



Sunlight strikes the stained glass walls of the reference librarians' office in the reading room.

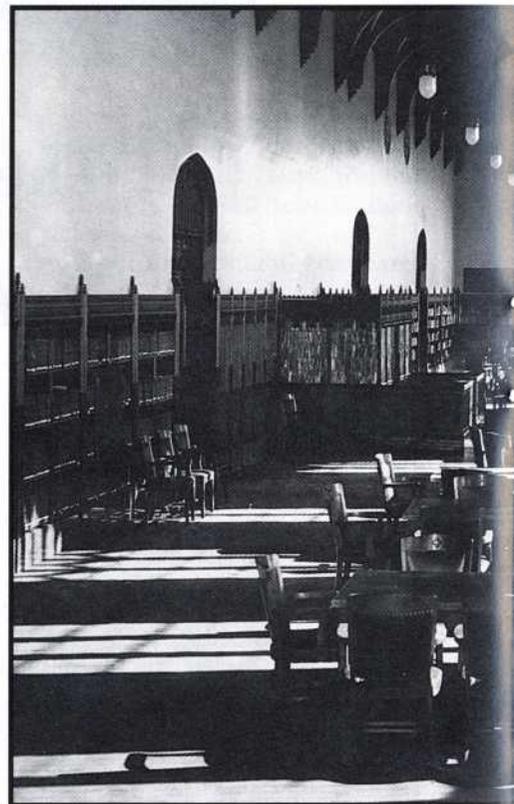
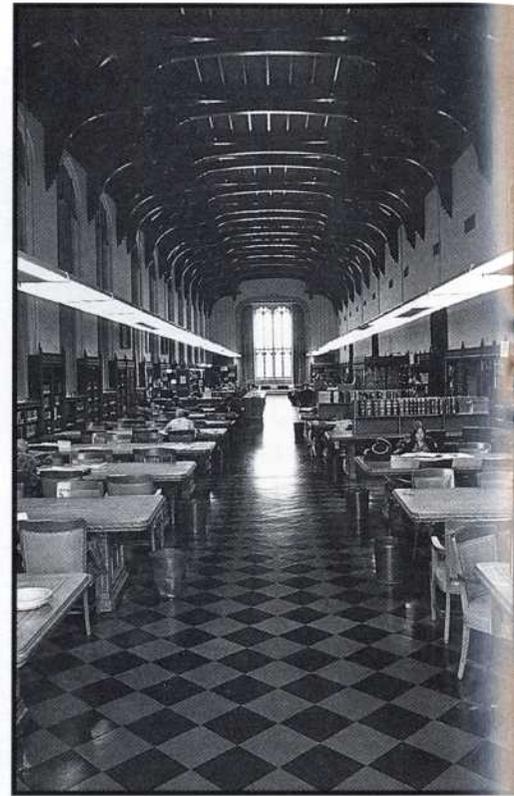
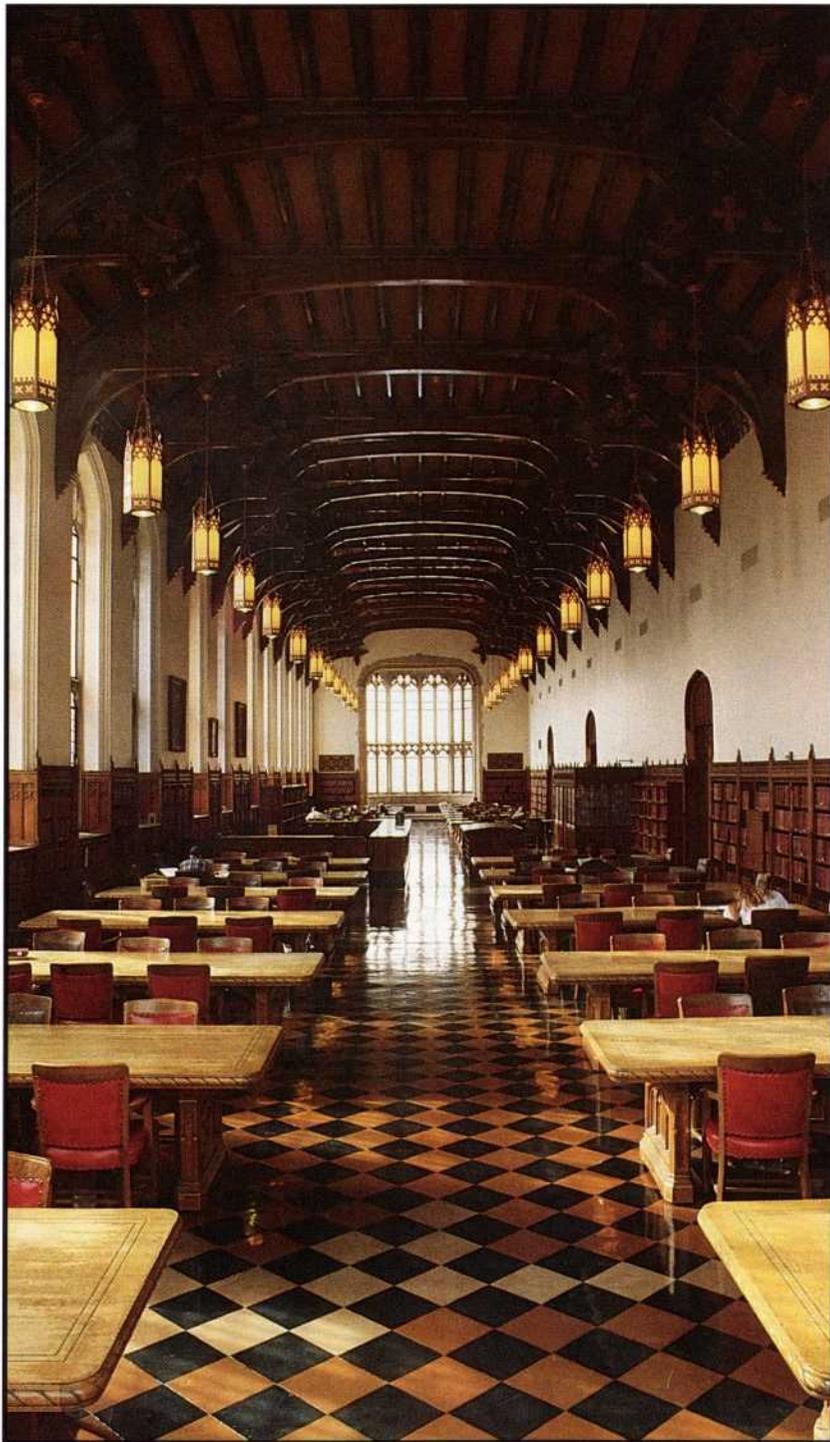
The Great Reading Room

