monday.

So, in the spring of 1986, Aldridge returned to McMurry—this time for good. As usual, he had success. In 1992, he was inducted into the McMurry Athletic Hall of Honor.⁵⁰⁰ In 1994, he received the McMurry Faculty/Spirit Award, and was named Outstanding McMurry Administrator.⁵⁰¹ Aldridge, who so eloquently blended humility with confidence, was proud of what he had achieved during his many years at McMurry: “I’m not bragging, but I done [the job as head football coach and then as athletic director] short-handed.”⁵⁰²

In 1995, after seventeen total years of service to the university, Aldridge decided to retire. His service, of course, never stopped. He and Marilyn began running a “Meals-on-Wheels” route—something that the two did together for eighteen years. He was volunteer of the month in April of 2003.⁵⁰³ He and his wife also were active in the Noah Project, a care center for victims of family violence and sexual assault in West Central Texas. Aldridge served as a board member from 2001-2007, and was nominated for the Jefferson Award in 2004 in relation to his service with the group.⁵⁰⁴ The couple was also extremely active in the church. The two attended Aldersgate United Methodist Church, just across the street from McMurry, where Aldridge was Chairman of the Administrative Board and served on the Worship Committee, Finance Committee, and Staff-Parish Relations Committee.⁵⁰⁵ For several years, he also taught a Sunday School class.

Aldridge dealt with tragedy as well. In 1984, the couple’s daughter, Nannette, passed away in car accident. The couple’s son, Greg, was also killed in a car accident. The heartbreak was severe, but Spud and Marilyn Aldridge remained steadfast in their faith, and helped others who were going through similar situations. “They relied on God, and on each other,” said Lori Frymire. “They pushed through... Neither one of them ever [became bitter]. They just tried to honor their children with the way they walked through [those tragedies.]”⁵⁰⁶ Frymire continued:

“They felt like that was their ministry... [a huge number] of people in their Sunday school class had lost children... and my mom and Spud ministered to those people.”⁵⁰⁷

Despite facing some of the most difficult challenges, Aldridge always remained eternally optimistic. He was a great father, grandfather, and mentor to countless former players who sought his guidance in their lives, their careers, and their faith.

In 2017, Marilyn passed away. Nearly four years later, in July 2021, Spud Aldridge died at the age of eighty-eight. With him went a lifetime of memories and achievement, but he left behind a legacy that will transcend generations—and no part of it was more sacred to Aldridge than his days as a coach. He saw it as his responsibility not just to win football games, but to also build better young men. The method was simple: “I have two sons, and I treated my players just like I did my sons. My sons love me to death, and I think my football players probably thought something of me.”⁵⁰⁸

They certainly did. Red Behrens, who was perhaps the closest with Aldridge, had this to say in a tribute to his old coach: “Not only was he my college coach, he was also a father figure, a mentor, and a counselor. Words can’t describe the influence he and his wife, Marilyn, and their family had on my life. Coach—Thanks for everything. I love you and will miss our special talks about football and family. Give Marilyn a hug for me.”⁵⁰⁹

The 1980 season was special because of the accolades and the individual achievements—that is for certain. Yet, the 1980 team also inhabited a time and a place in McMurry University's history where the traditions were rich and the identity of the institution was clear. The coaches, players, professors, fans, and all others associated with the university were all Indians—and it was an integral part of being at McMurry during the fall of 1980.

In August of 2005, the National Collegiate Athletic Association decided that the eighteen universities who competed in the NCAA that used Native American mascots had to either adopt a different name or obtain a waiver from their representative tribe for the use of the mascot name.⁵¹⁰ The Indian moniker was deeply important to the McMurry tradition, as has been outlined in this project. So, the school opted to appeal the NCAA's ruling.

In May 2006, the NCAA rejected McMurry's appeal. While other schools, such as the Florida State Seminoles, got to retain their mascot, McMurry was told that it could not. The feeling that larger schools with more buying-power could escape the NCAA's new law, whereas small schools with less capital to fight with were being unfairly targeted, immediately took hold of many in the McMurry community. Then-president Dr. John Russell penned a letter to the alumni, outlining how the university would move forward:

McMurry University Friends and Family:

As most of you know, on May 18, 2006, the NCAA staff committee considering the University's appeal to continue use of its Indian name and imagery recommended to the Executive Committee of the NCAA that McMurry's appeal be rejected. This message is to inform you that McMurry will appeal the staff committee's recommendation. The University's appeal will be based on the arbitrariness of the NCAA's decision-making process and the inconsistent results and messages that have come from the process.

The NCAA has consistently indicated it believes the Indian mascot creates a hostile and abusive environment. In particular, the NCAA stated, "Fans, opponents and others can and will exhibit behaviors that are indeed hostile or abusive to Native Americans." McMurry makes every effort to ensure our fans, opponents and others are not hostile or abusive to Native Americans. However, we are unclear how other institutions, who have

been allowed to retain their Native American names, mascots, and imagery, are able to guarantee appropriate conduct toward Native Americans at their games.

The appeal will be submitted to the NCAA by June 18, 2006, which is within the 30 day window for appeal. Additional information will be made available after the University's Board of Trustees meets on June 23, 2006.

