

SOONER SPOTLIGHT • Norman Crockett

Educators sometimes find the rewards of teaching in the strangest of places—say, the produce aisle of a supermarket.

It was there, OU history professor Norman Crockett recalls, that an OU graduate in his mid-20s once walked up to him and said, “You don’t know my name. That’s not important. I just wanted you to know that taking your course really made a difference in my life.”

Crockett says, “It was the nicest compliment I’ve ever had.”

In almost a quarter-century of teaching and advising, Crockett has demonstrated the vitality and relevance of American history for more than 20,000 OU students, a record of accomplishment recognized this spring when the popular professor was honored with the Oklahoma Medal for Excellence in Teaching at the College and University Level. He is the fourth OU faculty member to be so honored by the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence in the past six years. The award this year consisted of a \$7,500 cash prize and a limited edition glass sculpture, “Roots and Wings,” by Oklahoma artist Ron Roberts.

Receiving the medal was “very humbling, because I know of a lot of people who deserve it,” Crockett says. “There are great teachers within this department.” He cites the publication record of the current history faculty—67 books and 246 scholarly articles—and the fact that six of eight colleagues who came to OU about the same time he did have stayed with the department.

Crockett’s tenure at OU began in 1969. A Missouri native, he completed bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degree work at the University of Missouri. After finishing his Ph.D. in history in 1966, he served as a Newcomen Fellow in Economic and Business History at Harvard University in 1967-68. He then went back home to teach, accepting a permanent position on the University of Missouri campus at Rolla.

“It was the old Missouri School of Mines and Metallurgy. It’s right in the middle of the Ozarks. A beautiful location. But at that time it was heavily oriented toward engineering, and I found the students not exactly interested in history—or anything except engineering.”

The position at OU offered “a larger university where



Historian Norman Crockett is one of the best teachers on the college / university level and has the medal to prove it.

there were more students, more diversity and more interest in the social sciences and humanities.”

Over the years, Crockett has taught courses ranging from surveys of American history to classes in economic history, the American West, American history as seen through the eyes of novelists and a course in the nation’s constitutional history that draws many pre-law students. In addition, he served the department as assistant chair in charge of the graduate program from 1971-73 and as chair from 1976-80.

Especially close to his heart are the College of Liberal Studies’ nontraditional external degree programs, in which he has taught at the rate of about one seminar a year since 1973. He also has contributed to program planning as a member of the college’s executive committee. The Liberal Studies seminars, generally compacted into an intensive two-to-three-week period between semesters, offer an enjoyable

opportunity to interact with highly-motivated adult learners, Crockett says.

“I like adult learners, because collectively the class knows more than I do. Their life experiences far exceed my own. And they’re there because they want to be there. They’re paying their own way, and many times they’re giving up a vacation or taking off from work to attend, so they *really* get involved. It’s a great environment.”

Crockett expresses deep empathy for the challenges adult learners face in going back to school. Among the fears that drive middle-aged freshmen in regular degree programs are worries over whether they can survive academically. He sees in these apprehensions some of his own experience—as a rural child whose parents possessed no formal education beyond the sixth grade, who graduated in a class of 14 from a 75-member high school, who initially felt intimidated by the world of higher education.

“When I got out of high school and started at the University of Missouri after working for a number of years, I couldn’t read well. I don’t know what my reading speed was, but it was atrocious. So I did what I see being done on campus now by adult students—many of them middle-aged women, who are either divorced, or their kids are grown, who come to college and are scared to death.

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Crockett and his nominator, the late Louise B. Moore, admire the Ron Roberts glass sculpture accompanying his Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence award.

"What they do is study more than they really need to, and they make good grades. They overcompensate. And that's what I did."

That empathy has practical benefits for Crockett's students. "My two graduate assistants and I spend a lot of time teaching them how to study, how to study for an exam, how to outline an essay question, how to write one. I think it pays off."

Crockett speaks just as warmly about teaching students who come to OU straight from high school. "They don't know how to play the game yet, and therefore they'll ask the interesting questions. Some of the questions are absurd, of course, but the students aren't inhibited. I find them refreshing."

He adds, "It's really exciting to see an 18-year-old discover for the first time that they have a mind—that they can conceptualize a problem, research it, study it and write it up in some kind of understandable form."

Crockett's students discover that while his lectures tend to be concise, the professor "wanders" in a different sense. In nominating Crockett for the Medal of Excellence, the late OU Professor Emeritus Louise Beard Moore summed up his classroom presence: "No lectern gripper, he. He knows his stuff, is no pedant hanging onto notes . . . Textbook obfuscations disappear as Crockett lectures, pacing back and forth across the room."

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The professor's dislike of immobility is further evidenced by a portable manual typewriter set in the corner of his sparsely-decorated office. He says that when working on his books and articles, he pats the keys while he thinks—a habit sensitive computer keyboards do not permit.

Crockett is spending more hours at his keyboard these days. Author of two scholarly books and editor of two others, Crockett now is writing, under contract with the University of Oklahoma Press, a book on the economic history of Oklahoma. "I'm enjoying it because I'm interested in this state and in the great differences — culturally, economically, politically, socially — between the southeast and the northwest areas of the state."

His earlier works have been regional in scope, such as *The Black Towns*, a study of several all-black communities in Oklahoma, Kansas and Mississippi in the period between the Civil War and World War I. *The Woolen Industry of the Midwest* described the decline of the region's woolen mills, now abandoned, which numbered more than 800 during their heyday, circa 1870. The research took Crockett through eight states.

A pleasure traveler as well as a scholar, Crockett has visited every state east of the Mississippi and describes vacations with his wife Judith as one of his favorite uses of time. He also fills his leisure hours refinishing antiques and reading.

He does not, however, expect to find any additional time for recreation soon. Now age 58, the professor plans to continue teaching for at least another three years, until Judith, an elementary school teacher, finishes her doctoral degree in education. Beyond that, the most he can say is, "I'm not sure when I'll retire."

And what kind of mark does he want to leave behind when he leaves the classroom for the last time?

"I think every teacher who enjoys teaching wants to feel that along the way he's touched somebody's life. History is an excellent vehicle to do that, because if you can study a period of the past, and if you can help explain the human condition of that period, in the process you can reflect on your own life in a new way." —MICHAEL WATERS