

The President and the Professor:

With “a Sense of Deep Regret . . .”



OU Western History Collections

President William Bennett Bizzell

Third in a Series by David W. Levy

These three letters, written during the fall of 1933, speak for themselves. On one level, the story they tell may seem trivial and quaintly amusing to modern readers, a relic of the era of prohibition. But we must not be indifferent either to the deep personal feelings they reveal or to the subtle things we can learn from them about the history of the time in which they were written.

Both of the writers were gifted and well known. William Bennett Bizzell had been president of the University of Oklahoma since July 1925. Although he had considerable knowledge of both science and social science, and although he deserves much of the credit for modernizing the University and for encouraging faculty scholarship and publication, he nevertheless retained, at the core of his being, an austere and remarkable personal dignity and a stern Old Testament morality. If there was anyone to whom the term “Christian gentleman” could be applied, it was he.

In 1916 he had written a book called *The Social Teachings of the Jewish Prophets*, on the ground, he said in his preface, that “the content of the prophetic literature is rich in suggestiveness and social teaching for an age like our own.” It is no accident that one of his legacies to the University was the 655 Bibles he collected over the course of his lifetime. (He donated the bulk of his 14,000-volume personal library to Oklahoma Baptist University.) He was 57 years old when he felt compelled to take up this sensitive matter with one of his English professors.

Walter Campbell was only 46, but he had been at the University twice as long as the president. He had been raised in Weatherford, where his father was president of the Southwestern State Normal School. Campbell owned the distinction of being Oklahoma’s first Rhodes Scholar. He began teaching English in Norman in 1915, spent six months in France during World War I and returned promptly to the classroom in 1918.

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Writing under the name “Stanley Vestal,” he had already published seven books dealing with western and southwestern history, including well-received biographies of Kit Carson and Sitting Bull. By the time he died, on Christmas night, 1957, he had written 24 books, edited three others and produced countless articles, short stories and reviews.

Campbell was a loyal member of his church, St. John’s Episcopal, but probably took Biblical morality a little less seriously than Bizzell. He liked to hunt, fish and camp; he played golf and followed baseball; in 1930 and 1931, he lived for 18 months on the French Riviera. He loved Milton and Browning, but at the core of *his* being, was the spirit of the frontier that he wrote about so much and so well—informal, wise-cracking, free and easy.

It is as hard to imagine Campbell writing a book called *The Social Teachings of the Jewish Prophets* as it is to imagine Bizzell producing *Jim Bridger* or *Big Foot Wallace* or *The Wine Room Murder*. It is quite impossible to imagine William Bennett Bizzell flinging a piece of bread across the room—as Campbell admits doing—to get the attention of some old frat buddy.

