

**P**retend the following: You are 62 years old. You have spent the bulk of five decades associated with the University of Oklahoma—as student, professor and administrator. Finally, after 30-plus years working in 11 university-related positions, and after accomplishing enough professionally to fill several single-spaced *curriculum vitae* pages, you retire.

What then?

W. David Steen understands this challenge well. The 66-year-old retired OU professor began to ponder the topic of retirement planning more than two decades prior to leaving the College of Medicine in 1985. Currently, as executive secretary for the Academy of Retired Professionals, he devotes six-to-eight hours a week promoting intellectual development as a key to finding fulfillment in one's retirement years.

Organized through OU's College of Liberal Studies in 1985, the Academy seeks to "keep older folks' vital signs operating," Steen says. He sees the Academy as providing a stimulus for "this increasingly large number of well-educated older people who have the ability to contribute significantly to society."

In practice, "providing a stimulus" means organizing forums which give the Academy's 120-plus membership an opportunity to hear presentations on diverse topics — the status of American Indians, Central America, the environment, preventive medicine and more. Often, the forums boast not only authoritative speakers but "name" ones as well. For instance, two years ago Oklahoma's Attorney General Robert Henry, an expert on Will Rogers, joined former Governor George Nigh at an Academy forum on Rogers' life and times.

Steen, who organizes up to four of these disparate forums a year, points proudly to the Academy's most recent and most ambitious forum, a "story-telling celebration" March 7. The forum will be the Academy's contribution to OU's Centennial Celebration, and is viewed by Steen as above



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all a preservation of an important yet fragile resource in the University community — the memories of its older citizens.

"There's an amazing amount of information out there that's associated with the University," he adds. "Funny stories, sad stories, historical stories, but most of all stories that never have been told. The media go after the big stories—that's their job — and so many times people don't get to hear these other important stories."

To bring these tales together, Steen solicited 750- to 1,000-word anecdotes about life at OU in the last 100 years, with plans for participants to recite them at the March forum in intimate groups of a dozen or so people. Steen envisions publishing a selection of the best stories and preserving a number of them on videotape as well.

Overall, the unstructured nature of the Academy's intellectual mission has proven popular with members, Steen says. In contrast to most goal-driven scholarly organizations, the Academy "doesn't have a mission or a crusade . . . It's delightful, after spending 30 years professionally with your mind concentrated on a spot the size of a quarter, to read about and attend a forum on law, sociology, history or whatever."

Steen wants to expand the Academy's offerings to include seminars on aspects of planning for retirement. He encourages professionals 50 and older to be "thinking about retirement, about second careers, what volunteer services you want to render, if you want to write a book, and so on."

The notion of "pre-retirement" planning has been on Steen's mind since he served on the National Advisory Committee on Aging 30 years ago.

"We found that very few companies were helping their people prepare for retirement. Based on that, plus the fact I was teaching gerontology at the time, I learned the best thing for me was to go through a process of planning."

Obviously, the lesson was not put to personal use right away. Hired as assistant professor of preventive medicine

# W. DAVID STEEN ●



Photos by Betsy Baker



*LEFT: In his ongoing effort to preserve precious memories of our older generation, Steen chose longtime Sooner resident Ruby Sullivan, right, who moved to Oklahoma in a covered wagon. ABOVE: OU journalism professor emeritus Louise Moore, left, played the role of the interviewer while Steen's videocamera recorded for posterity Sullivan's stories of an early OU.*

and public health in 1963, Steen went on to serve as associate dean in the College of Health from 1968-73, vice-chair in the department of family practice from 1974-76 and interim chair for family practice from 1979-82. He directed the community medicine division of the department of family medicine from 1982 until his 1985 retirement.

Steen recalls that for two years prior to his departure, "I worked out ways to schedule my time. I figured what my income was going to be . . . When I quit teaching in 1985, I volunteered to work with the state medical association for a year as secretary to medical students. I promised my class of '86 students I'd work with them until they graduated. It was a transition."

In and out of retirement, Steen's life has been closely linked to the Sooner state. Born in the southeastern Oklahoma town of Hugo in 1923, he graduated from Norman High School in the late 1930s and studied for a year at OU. World War II took him to China and Burma with the Army Air Corps. Upon his return, he married and continued his studies at OU, obtaining a bachelor's in zoology in 1949.

Steen journeyed to New York's Columbia University to seek a master's degree in public health, finishing there in 1952. Returning to Oklahoma, he worked successively for the state's Department of Health, the American Cancer Society and OU's Extension Division (now Continuing Edu-

cation and Public Service). He stayed in Oklahoma, he says, because in his work at OU, "I never did lack for a challenge."

Steen describes himself these days as "plugged into" his Academy work, his passion for gardening and his two primary school-age grandchildren. He also teaches a course in nursing home administration through OCCE for the benefit of prospective administrators preparing to take the state's certification exam.

"And then grandmother and I travel," he says, referring to Beatrice, his wife of 41 years. "But not like the typical retired traveler."

A weekend trip for the Steens might include photographing bald eagles at Lake Keystone or an excursion to a museum in some out-of-the-way part of the state. The couple took a more ambitious jaunt last Thanksgiving when they hopped a flight to San Diego. Once there, they enjoyed an unorthodox Thanksgiving dinner at a burger stand and drove to the ocean to hear the waves lap against the shore. It was "just beautiful," Steen recalls.

Definitions of successful retirement are probably as subjective as definitions of happiness, but Steen's retirement lifestyle can be summed up in a maxim he feels works for him:

"The important thing when you sit down at the end of the day is that you've been up for most of it."

—MICHAEL WATERS