

Chapter Four

When the Sneeds and the Thompsons gathered for OU Law Commencement 1994, family tradition and University history intertwined once again.

by Mary Lyle Weeks

The story began almost 90 years ago when a young man of 21, the youngest ever, was admitted to the Territorial Bar in 1906. A chapter was added in the early 1920s by two other young men, identical twins with fiery red hair, who established a cleaning business to pay their way through college. The stories intertwine the histories of two distinguished Oklahoma families—the Sneeds and the Thompsons—with the annals of the University of Oklahoma.

The most recent passage was recorded May 7, 1994, when three young women participated in OU College of Law Commencement ceremonies. They are Elizabeth (Beth) Jane Sneed, the fourth generation to attend law school at OU, and twins Maria Louise and Elaine Bizzell Thompson, third-generation law graduates but with fourth-generation ties to a celebrated OU figure.

The name Sneed is almost synonymous with the College of Law because of the late Earl Sneed's long association as dean of the College. But the family connection began long before he joined the faculty.

The young man admitted to the Territorial Bar was Dean Sneed's father, Earl Sneed Sr. (Once he added a middle "Everett" to give him a more "dignified" name; later he dropped it.) In accordance with the times, he already had "read for the bar" in a Tulsa attorney's office, but in 1907, he came to OU to study law. While doing so, he supported himself as assistant county

attorney for Cleveland County and by reporting for *The Oklahoma City Times*, resuming an occupation begun years earlier at *The Lawton Constitution*. He also worked on newspapers in Joplin and Tulsa.

In 1911, he married Nellie Frances Johnson and moved back to Tulsa, where he served two years as assistant county attorney before entering private practice. Their son, Earl Sneed Jr., was born in 1913, the same year Earl Sr. returned to OU briefly to complete a B.A. degree.

Earl Sr.'s interests expanded to include the oil business, and he served as attorney and secretary for Roxana Petroleum Corporation, predecessor of Shell Oil. He is credited with giving Tulsa its International Petroleum Exposition and was the organizer of the Petroleum Club of Tulsa.

Earl Sneed Jr. (in later years, he had the Jr. legally removed from his name) earned a B.A. degree at OU in 1934 and an LL.B. in 1937. While a student, he met and later married Cornelia Lynde.

After a brief private practice in Tulsa, he joined the Tulsa Chamber as a full-time employee until activated for World War II in 1941. At war's end in 1945, the School of Law, beset by the first surge of the returning G.I.s, needed new faculty members. Acting Dean Maurice Merrill invited Sneed to teach law.

After consulting close friends, he accepted. One friend wrote that the gist of what Sneed said of his decision

was that "working with the young was exceptionally rewarding, that teaching was hard work, and the great disadvantage was that pay was meager, especially in Oklahoma."

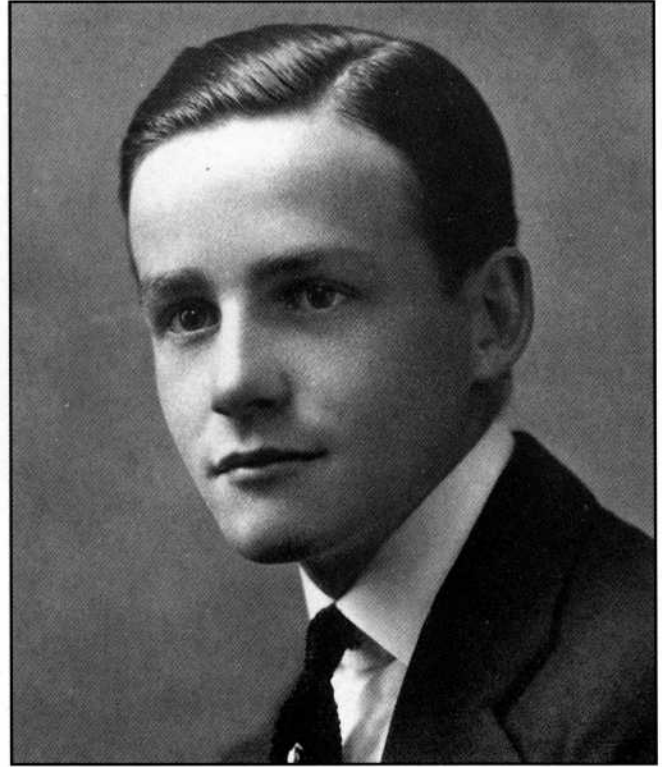
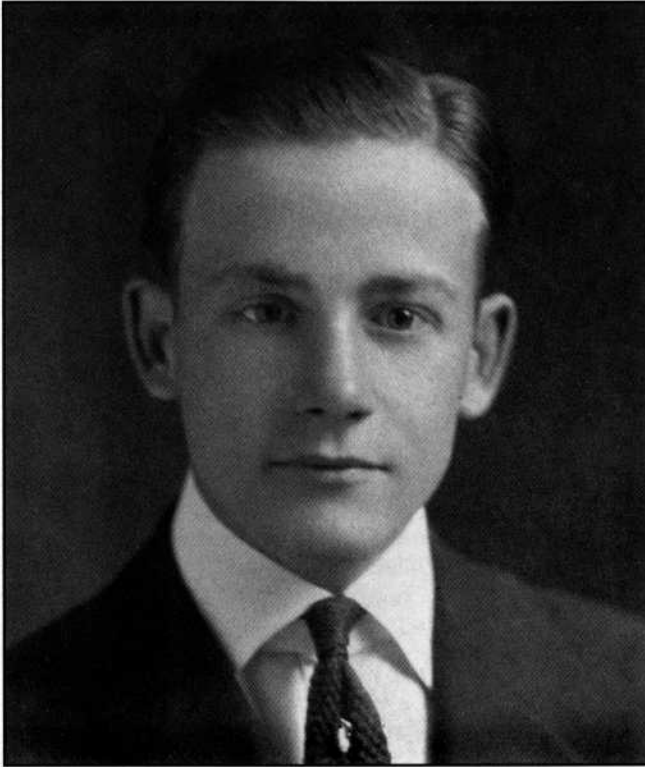
He rose from visiting assistant professor to professor in 1948 and acting dean in 1949 at age 36. He was named dean in 1950 (the same year the School of Law became the College of Law), holding the post until 1965 when he went into banking in Oklahoma City.