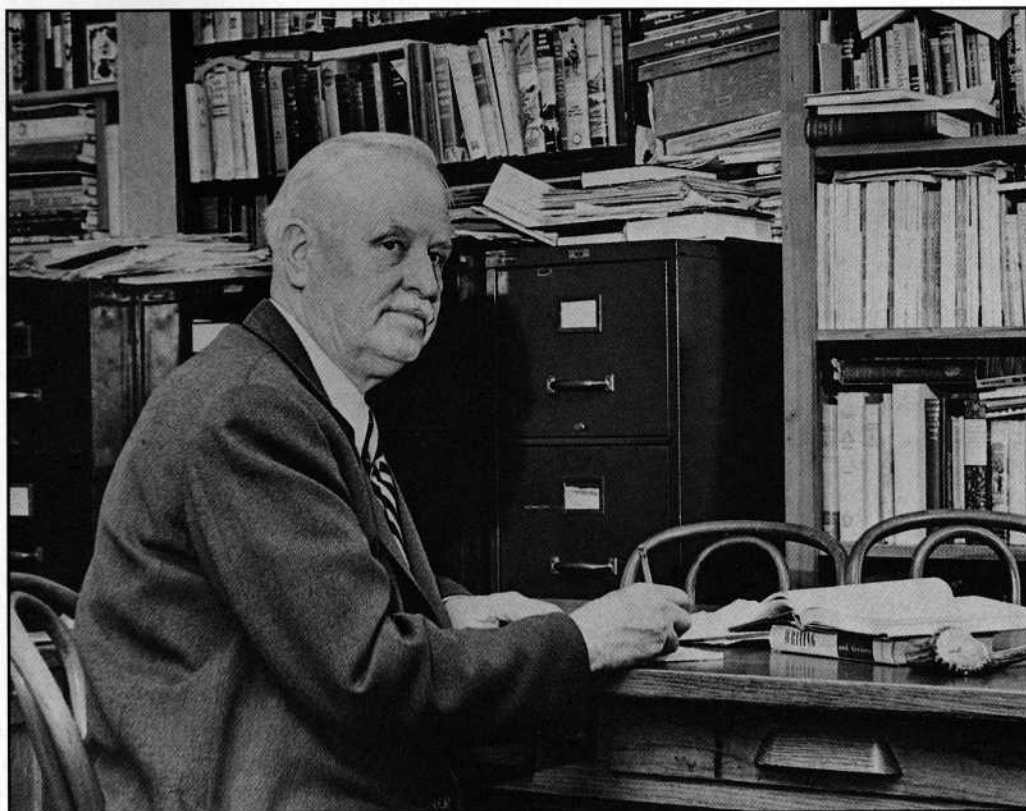
What we have in these letters, therefore, is a dialogue between two generations, almost between two cultures.

The picture that emerges from Bizzell’s letters is of a man driven by an unshakable sense of duty to the resolute performance of a distasteful, but necessary responsibility. In Campbell’s case, the picture is more complicated.

The first thing we notice, of course, is his eloquence. The letter, written on the very same day that Bizzell’s accusation reached him, makes it easy to understand his reputation as a brilliant stylist—he was certainly the right choice to be the founder of the University’s distinguished Professional Writing Program. His letter to President Bizzell begins and ends in a tone of deference and respectful friendship. Toward the end, however, Campbell permits himself a touch of anger as he strikes out, sometimes a little wildly, at enemies and injustices real or perceived.

But the most interesting and revealing thing in this exchange is what Professor Campbell absolutely *refrains* from saying—what, I suppose, almost any present-day professor would immediately reply were he or she to receive such a letter as Bizzell’s. Campbell never asserts the position that his conduct at a weekend party is not the proper concern of the institution or its president. He never argues that he has a private life, and that until his personal behavior directly touches his teaching or research, it is no one’s business but his own. His letter, instead, acknowledges (by never questioning) the propriety of Bizzell’s action. Thus, these two quite different men—separated by age, position, codes of morality and temperament—both subscribe to an ideal of a university community far more intrusive and paternalistic, far more concerned about its moral reputation and public example than would soon be the case.

This ground of common belief in the nature of the University is able, in some measure, to overcome the possibilities for bad feeling and personal animosity inherent in this situation. Because they agreed on some basic things, because, in a sense, they spoke the same language, both men emerged from the confrontation with their dignity, self-respect and friendship undamaged.



Despite their widely different personalities, author/professor Walter S. Campbell (a.k.a. Stanley Vestal), above, and William Bennett Bizzell held each other in high regard and refused to allow the performance of the president’s administrative “duty” to destroy their friendship.

November 14, 1933

Mr. W. S. Campbell
Faculty Exchange

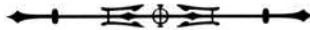
Dear Mr. Campbell:

Information has come to me from several sources, both here in Norman and in Oklahoma City, that you were under the influence of liquor at the alumni banquet in Oklahoma City the night before the Homecoming Game. I did not see you myself and I have been rather shocked to have people tell me about it. I hope it isn't true, but I cannot ignore such definite information from people who seem sure of the facts.

