

# Surviving and thriving as the first woman

BY DOUGLAS ANN NEWSOM

*Ed. Note:* Board diversity has been a 30-year campaign for DIRECTORS & BOARDS. There still is a long way to go, but there was a very long way to go in the early 1980s. That's when Douglas Ann Newsom's appointment to the board of Oneok Inc. caught our attention. Here was a woman being named to the board of an energy company in Oklahoma. Even more, she was chair of the journalism department at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. Intrigued, we thought she might be open to keeping a journal of the first year of her board service as a way of giving our readers a special insight into how a board was diversifying itself. Willing she was, and "Directorship: A Year in the Life" was published in 1983. Dr. Newsom is still with TCU as a professor of journalism and still on the Oneok board.

**W**HEN I WROTE THIS piece for DIRECTORS & BOARDS, I was the first woman elected a director of Oneok, which is celebrating its centennial in 2006. Now three of the nine outside directors are women.

Back then I wasn't sure that what the board was looking for was my expertise, because it was a time of token appointments as a nod to diversity in race and gender. Recently the lead director, Pattye

L. Moore, told the *Wall Street Journal* that what the company looked for in directors was diversity of thought and background.

Then, the company received most of its income from a single utility, although the company slogan was "wellhead to burner tip." Now there are three utilities, one of them headed by a woman, and the company is much more diversified. Many

members of the investment community didn't know Oneok; now it is among the *Fortune* 500.

Some of the challenges I wrote about seemed enormous, but others, much more demanding, were in the future. I enjoyed having a role in implementing Sarbanes-Oxley. Then, I was on the audit committee and now I am again, as well as the executive compensation committee, although I was off of both when I was chair of corporate governance and lead director. I've served under four chairmen and seen consistency in ethical, responsible leadership that always has thought and planned for the long term.



In 1982 when I was elected to the board, I was interviewed by then Chairman and CEO Charlie Ingram, now chairman emeritus. I was 48 years old. December 2006 will be my last meeting because I will be 73 in January, before the first meeting in 2007. Retirement used to be

70, but a stockholder at an annual meeting asked why we were retiring people so early. We considered his point, talked about 75 and decided on the 73rd birthday being the retirement age. ■

## That was then...

...Walt Radmilovich, the VP for corporate communications, picked me up from the hotel so I could go over early and meet other Oneok officers. I visited various offices in the wonderful 1920s building and enjoyed the splendid hospitality and apparently genuine welcome, although I was not yet a member of the board.

The youngest board member, Bill Ford, came in to shake my hand on his way into the board meeting. I appreciated that expression of confidence. I recognized the other officers from their pictures in the annual report, so I knew who they were

as they dropped into the office to meet me. Shortly after the meeting started, Charlie Ingram came to get me and take me to the boardroom where I was officially welcomed as the first woman and the 13th board member.

All of the men stood when I

came in, and I walked around the room shaking hands with each. A chair (and all of the meeting materials) had been placed for me at the end of the table, so my journey around the room put me in the proper position to be seated. Ingram said jokingly that he didn't permit new board members to say much, but I could have a few minutes. I just thanked them for the opportunity of working with them and although I knew where we were in the agenda, I was immediately aware of what I must start learning about the industry to become

an effective director.

On the way out of the meeting, as I picked up my luggage and coat to get to the airport, much to my amazement secretaries came out of all of the nearby corporate offices and seemed really eager to meet me. Two of them said things like, "You know what this means to all of us to have you on the board." I don't think I really had, until then.

When I got home, my oldest son asked if this was another of those "nonpaying" jobs. It was those volunteer jobs, service on all those professional and community organization boards, that gave me the sort of background that Oneok was looking for...



Copyright of Directors & Boards is the property of MLR Holdings LLC d/b/a Directors & Boards and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.