Grandeur Restored

by Carol J. Burr

The University Library. At dedication ceremonies on February 21 and 22, 1930, this generic name was attached to the classic example of the Collegiate Gothic architecture that would come to symbolize the University of Oklahoma's Norman campus. But the eloquent speakers also dubbed the imposing structure at the head of the south oval "Oklahoma's Crown Jewel." In 1949, five years after his death, the library would be formally renamed for William Bennett Bizzell, the indomitable president whose uncompromising determination drove a reluctant legislature to authorize the \$500,000 for its construction.

The single most impressive feature of Bizzell's library was its magnificent "main reading room." Stretching 185 feet across the entire width of the building, this sanctuary for generations of studious Sooners was accessed through four Gothic doors covered in red leather,



The recent restoration of the Great Reading Room in Bizzell Memorial Library, as shown above, was accomplished by a crew from the OU physical plant, who researched the University Archives in an effort to recapture the grandeur of 1929, as seen in the photo at bottom right, taken at the time of the library's dedication. In the photo at top right, the reading room is shown with its 1958 draperies shutting out the natural light and eight-foot fluorescent fixtures replacing the original medieval lamps.

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studded with copper spikes and ornamented with hammered copper hardware. At either end of the room stood 30-foot-high bay windows of Bedford stone with narrower windows of the same height lining the entire south side to admit the maximum amount of natural light.

The exquisite hand-carved woodwork of dark oak found throughout the building was used to great effect in this room, which over the passing years would be rechristened "the Great Reading Room." The carved figures on the 17 large oak ceiling beams gazed down from 40 feet on the light oak tables and red leather upholstered chairs (which could seat more than 500), the built-in bookcases with their carved accents and the black-and-tan diamonds of the tiled floor.

The reference librarians' office was centered on the north wall, a quaint little room-within-a-room of stained glass walls framed by more of the intricate hand-carved oak motif. The whole room was illuminated by 14 medieval-style lamps hung from the ceiling beams.

But taste and styles change, and the passage of time took its toll on the Great Reading Room as it did elsewhere in the grand building. The original plans had called for construction of east and west wings to form a quadrangle by joining the library to Evans Hall, the administration building, its architectural mate to the north. When an addition finally was added in the late 1950s, the age of the woodcarvers, Gothic sculptors and stone masons had passed, and the new architecture reflected the stark red brick boxes of the day. The subsequent addition in 1982 of the Doris W. Neustadt Wing on the west created a new front entrance to Bizzell Memorial Library and architecturally mediated the differences between its first two units.

The reading room, all but forgotten in the push to modernize, did receive some updating of dubious value in the 1958 renovation. Tapestries and draperies were installed over the south windows to shut out the natural light, and, to compensate, eight-foot fluorescent fix-

tures replaced the 14 medieval lamps. Inexplicably, some of the red leather chairs were reupholstered in green. The wood, stone and tile were allowed to dull to but a pale reminder of their former grandeur.

In the preparation for the 1990 Centennial Celebration with its emphasis on institutional history, however, a new appreciation for the artistry of Great Reading Room emerged, and plans were laid for its restoration. OU physical plant engineer Don Carter and his crew researched old photographs from the archives and quickly stripped the tapestries and draperies from the windows and disposed of the fluorescent lights. An exhaustive search turned up energy-saving fixtures in a church accessory catalog that resembled the original hanging lamps while providing vastly improved reading light. The annual savings in energy costs will be nearly \$4,100.

In addition, the carved oak woodwork was cleaned and sealed with polyurethane, water-damaged ceiling tiles replaced, the walls repainted and floor tiles repaired, sealed and waxed to a high gloss. Eventually all the massive oak tables and chairs will be refinished for students who prefer the spaciousness and quiet isolation of the reading room to the study carrels of the more modern wings of the library.

"No person now living can predict accurately the needs of a library 20 years from the present time," wrote OU librarian Jesse L. Rader in discussing his splendid new building in the March 1929 *Sooner Magazine*. He and the visionary President Bizzell would have applauded the library's expansion in both facilities and holdings over the past six decades. Yet it is not difficult to imagine their pleasure in seeing past glories revisited in the restoration of the Great Reading Room.

President Bizzell saw the "new" library building as an expression of the spirit of the University of Oklahoma and a symbol of the faith of the people of Oklahoma in higher education. His successors merely are proving their stewardship in keeping the "Crown Jewel" shined.