The University punishes very severely any student who is caught under the influence of liquor. Aside from other considerations, the University feels that in order to be consistent, it must insist that every member of the faculty refrain from the use of intoxicating liquor.

My great affection for you causes me to feel a sense of deep regret that I must write you this letter, but my duty is clear in the matter. I wish you would write me clearly whether my information is correct or false. I have been trying to see you for several days but the pressure of work has made it impossible. I am leaving for Chicago today and I will thank you to have this information in writing on my desk by the time I return.

Sincerely yours,
/s/ W. B. Bizzell, President.



November 15, 1933.

Dr. W. B. Bizzell,
University of Oklahoma,
Norman, Oklahoma.

Dear Dr. Bizzell:

I have your letter of November 14, and will answer it, as you request, as clearly and directly as possible. All along you have treated me like a Prince, and the discovery that my behaviour has caused you embarrassment and pain distresses me more than I can say. I am terribly sorry. But you may set your mind at rest; your informants were mistaken. I was not the worse for liquor at the Homecoming Banquet in the Biltmore.

If several persons in whom you have placed confidence have received the impression that I was so, it is useless to oppose my simple statement to their opinions, I therefore offer the following facts.

I had never attended a Homecoming party before. But when it was suggested, I had just completed my book for the University Press. I had been working night and day, had lost more than ten pounds weight, was tired and nervous, and sadly in need of relaxation. Once, long before, I had been warned by an older, and (I realize now) a wiser head, that any faculty man who attended such a party was risking his good name. But I thought nothing of that, and went. I went to have a good time, and enjoyed myself. Unhappily for me, my notion of a good time does not consist in standing in a corner and looking solemn.

I drove my car to the City myself. Had I been under the influence of liquor, you may rest assured that Mrs. Campbell would never have permitted me to take the wheel. On arriving at the hotel I was happy to see so many old friends, and may have talked with more animation than usual. In the lobby I ran across a vagrant Oxonian (a sportsman who had come West to shoot) and had five minutes chat with him there. I suppose that conversation made me sentimental and carried me back to my

undergraduate days. At any rate, during dinner I saw an old fraternity brother of mine at a nearby table. He was a member of the chapter when I was initiated, and was sitting with his back to me. In order to attract his attention, while the noise of the singing was going on, I chucked a piece of bread at his back. As you probably know, such an action is nothing out of the way at Oxford, or in any gathering of English university men. But immediately after, I saw that the people about had put the worst construction upon my action. Then I recalled the warning of my friend—too late. I suppose that this was the beginning of the stories against me.

But if you will ask anyone who knew me well at Oxford, or in the A[merican].E[xpeditionary].F[orce in World War I], he will tell you that a man of my temperament, when intoxicated, is never convivial or jolly, but becomes silent, surly, mean, quarrelsome, and violent. Had I been under the influence of liquor, I should have been tossing bricks, not biscuits. On the contrary, throughout the evening I was as pleasant, agreeable, and considerate as I know how to be, and there was not an unfriendly word spoken. I danced with a number of ladies, and afterward spent some time tracing down my wife's fur coat, which someone had carried away by mistake. Later on, finding my Oxford acquaintance back in the lobby, now considerably fuddled and harassed by a group of bell-hops, I undertook to straighten out his affairs. His car had been left at a filling-station, and he wanted it put up for the night. I submit that these are not the actions or the manners of a drunken man.

Sometime after midnight I left the hotel and got the car and drove it home. Our old Pontiac was wet and cold and hard to start, and I had to get out and shove, while Isabel sat at the wheel. When we had finally got started and warmed up the engine, I took her place and drove home. Had I been the worse for liquor, she would certainly never have surrendered it to me.

Appearances, I admit, are against me. And if you feel that my behaviour was such as to prove damaging to the University, I will cheerfully submit to any discipline you may consider proper in the circumstances.