The OU Regents granted him the title of dean emeritus in 1975, and the faculty lounge in the Law Center is named for Earl and Cornelia Sneed. During his tenure, he is credited with heightening the excellence of the faculty and with successful fund raising for faculty salaries and facility improvements. But Cornelia maintains that Earl's first love was always the classroom.

"He loved teaching," she says. "He always taught a course, usually a freshman course. He once said he cherished the classroom dialogue."

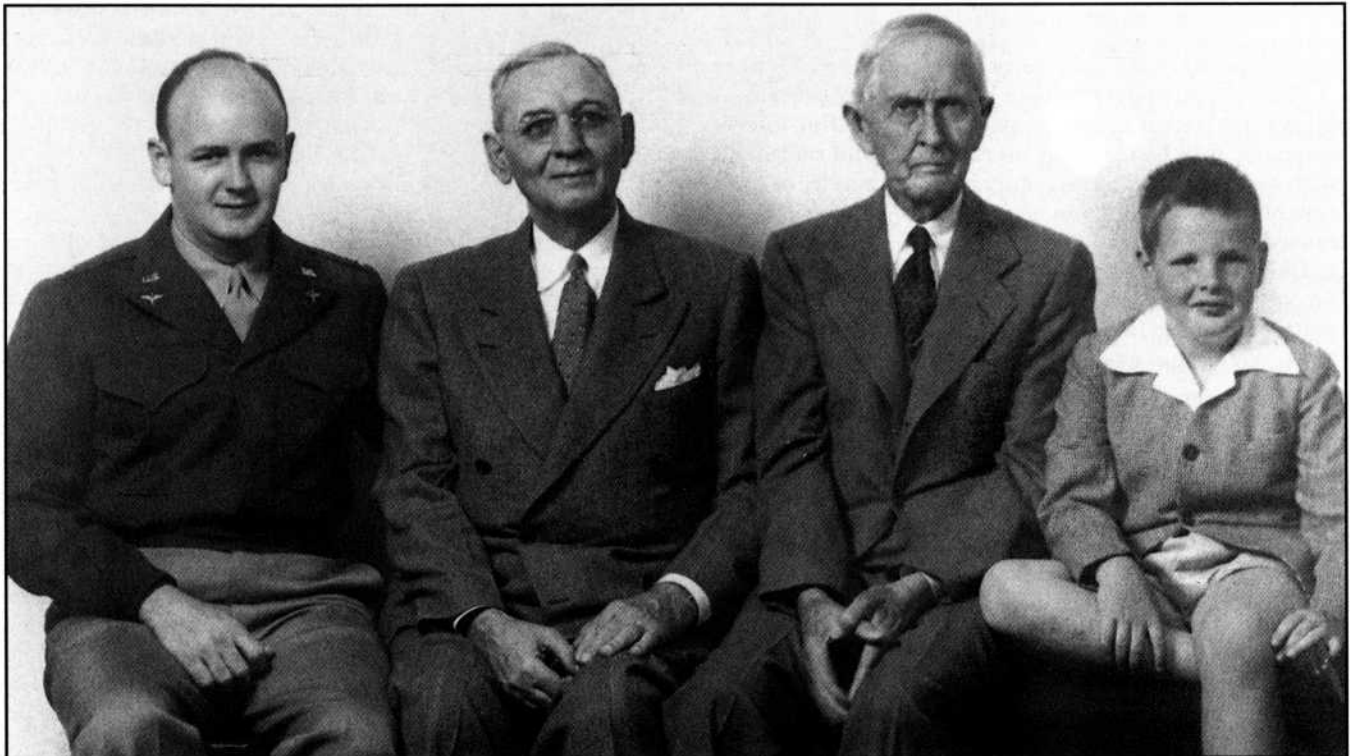
Earl and Cornelia Sneed also contributed greatly to their community and the state. He served as mayor of Norman and authored the Sneed Plan for judicial reform in Oklahoma. Earl was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, and both were active in the cultural life of Norman and Oklahoma City.

