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Good for Lamar, good for all:

KEMBLE LED BY UNITING

by **Jeff Spoeri**

Early in 1977, Lamar University president John Gray stepped down after his second term leading the institution, and a national search began to find his successor. That search led to Roswell, New Mexico, and the campus of New Mexico Military Institute, where a thoughtful, innovative graduate of and faculty member at West Point, C. Robert "Bob" Kemble, a World War II veteran, was in his fifth year as superintendent. He had righted the financial ship at NMMI and, intrigued by a new challenge, came to Lamar to interview for the presidency.

Kemble took the job, and for the next decade he was instrumental in setting a direction and course for Lamar University that in many ways persists to this day. Committed to building relationships and encouraging collaboration, Kemble brought together disparate communities, both on campus and around the world, to move Lamar into the national and international higher education conversation. "We were a very regional university, in that 70% to 80% of the student body came from within 100 miles," Kemble said he discovered upon arriving in Beaumont, "but the second-largest contingent was international students—people who were interested in Lamar because of oil, business, offshore drilling, that sort of thing." He set to work managing and uniting these two extremes into a cohesive university population, while enhancing Lamar's reputation within and beyond Southeast Texas.

Guided and assisted by university and community leaders like longtime banking executive Elvis Mason '59, Gulf States Utility Corp. CEO W. Donham Crawford, commercial real estate developer and founder of Texas State Optical Ben Rogers L.L.D. '88, and Lamar regent A.H. "Bob" Montagne, Kemble set to work. "The first focus," he said, "was to address immediate needs in finance, business, the oil-related industry, and then move to long-term planning." He is quick to point out that he could not do this alone. "With such local support from truly influential leaders, I earned their trust pretty quickly and [set] on a course that they could all understand: 'What we do for Lamar is good for our area and therefore good for us.'"

Kemble served as Lamar University president until 1984, at which point he moved into the role of chancellor of the Lamar University System. Throughout his tenure, he focused on building consensus and advancing the university through broad engagement. "If I had one forte," Kemble remarked, "it was listening very carefully to other people's views and interests and then bringing them together." This was true not only in the LU faculty and the broader Southeast Texas community, but internationally as well.

In 1978, Kemble was invited, along with educational leaders from Wisconsin and Florida, to visit China to observe and review their higher education activities. "They always allowed me to have the last question in meetings," Kemble recalled, "because the first time they asked, 'Any more questions?,' I said, 'Yes, what can we do for you?,' which everybody thought was a good ending." During their last visit, though, at a university in northern China, Kemble's final question was actually an invitation to form a sister university relationship with Lamar. This led to exchanges of faculty and students between Texas and China for several years and helped to reinforce Lamar's status as a university welcoming to international collaboration. Kemble even navigated the tricky challenge of working with both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. "I called our Chinese faculty together one evening and said, 'I'm bringing people both from PRC and from Taiwan,'" chuckled Kemble, who was concerned about their reaction, "and they told me, 'Forget about it – we're all Chinese.'"

Kemble takes great pride in helping to build the athletics and arts programs at Lamar as well. He remembers Lamar sending several athletes to the 1984 Olympic Summer Games in Los Angeles and the success of Cardinal teams in baseball, football and men's basketball, the latter highlighted by trips to the NCAA tournament in 1979—where, he wistfully recalled, "we ran into Michigan State and a guy named Magic Johnson"—and 1980, when Big Red advanced to the Sweet Sixteen. With fond recollections of coaching legends like Jim Gilligan, Billy Tubbs, and Larry Kennan, Kemble's support of LU athletics continues to this day. Music also became a particular passion for Kemble and his wife Helen. "I have wonderful memories of the band with Jimmy Simmons. Students would say, 'We're going over to Houston to play in the Dome, and we may lose the game but we're going to win the half!'"

After leaving Lamar in 1986, he and Helen returned to New Mexico, where Gov. Garrey Carruthers appointed him to head the brand-new Department of Public Safety. As he had done so often in his career, Kemble successfully brought together seven different agencies into one cohesive unit to benefit the people of New Mexico. He left that role in 1990 and, after several years consulting throughout the country, Kemble retired for good in 2007. His wife of 58 years, Helen, with whom he has five children and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren, passed away that same year, but today at age 96, Kemble remains active, taking frequent walks around his neighborhood at the base of Sandia Peak and maintaining his support of LU through the C. Robert Kemble Presidential Scholarship, established in his honor in 1986, and the Robert Kemble Award, which is given annually to the outstanding male graduate of Lamar University. Always deflecting credit and acknowledging that, as he put it, "I've been blessed with a lot of people who have helped along the way," Bob Kemble's commitment to Lamar University is still felt today, some four decades after his presidency.