I have kept your letter an absolute secret. I have done this so that, if anything further comes of this matter, I may know that it comes from those who have assailed my reputation. In that case, I think I am within my rights in asking for their names. There may be two opinions about drinking, but there has never been any diversity of opinion about informers. From the beginning of history, all mankind has regarded them as the lowest things that crawl. And of all informers, in my opinion, persons who, disguised as gentlemen, will attend a social gathering in order to carry tales are the vilest. In my candid opinion, the presence of such persons on the campus is far more dangerous to the morals of the young people, and far more of a detriment to the standing of this University, than twice their number of sots could be. It is also a main cause why our alumni are so slow to take up the cudgels when the University is in difficulties. As one graduate put it to me, "it is hard to be loyal to a nest of spies."

I have given eighteen of the best years of my life to the service of this school—years (some of them, at least) which might have been devoted entirely to creative writing with far more profit to me. In fact, now that I have completed the historical research which I wished to do, I can no longer afford to remain in academic life at the salary I receive. It has been my intention all along to put in for leave of absence without pay at the end of this year, and thereafter devote my time to writing. I am happiest when writing, and I believe I shall be far better paid.

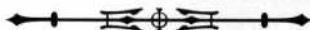
However, if my anonymous accusers imagine that I will passively be butchered to make a snoopers' holiday, they are badly mistaken. If they attempt to shove me out in the middle of a semester, I shall certainly resist them with all the vigor I command. A very amusing book could be written out of what I know of the private lives of some of the principal snoopers on this campus—a book which would not only expose them to ridicule and contempt, but amply reimburse me for any inconvenience or loss which they may wish to inflict upon me.

While on this campus, I think my record will show that I have never meddled with anyone, never pulled wires, engaged in intrigue, or spread malicious slander. But some people know that one despises

them, however one may try to conceal it, and of course they don't like it. But I know their type. During my two years in the Army, I commanded, at various times, some thousands of men, and was accountable for government property valued at close upon a million dollars. My experience convinced me that men who carry tales against their comrades will, sooner or later, betray their Chief.

My father was a college president in Oklahoma at a time when people here were even more intolerant than they are today. I think I know also from my own experience how repugnant it is to carry out orders that strike across personal attachments. I have therefore tried here to co-operate with you fully, and to set forth the whole business as you wished. You have been much too kind a friend to me in the past for any such matter to alter my feeling for you.

Faithfully yours,
/s/ W. S. Campbell



November 20, 1933

Mr. W. S. Campbell
Faculty Exchange

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I have just received your letter under date of November 15, which I have read carefully. While you do not answer specifically my inquiry, I am assuming that your letter means to convey that the information I have received is not correct.

I probably owe it to those who have casually mentioned this matter to me that I do not believe any one of them had any desire to do you an injury. The suggestion made to you that "it is hard to be loyal to a nest of spies" is too absurd for comment. There is not a place in the world where it is as easy for man, who wants to do right, to get on than on the campus of the University. So far as I am able to judge, there is as little disposition on the part of our people here to indulge in petty gossip as you will find any where. But it just so happens that you and I are engaged in a type of work that comes very closely under the scrutiny of the public. Any unusual conduct on our part attracts attention. This may be unfortunate, but it is one of the prices we pay for the high privilege of associating with youth whose lives we are supposed to influence for good.

Let me say again that it brought genuine grief to me to raise this question with you at all, but for me to have ignored these reports would have brought severe criticism and placed me in an inconsistent attitude.

So far as I am concerned, the incident is closed. The fact that duty compelled me to raise this question with you in no wise affects my affectionate regard for you or my admiration for your talents.

Sincerely yours,
/s/ W. B. Bizzell, President.



[Source: Walter S. Campbell Papers, Western History Collection, University Libraries, Box 18, Folder 3.]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: In the process of researching his history of the University of Oklahoma's first century, David W. Levy, David Ross Boyd Professor of

history, has unearthed the fascinating documents that form the basis for this continuing Sooner Magazine series.