The third-generation Sneed to attend the OU College of Law was James L. Sneed, now a Tulsa attorney, who earned his 1960 bachelor's degree cum



Ralph Thompson, left, and twin brother Lee, right, who earned '25 B.A.s and '27 LL.B.s, never switched places in class or on dates, but Lee confesses that by showing their lone

ticket and becoming acquainted with the train conductor one at a time, the identically dressed OU students took more than one mid-'20s football trip on a single fare.



Three of the four generations of Sneed attorneys who attended law school at the University of Oklahoma are pictured here with the family patriarch, Gamaliel Sneed,

second from right. At left is future law dean Earl Sneed, in his WWII Army Air Force uniform; his father, Earl Sneed Sr.; and his son, James L. Sneed, then age seven.



A proud James L. Sneed, left, an attorney in Tulsa, welcomes his daughter, Beth, to the family legal fraternity that includes his late father, OU law dean Earl Sneed, whose portrait hangs in the Law Center's moot court room.

laude from Harvard University.

"I was in an undergraduate honors program at Harvard," Sneed says. "The emphasis was history and literature with some pre-law." The family business obligations in oil and agriculture caused him to return to Oklahoma for law school. "You don't get much oil and gas law back east," he explains.

Jim entered the College of Law where his father was dean. Cornelia says with typical decorum, that the situation was "difficult for both of them." Jim gives a longer but still understated description.

"If I had been a 'gentlemanly C' student, it wouldn't have mattered," he says somewhat ruefully. "But because of the struggle to be among the leaders in the class, it was

difficult. There was a lot of competitive pressure."

Jim followed his father into law and continued the family tradition of service as a trustee of Tulsa's Hillcrest Medical Center and its foundation and a director of the Grand River Dam Authority. His brother, Robert Earl, is a captain for United Airlines, reflecting Earl's Air Force service and his 30 years in the reserve. His sister, Cornelia Ann Sneed Scribner is married to a senior professor at Michigan University.

Jim and his wife, Jane Barnes Sneed, an OU fine arts graduate, have three children. David is a graduate of the University of Kansas with a dual emphasis in radio-TV and Spanish. Thomas is a liberal arts major at Montana Uni-

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versity; his dominant interest is wilderness skills.

The middle child is Beth, who did not set out to be an attorney.

"I enrolled in education in the Peabody School at Vanderbilt, then transferred to the OU College of Education," she explains. Graduating in 1989 with a B.S. degree in early childhood education, she moved to Dallas to seek a teaching position.

"While I was there, I became interested in the paralegal field through friends," she explains. She received a paralegal certificate from the Southeastern Paralegal Institute and worked for an Oklahoma City law firm.

"I realized I wanted more of a challenge, more involvement in the legal profession," she says. She completed her juris doctor from the OU College of Law in December 1993 and passed the bar in February. Currently she works for New York Life Insurance Company in Tulsa. "I do counseling on financial planning, both personal and business, estate planning and related matters."

Beth grew up hearing about OU but became much more aware of the significance of her family history and traditions while in law school. She also continued the family custom of service through Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

"One of the hardest things about leaving Norman was leaving my little sister (a girl of seven). I keep in touch with her—that relationship is important to me." She already is looking at volunteer work options in Tulsa.

The Sneed family, through the Sneed Foundation, has established the Earl Sneed Centennial Professorship in the College of Law.

