Something About Pride—the story of *Varsity*

By Joseph Dobos '71 B Mus, '72 M Mus

In 1911, the University of Michigan was no longer a member of the Western Conference; about half of Michigan's games were played with schools from the East. For this reason, some Michigan fans considered *The Victors*—which ended with the words, "champions of the West"—to be unsuitable. Among those who held this view were Earl Vincent Moore, a senior at the School of Music, a private Ann Arbor conservatory, and J. Fred Lawton, a graduate of the Class of 1911.

On a crisp October afternoon in 1911, they met on the corner of Trumbull Avenue and Grand River in Detroit and decided that Michigan needed a new fight song. Lawton, a self-styled poet, and Moore, a gifted organist, had worked together on several Michigan "opera" productions—Ann Arbor's answer to Gilbert and Sullivan.

It was Moore who brought up the idea of writing a new Michigan song to which Lawton readily agreed. They went to Lawton's parent's house which was located nearby on Trumbull Avenue at Selden to write it. They hopped onto a streetcar and immediately began work on their new song. While looking at the advertisements posted on the streetcar, Lawton got an idea for a verse:

Varsity
We're for you,
Here for you to cheer for you,
We have no fear for you,
Varsity!

At the same time, Moore noticed a constant—almost annoying—clanking sound caused by a flattened wheel on the streetcar. From this, Moore got the idea for a usable rhythm. Neither of them had any paper to jot down their ideas, so for the duration of the ride, Moore "kept pounding out the rhythm on the seat of the car" and Lawton recited the words over and over so as not to forget them.

Upon reaching their stop, the two young men raced into the Lawton home and sat down at the parlor piano to hammer out a tune. Lawton's family—hearing the noise that was coming from their parlor—retreated to a back room where they listened to singing "that didn't sound a bit like human beings!" As the song developed, Lawton thought that the text ought to say "something about offense, something about defense, something about pride." When the song was finished, they played it over and over, and Lawton's family came in to listen; soon the whole family was marching arm in arm, singing the chorus of *Varsity*.

Back in Ann Arbor, a few days later on October 6, nearly 2,000 students filled University Hall for the weekly Friday night Mass Meeting. As Moore played the opening syncopated chords of *Varsity* from the console of the Frieze Memorial Organ, the assembled throng roared its approval. The song was hit; encore after encore was demanded.   After playing about a dozen choruses of *Varsity*, Moore tried to stop, but the crowd only responded back yelling "More, more, more!" Thinking they meant Earl, Lawton pulled his friend from the organ bench to take a bow, but the frenzied crowd shouted, "We don't want *that* Moore! We want more *Varsity!"*

In attendance at this rally was the conductor of the University of Michigan Band, Eugene "Ike" Fischer, who immediately recognized the appeal of *Varsity*. He agreed to play the march the next day at the Michigan-Case football game. Very likely, he made his own band arrangement overnight, and at the game, the Michigan Band performed *Varsity* during the half time. In so doing, Fischer chose to omit the traditional playing of *The Yellow and Blue* which caused the campus student newspaper, the *Daily,* to print the headline: *Did You Miss the Yellow and Blue?*   As for the new song, *Varsity,* the *Daily* called it "stirring" and predicted that it would "be one of Michigan's most popular songs." The *Michigan Alumnus* periodical reported that it was not uncommon, that autumn, to hear the tramp of "many feet and much whistling on the Diagonal Walk across the campus." The tune that they whistled was *Varsity*.

Earl V. Moore (left) became the first Dean of the School of Music when it was incorporated into the University. J. Fred Lawton was known as the unofficial poet of the University.