

# SOONER SPOTLIGHT • ARRELL GIBSON

Arrell Morgan Gibson arrived at the University of Oklahoma in 1946 with a burning desire to study with the late Edward Everett Dale, the day's foremost interpreter of the history of the Southwest. In the subsequent years, he earned bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees under Dale, then joined him on the OU faculty, mirroring, and in some cases, exceeding, his mentor's achievements as scholar, historian, educator, speaker and author. Today it is Gibson who is the recognized authority on the history and culture of the Southwest.

Except for a brief but "happy and productive" stint at Phillips University in Enid and several sabbaticals, Gibson has remained an OU faculty mainstay, serving as department chair twice, ever since. In addition, he was curator of the OU library's Western History Collections from 1957 to 1972 and presently is curator of history at the University's Stovall Museum.

Named a George Lynn Cross Research Professor of History in 1972, Gibson was awarded OU's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Citation, in 1982 and was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame on November 16, all honors which Dale also garnered during his career. Gibson readily admits he patterned his life after the inimitable Dale, a Sooner legend who died in 1972 at age 93.

"It's been the fulfillment of a dream—not only to have been able to study under Dr. Edward Everett Dale, whom I regard as the premier interpreter of this region, but also, in a sense, to continue his work."

Editing Dale's autobiography, *The West Wind Blows*, was a real labor of love, Gibson says of one of his most recent undertakings, noting that most importantly, Dale's widow, Rosalie, was pleased with his determined effort to keep the "Dale spirit" of the work intact.

Gibson frequently spices a conversation with Dale witticisms, such as Dale's admonition to his readers: "Remember that the only difference between a rut and a grave is depth." Clearly Gibson, who was Dale's last Ph.D. student, lives the life of a man bent on heeding that warning.

Gibson teaches the survey of U. S. history required of all OU freshmen,

and courses on the West and the American Indian. In alternate years, he and President Emeritus Paul Sharp team-teach a seminar on the western regions of the U.S. and Canada as literary themes. Additionally, Gibson works with more graduate students on theses, directed readings, research problems and dissertations than any other member of his department; he has produced more than 30 Ph.D. students, a source of great pride.

"I educate through my writing," he says. "I've taught thousands of students in my career, and I have reached hundreds of thousands with my books, so I teach both ways."

A self-proclaimed "compulsive writer," who writes "something every day," Gibson has authored 150 articles and 23 books on the West, Southwest and



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American Indians, many of which are used as college, secondary and elementary school textbooks. Now, however, he is adding a twist to his writing repertoire with an upcoming book on the Pacific Basin frontier, and he plans another to be based on his World War II experiences in the Mediterranean.

"I've refused to be a specialist, and my range of interest is so catholic and so eclectic, that I figure I can study and write and develop an engaging interest in just about any topic."

Gibson and his wife, Rosemary, a fiction writer, travel like gypsies. They began the fall 1985 semester at an Albuquerque museum dedication, where he spoke on the artist colonies of Santa Fe and Taos, a synopsis of his book on the same subject. Then they visited Sacramento, Tulsa, Kansas City, San Antonio and wound up the semester in Tucson, where the couple lectured at a writers' conference.

With all his traveling, however, Gibson has missed but one class meeting during the course of the semester. "I arrange my departures and arrivals so that my teaching does not suffer, because it's very important to me."

Next spring, Gibson will be on sabbatical at Arizona State University at Tempe, where he will be appointed to the Goldwater Distinguished Professorship of American Institutions. It will be a return engagement for Gibson, who was loaned to ASU 10 years ago to help with the installation of two new graduate courses.

"That is very exciting," Gibson says. "To be wanted back is gratifying."

At this juncture in his life, Gibson could be forgiven for resting on his laurels. However, as this man of amazing modesty and grace shares another Dale pearl, it is obvious that the Dale influence still spurs him on to accept new teaching and literary challenges.

The story goes that when Dale made the decision to abandon his cowboy life in frontier Greer county to seek a college education, his peers chaffed him, one noting Dale would be 32 by the time he graduated. Gibson says Dale only sipped on his coffee and replied, "Well, boys, it seems to me it just sort of sifts down to this. Do I, when I reach the age of 32, want to arrive there with a college degree or without it? I'll be 32 anyhow." —MF