The Thompsons' law school tradition began with the identical twins, Lee and Ralph, who came to OU from Nowata. As undergraduates, they amassed a total of 33 honors. Lee received the first Letzeiser Medal as the outstanding senior man, was president of the student body and chosen for the senior men's honorary Pet. Ralph was vice president of Congress, a member of the Congress debating team and business manager of the *Sooner* yearbook.

Early in life, Lee had been undecided on a career. "Ralph always planned to go into law, and I hadn't

made up my mind. But by the time to go to OU, we both knew we wanted that.”

It was as president of the student body that Lee met his future wife, Elaine Bizzell Thompson, daughter of William Bennett Bizzell, OU's fifth president. She recalls their first date.

“Lee had another girl, but because he had worked so closely with my father, he thought he'd ask me for a date—just out of courtesy. He took me to a baseball game, and we stayed until the end. I had come from Texas A&M (where Bizzell had been presi-

dent), where nobody ever left any athletic event until the end, so it didn't occur to me to leave. That impressed him. He said girls were never that interested. Through the years, I've said that's how I caught him—by staying until the end of the game.” They have been married 65 years.

Lee and Ralph received their LL.B. degrees in 1927 and practiced law in Oklahoma City. Lee and Elaine's first son, Lee B. Jr., was born in 1931. The second son, Ralph, was born in 1934 and named for Lee's twin. A daughter, Carolyn Thompson Zachritz, was born

in 1937. Sadly, Lee's twin died the same year son Ralph was born.

“It was pain that I had never experienced,” Lee recalls. “I just couldn't get over it. I felt I had lost a part of myself.” Lee always had wished for additional twins in the family and, after Ralph's death, wished for them even more.

The Honorable Ralph G. Thompson, now a United States District Judge, grew up with an awareness of OU.

“As long as memory serves, I felt a kinship with the campus. I spent my first seven Thanksgivings and Christmases at Boyd House (then the president's home), and I recall the walks I took across campus with my grandfather.”

However, when Ralph was graduated from high school, he “intended to go anywhere but OU. When I did come to OU, I knew only one thing: I never intended to be a lawyer. I could remember my father spending evenings working at the dining room table at things that did not seem exciting.”

He enrolled in business, but by the time he received his B.B.A., his long-range plans had changed.

“After one year at OU, my horizons broadened,” he says. “I decided to be a lawyer.” Ralph received his law degree in 1961 and recalls a particularly significant fact about his law school days. “There were only two women in my class—pioneers—and they took turns being No. 1 and No. 2 in the class.”

After law school, Ralph spent three years in the Air Force Office of Special Investigations and considered a career in foreign service or the CIA. Instead, he opted for private practice with his father for 15 years.

“I had always dreamed of the possibility of service in the judiciary but never expected it.” The possibility became reality in 1975 when, upon the nomination of the late U.S. Senator Dewey Bartlett, President Gerald Ford named him to the U.S. district judgeship.

Ralph and his wife, Barbara Hencke Thompson, OU B.A. '61, have three children. The oldest, Lisa Thompson Campbell, OU B.A. '88, is an FBI intelligence operations specialist in Washington. The law school graduates, Maria and Elaine, are the twins that



Gill Jain

The University memories of Lee B. Thompson, seated, extend back to the careers of his brother, Ralph, and father-in-law, William Bennett Bizzell, through his son, Ralph, second from left, to granddaughters Elaine and Maria.

Lee Thompson had wished for.

"Three days before they were born, the doctor diagnosed that Barbara was carrying twins," Ralph says. "We kept it secret from my father and told him only after they were born. He was ecstatic."

The twins had opportunities to go to other universities but chose OU because they believe it is a wonderful institution and they "wished to continue the tradition." As undergraduates, they were chosen for the President's Leadership Class, Mortar Board, Tassels and Alpha Lambda

pline," Elaine says, "but it has been very rewarding."

"We had wonderful examples to follow," Maria adds. "Our father and grandfather. We were exposed to a wonderful work ethic through them."

Listening to their grandfather's stories about their great uncle Ralph has made them appreciate the twin relationship even more. They say it has always been positive, never a problem, with a meaningful closeness that will not change even if they live apart—which is a distinct possibility. Elaine has accepted a position as an associate

Ralph and Lee Thompson and Carolyn Zachritz have honored their parents at OU. Surrounding the William Bennett Bizzell statue that faces the library named for him is the Elaine Bizzell Thompson Garden, an oasis of flowers and seating areas created and maintained by an endowment. They also established the Lee B. Thompson Sr. Scholarship in the College of Law.


During the years, there have been similarities between the Sneed and Thompson families and times when their paths have touched. Both Lee B. Sr. and Earl Jr. were selected to receive OU's Distinguished Service Citation, and in 1970 Earl Sneed Jr. nominated the man who would be elected president of the Oklahoma Bar Association, Lee B. Thompson Sr.