If you would like more information regarding the NCAA ruling and the appeal process, please do not hesitate to contact us at walters.kc@mcm.edu, or call KC Walters at (325) 793-4614. We will provide you with further information as events unfold.

Again, I would personally like to thank each of you for your thoughts and prayers as we deal with this issue.

Warm Regards,

John H. Russell, Ph.D.⁵¹¹

Despite the university's best efforts to fight the NCAA, the battle appeared to be unwinnable. The consequences were clear: the various athletic teams would not be able to participate in any post-season games, matches, meets, or events, and some schools would be unwilling to even schedule a regular season game with a team bearing the Indian mascot. The move back to the NAIA, who had no standing rule against a Native American mascot, was considered, but ultimately that was determined to be improbable. To fight the NCAA was also out of the question. The money that it would cost to litigate the issue was astronomical.

So, in October 2006, the McMurry Board of Trustees decided to move on from the mascot. After eight decades of tradition and lore, McMurry would no longer be the Indians.

Russell released another statement:

The Board and I believe that it is time to move on. It is time to focus our resources on creating more opportunities for our students. McMurry's values are reflected less by what our athletic teams are called than by who we are and what we do. McMurry University has been committed to honoring Native Americans since its founding in 1923. Regardless of the NCAA position on our team names, we will continue to meet our commitment to honor the Native American and to the history and culture that has ALWAYS defined McMurry.⁵¹²

The hearts of many old Indians broke that fall.

The decision came as a shock. The reactions were emotional and varied. Many McMurry alumni view the loss of the mascot as the loss of a legacy. Others do not care. Those associated with the 1980 team are among the opinionated.

“There’s still wounds there,” said David Lynn. “I didn’t like it... McMurry did nothing but honor Native Americans. There was not any tribe that pushing for it to be changed here... The people who graduated when [McMurry was] the Indians—there are wounds there. And that’ll go away eventually, because we’ll all pass away.”⁵¹³

Luke Taylor had a different take: “Me personally, I don’t give a shit what they call themselves... If they can provide the same thing to kids today that they provided back then, it doesn’t matter what you call them.”⁵¹⁴

“I didn’t like it man,” said Ricky Nolly. “I still can’t see us as War Hawks; I still see us as Indians... To me, we’re still the Indians.”⁵¹⁵

“I don’t think [the alumni] felt like McMurry tried to fight it,” said Mark Odom. “I don’t think that [McMurry] did... There were several things in [Kimbrall Arena] that had [the Indian logo or references]... they painted over those. I said, ‘You know, you don’t have to get rid of that, because even though it is not our mascot anymore, it is our history.’”⁵¹⁶ Odom added: “It hasn’t healed completely... and it probably won’t until attrition takes all of us Indians out of the picture.”

“We have a Facebook group, ‘The McMurry Indians.’ That’s what it is,” said Red Behrens. “I don’t think it made that big of a difference, though.”⁵¹⁷

Pug and Rickey Parris were damaged. “It’ll be something that’ll take a number of years [to get over],” said Rickey. “People like us are gonna have to die.”⁵¹⁸ Pug Parris, with tears in her

eyes, recalled the day that the decision was announced: “The student-body president stood up and said, ‘I don’t know what to say, because those on the inside can’t explain, and those on the outside will never understand.’”⁵¹⁹ An emotional Parris continued: “I have one my friends in my group... She’s gonna leave her estate to McMurry... She was hurt so bad over this that she’s thought about changing her will... I just hurt, and it is going to hurt a-lot for a long time.”⁵²⁰

Spud Aldridge was hurt as well. “I didn’t think we tried hard enough [to keep the name], but I don’t want to talk about it.”⁵²¹

McMurry College is now McMurry University, and the sports teams’ don the nickname “War Hawks” instead of Indians. The name attempts to honor the school’s heritage, and some believe that it does. Others will never get over the fact that the Indian mascot was lost. What cannot be doubted is that the decision has had and will have ramifications for years to come.

During the summer of 2020, another piece of the McMurry tradition was lost. After six decades of social clubs building and displaying Native American tipis out in Wah Wahtaysee Park during homecoming week, the university decided that the tradition would be no more. J. Stephen Sundby, chair of the Board of Trustees, had this to say: “While we appreciate and cherish the significance of Tipi Village in McMurry University’s history, it is imperative that we move forward embracing our new War Hawk mascot and in demonstrating and living by the institutional values consistent with the University’s Christian teachings.”⁵²² McMurry’s current president, Dr. Sandra Harper, added:

We know this decision will be disappointing for many alumni, students, and community members who have fond memories of Tipi Village, as does my family. Yet, I am confident that our current students, with the support of our dedicated alumni, will design a new tradition that will guide the University through its second century. Let’s unite to create a thriving future for McMurry University.⁵²³

So went Tipi Village, and with it sixty-plus years of tradition, legacy, and memories. What cannot be known is the impact that these losses will have on the university's future. What is known is that 1980 does not only stand apart because of the football team's success that fall, but also because it represents a different era—a time long ago when the words 'Ala Cumba' were a way of life at McMurry, rather than a phrase on the back of a t-shirt.

