

"How can a Congressional Studies Center exist in Oklahoma? Shouldn't that be located in Washington?"

Ron Peters hears those queries often. However, as director and curator of the University of Oklahoma's Carl Albert Congressional Research Studies Center — a blend of academics and research — he is amply qualified to field any questions and quiet any doubters.

Peters was a key member of the group that proposed the formation of the center, established officially in 1979 by the State Legislature and State Regents for Higher Education. This spring, nearly a decade later, the papers of Albert — an OU graduate, Rhodes Scholar and former Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives — were opened at a public ceremony befitting the occasion. Housed in Monnet Hall, the Albert collection joins the papers — files, speeches, scrapbooks, clippings and photographs — of 50 current and former members of Congress.

Peters, his colleagues and supporters of the center have achieved what critics thought impossible: establishment of a center for congressional studies in the hinterlands. But in the beginning, even Peters could not have foreseen what success lay in store for the Carl Albert Center on its way to becoming OU's largest endowed academic program.

Genesis of the center's endowment was a bill introduced in the House in 1980 by Rep. Dave McCurdy, who had inherited the legislation from the late Rep. Tom Steed upon Steed's retirement as Oklahoma's 4th District congressman. However, the original \$2 million bill carried a matching fund requirement until U.S. Sen. David Boren's 1986 amendment lifted that stipulation. Another amendment added a \$1 million federal grant to OU's private funds, bringing the endowment to \$3.5 million.

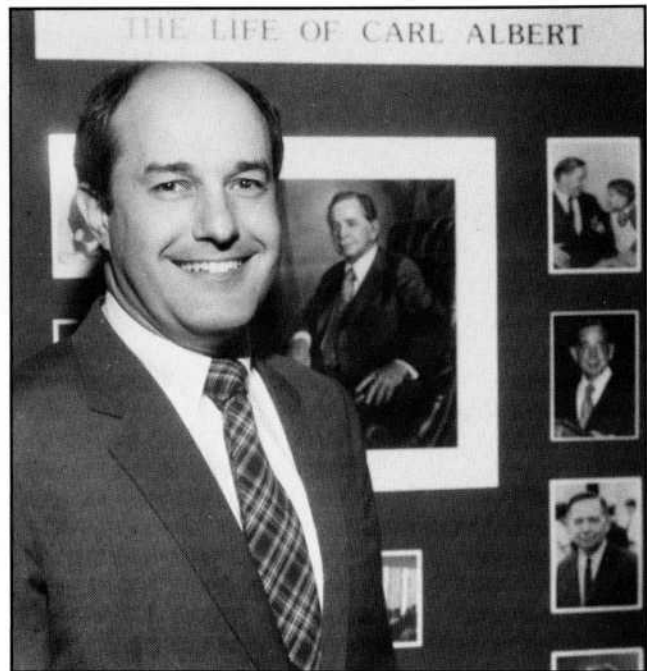
The academic program annually offers two highly competitive five-year Ph.D. fellowships topped off with a year in Washington and a year back at OU to write a thesis. Additionally, the center has introduced a new undergraduate research fellowship program with plans to accept five students yearly.

"What we're trying to do is bring together high quality undergraduate and graduate students and faculty all in the same place, all studying in the same area, to interact," Peters explains. To date, 16 graduate students from as far away as California, Massachusetts, Virginia and Georgia have enrolled.

A political scientist with roots in political philosophy, Peters teaches a graduate level course on representation and next year will teach democratic theory to undergraduates. Born in Indiana, Peters received his Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1974. He accepted a one-semester visiting appointment at OU in 1975, and more than a dozen years later views his accomplishments — and his goals — most pragmatically.

"Because of our resources, we have opportunities here that others don't," he says. "I think that imposes upon us a greater obligation to take advantage of those opportunities in ways that will serve the University."

Peters has authored *The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780* and is completing *The American Speakership*, under contract to the Johns Hopkins University Press. The book places the speaker's office in historical perspective and



traces its development through several periods in its evolution, with emphasis on Albert and Tip O'Neill.

The Carl Albert center offers a visiting scholars program, through which any scholar with a purpose to be served by OU's congressional papers may submit a proposal. If center administrators agree that the program can benefit the scholar's work, the center will fund his or her travel to OU.

To further direct the center to national prominence, Peters is promoting — in connection with the OU Centennial celebration — what will be the largest congressional studies conference ever held. In April 1990, 30-50 major congressional scholars, along with present and former members of Congress, will descend on Norman for what Peters envisions as the first of a triennial series.

Peters now has amassed plenty of ammunition to silence the "Only in Washington . . ." critics.

"It's silly to think you must live within the Washington Beltway to understand the Congress," he maintains. "It's more valuable to have places around the country where people can study the government. With the Rayburn Library, LBJ School, Truman Library and Eisenhower Library all nearby (in Texas and Kansas), this part of the country has a lot going for it.

"Besides, we play to more than one audience, the most critical of which are the scholars, and they are not deceived by accouterments. They want to see research."

OU's Carl Albert Center, replete with its newly acquired reputation for research, a blossoming academic program and respected archives, appears to be approaching the very threshold of scholarly esteem. Even its architect cautiously believes the pieces are in place.

The day will come, Peters says, when "scholars around the country are willing to say of the center that 'students go there because they can get well educated; they have good people.' When that day comes, we will know that we have arrived."