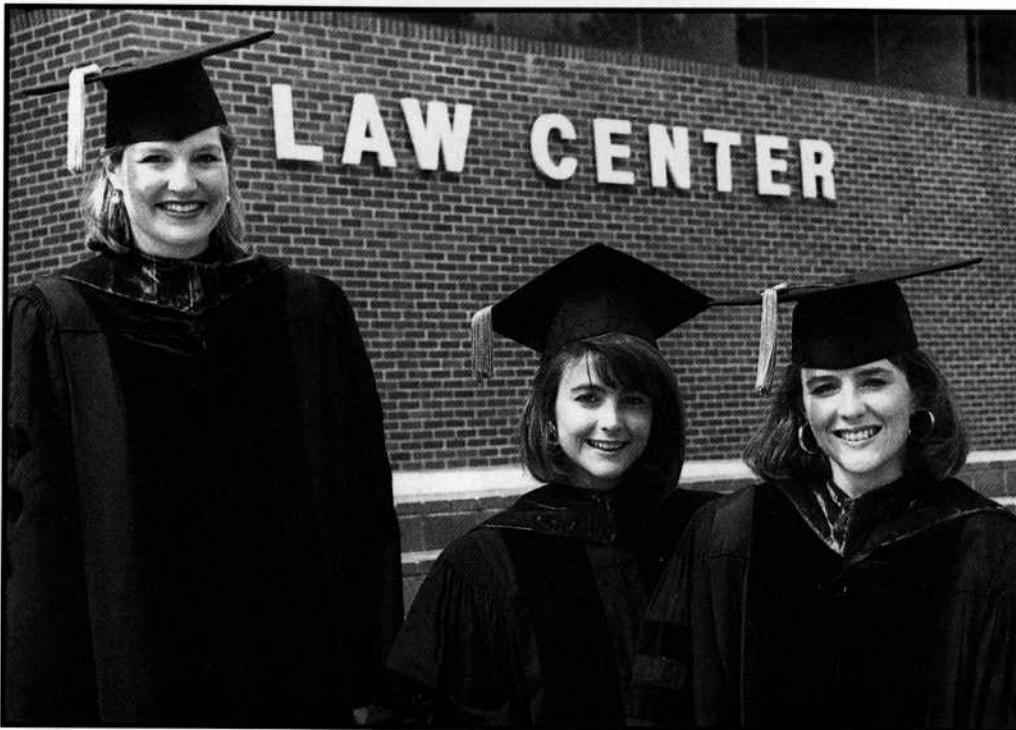
There is the Beta link—Earl Sneed Sr. was the first at OU to pledge Beta Theta Pi social fraternity; Earl Jr. and Jim Sneed, the twins Lee and Ralph Thompson, and Lee Sr.'s sons, Lee Jr. and Ralph, also have been Betas.

Beth Sneed now works for New York Life, a company for which Lee B. Thompson Jr. has been an agent in Enid for many years. And in 1992, three good friends—Beth Sneed and Maria and Elaine Thompson—spent the summer at Oxford University studying British law.

In 1906, the young man reading for the Territorial Bar could not possibly have foreseen that in 1994 a

woman, his great-granddaughter, would be admitted to the Oklahoma Bar. And William Bennett Bizzell, working with the fiery-haired young student body president, could not have dreamed that his great-granddaughters would be another pair of Thompson twins destined for the legal community.

But the May 7 Commencement marked exactly those achievements in the history of these two prominent Oklahoma families—and a fourth-generation milestone for the University of Oklahoma. 



Gil Jain

May 1994 College of Law Commencement ceremonies were strictly a family affair for Beth Sneed, left, and Elaine and Maria Thompson, whose Sooner roots are four generations deep.

Delta on the basis of scholarship, leadership and service.

Their third year in law school was the only time they lived together since coming to college. While in law school, both were named to the Dean's Honor Roll. Maria was selected as an American Inn of Court participant and named to Phi Delta Phi honorary scholastic law fraternity. Elaine was a semi-finalist in the first-year appellate advocacy moot court competition and a Board of Advocates member.

"Law School has been a test of disci-

with Andrews Davis Legg Bixler Milsten & Price in Oklahoma City and wants to be a litigator. Maria is completing interviews, some in Tulsa and Texas. She is interested in corporate law and civil litigation.

Maria and Elaine, to most people, are identical. Their grandmother Elaine says when they were small, she couldn't tell them apart. Now, if she sees them together, she can.

"But if I see just one without the other..." She smiles. "I wait until I get a clue before I use a name."