The legacy of the 1980 team lives on. Spud Aldridge, Tommy Estes, Luke Taylor, Dudley Woodard, Ricky Nolly, Mark Cox, and Red Behrens are all in the McMurry Athletic Hall of Honor. In 2012, the entire 1980 squad was inducted, forever enshrining the coaches and young men who took the field that fall amongst the McMurry greats.

There is no doubt that the central figure in that team's story was Spud Aldridge, and for good reason. He was a larger-than-life character. His thirty-six wins make him the third-winningest coach in McMurry football history—a feat he accomplished in just six seasons. Only R.M. Medley and Wilford Moore are ahead of him, who led the program for sixteen and eight years, respectively.⁵²⁴ In total, he won over one-hundred games at the junior-high, high school, and collegiate level.

Aldridge, when asked what makes a good coach, revealed the answer: "You have to love those kids, for then and forever."⁵²⁵ He cared for his players, and they loved him back. "You know what?" Aldridge continued. "When I see one of [my former players] I haven't talked to in a long time, we never shake hands. We hug one another."⁵²⁶

In the spring of 1981, the team was set to receive conference championship rings to commemorate the historic 1980 season. There was just one catch, though: the players and coaches had to pay for the rings themselves; McMurry did not have enough money in the budget to cover them. Aldridge, recognizing that not every player would be able to afford a ring, refused to get one. If every single player did not have one, then neither would he.⁵²⁷ That is because, for Aldridge, it was never about himself or his success. It was about his boys.

He loved them then, and he loved them forever.

¹ Vernon, Robert, "Multitude of Records Set In McMurry's Title Win," *Abilene-Reporter News*, November 9, 1980.

² McMurry Play-by-Play Sheet vs. Austin College, Nov. 8, 1980.

³ Lawler, Art, "Spud Still Searching For First Title," *Abilene-Reporter News*, November 5, 1980.

⁴ McMurry Football Record Book, 29.

⁵ Vernon, "Multitude of Records."

⁶ Lawler, Art, "McM Whips Tarleton," *Abilene-Reporter News*, September 14, 1980.

⁷ *The Totem*, 1924.

⁸ McMurry Football Record Book, 51.

⁹ *The Totem*, 1924

¹⁰ McMurry Football Record Book, 51

¹¹ McMurry Football Record Book, 31

¹² McMurry Football Record Book, 51-58.

¹³ *The Totem*, 1940.

¹⁴ "After 16 Years At McMurry—R.M. Medley Named Head Coach at Southwestern," August 8, 1939.

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- ¹⁵ *The Totem*, 1944.
- ¹⁶ McMurry Football Record Book, 28.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ *The Totem*, 1948.
- ¹⁹ McMurry Football Record Book, 52.
- ²⁰ McMurry Football Record Book, 29.
- ²¹ *Pride of Our Western Prairies: McMurry College 1923-1988*, (Mount Vernon, Texas: Eakin Press, 1989), 123.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ 2020 Baylor Football Media Guide
- ²⁴ McMurry Football Record Book, 29.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Vernon, Robert, "Spud Throws Gameplan Out The Window," *Abilene-Reporter News*, November 11, 1980.
- ²⁸ McMurry Football Record Book, 54.
- ²⁹ Interview with Spud Aldridge, June 26, 2021.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ *Pride of Our Western Prairies*, 154.
- ³² McMurry Football Record Book, 54.
- ³³ Interview with Spud Aldridge, June 26, 2021.
- ³⁴ 1980 McMurry Football Pre-Season Program
- ³⁵ Cameron Hollway, *The Little Southwest Conference: Texas' Greatest High School Football Rivalry*, (Odessa, Texas: Odessa American 2000).
- ³⁶ Interview with Spud Aldridge, June 26, 2021.
- ³⁷ 1980 McMurry Football Pre-Season Program
- ³⁸ Interview with Luke Taylor, January 29, 2022.
- ³⁹ Interview with Spud Aldridge, June 26, 2021.
- ⁴⁰ 1980 McMurry Football Pre-Season Program.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Interview with Spud Aldridge, June 26, 2021.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ McMurry Football Record Book, 54.
- ⁴⁶ 1980 McMurry Football Pre-Season Program.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with Spud Aldridge, June 26, 2021.
- ⁵⁰ 1980 McMurry Football Pre-Season Program.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Lawler, Art, "McM Counting On Defense," *Abilene-Reporter News*, August 31, 1980.
- ⁵³ 1980 McMurry Football Pre-Season Program.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Lawler, "McM Counting on Defense."
- ⁵⁹ 1980 McMurry Football Pre-Season Program.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.

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- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Lawler, "McM Counting."
- ⁶⁹ Interview with Spud Aldridge, June 26, 2021.
- ⁷⁰ Vernon, Robert, "Wilcoxson Initiates McM Scalping Party," *Abilene-Reporter News*, November 15, 1980.
- ⁷¹ "Aldridge's Indians In Good Shape," August 19, 1980.
- ⁷² Interview with Richard Nolly, March 28, 2022.
- ⁷³ Ibid.
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