

Charles Gilbert is one of those professors whose enthusiasm and sheer personality can make even rocks sound interesting—which, incidentally, is a very good thing in a geology teacher.

Gilbert is the director of OU's prestigious School of Geology and Geophysics and holds the Eberly Family Chair. A Lawton native and OU alumnus, he embarked on a successful research and teaching career that took him across the United States to work at such noted institutions as the Carnegie Institution's Geophysical Laboratory, the U.S. Department of Energy and Texas A&M University. Four years ago, he found his way back home.

Norman is where a lot of things started for Gilbert. For instance, it is where he met his wife of 36 years, OU School of Music alumna Mary Carol Gilbert, where he learned about teaching from such campus luminaries as Duane H. D. Roller and J. Clayton Feaver and where he discovered geology—but not right away.

"When I first came to OU, I was more interested in the whole university experience," Gilbert says. "Of course, I was familiar with OU, being from Lawton. But it was a nice experience, coming up to the University and opening a whole new world."

His new world included life in Cleveland House, an upperclass residence hall that once was part of the old Woodrow Wilson Center, across from the stadium.

Gilbert insists that Cleveland House, while not the finest of OU's residence halls, had certain advantages.

Among them was a serious learning atmosphere aided by a large number of Canadian students brought to OU through a special exchange agreement.

Another advantage was that residents of Cleveland House were the only men on campus permitted to eat at Cate Cafeteria, which was in the Women's Quadrangle. Daily exposure to young co-eds who expected eating companions to mind their manners had a definite impact on his neighbors, Gilbert says.

"It made the whole place more civilized," he quips.

But the cafeteria was not a matchmaking spot for Charles and Mary Carol. They met at the First Presbyterian Church on University Boulevard, where they were married some three months after graduation, by E. Kenneth Feaver, the brother of Gilbert's favorite philosophy professor.

Following his wedding, Phi Beta Kappa graduate Gilbert began working toward his master's degree at OU.

"That's when I really got more deeply committed to geology and found it a fascinating topic," he says.

Gilbert was surrounded by dedicated graduate students. Beginning in 1957, the geology job market was very slow. As a result, many undergraduates went directly into graduate school and worked diligently on their second degrees, hoping that the market would be brighter for a master's graduate with a high grade point average.

Such dedication paid off for Gilbert, who went on to earn a doctorate at the University of California at Los Angeles. The young Oklahoman had moved to California when stars like Marilyn Monroe still strolled the streets of Hollywood; however, Gilbert was more interested in what was happening below the surface of Los Angeles.

In most places, he says, mountains are formed when surrounding land wears down. California, however, is unique because its mountains actually rise up out of the earth. Earthquakes also offered Gilbert another learning tool. For a budding geologist, Los Angeles was a living laboratory.

"It was quite an experience, being in California," he says. "The crust is actively deforming—it's where hills are actually forming. It was really mind-boggling, in a way."

Gilbert's studies didn't end at UCLA. He received a post-doctoral fellowship to Carnegie Institution, where some of the world's most famous geologists and geoscientists were working. Then Gilbert devoted the next 15 years of his life to the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, serving as department chair from 1975 to 1980.



*Himself one of the 5,000 who have graduated in geology at OU since 1904, Director Charles Gilbert credits geology alumni with making the difference in his successful efforts to strengthen his school in a time of dwindling state funds.*

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In the midst of his Virginia career, Gilbert took a sabbatical and brought his family home so he could study at the Oklahoma Geological Survey on the OU Norman campus. He delved into an exploration of the Wichita Mountains, striving to learn about the origin of these "basement rocks of Oklahoma," which lie below the state's sedimentary level.

The family returned to Virginia at year's end but soon moved southwest again when Gilbert accepted a position as department chairman at Texas A&M.

Except for a short assignment with the U.S. Department of Energy, "we thought we were going to be at A&M the rest of our time," Gilbert says. But in 1990, he received a call from OU with an offer he couldn't refuse.

"It just seemed like an exciting time to come back to our roots," he says. "The faculty is one of the strongest, intellectually, in a long time. It was a good base on which to build."

Gilbert's building efforts have included filling faculty positions to "make sure the quality of education here is a superior one."

Ongoing at the college is cutting-edge research in fluid rock interactions and geophysical imaging, which Gilbert describes as "seeing into the earth to understand what the subsurface structure is like."

The college's classroom instruction also is breaking new ground. This year, Gilbert inaugurated a series of "enrichment trips" that will take students into the field to learn about geology and geophysics firsthand. The series began with a May trip to the Grand Canyon.

"The key is, early on, going out and putting geology to work. We want to move the level of experience right down to the freshman year, if possible. We want to give our students an edge, to prepare them to compete well in the future and enjoy their careers."

Gilbert knows about enjoying his work. One of his proudest achievements is the Wichita Mountains project, which has continued since his late '70s sabbatical. His research unearthed evidence of a 7.0 magnitude earthquake near Meers dating back some 1,100 years, a time

when southwestern Oklahoma would have been inhabited by early Native Americans, but no oral or written histories of the earthquake exist in Native American culture.

Why all the fuss? Because the Meers earthquake represents the most modern movement of bedrock in this part of the nation.

"We have earthquakes in Oklahoma, but they don't result in land displacement," Gilbert explains.

But the Meers earthquake did just that, resulting in a 15-mile fault line bisecting the countryside.

"It's the best little fault scar east of the Rocky Mountains," Gilbert jokes, pointing to a photo of himself straddling his favorite earth fissure. "It wasn't expected at all. People didn't think there were any modern fault scars east of the Rockies."

The discovery reverberated through the professional community, causing geologists along the East Coast and in such states as Missouri and Pennsylvania to re-examine their own seismic history.

Gilbert's history in geology has spanned 37 years, just a blink of an eye to a man who refers to the Pleistocene era of 1 million years ago as "modern" and anything that occurred 10,000 years ago as "recent." Such a long-term outlook on life also gives Gilbert confidence that the future of the ground we walk on is fairly secure.

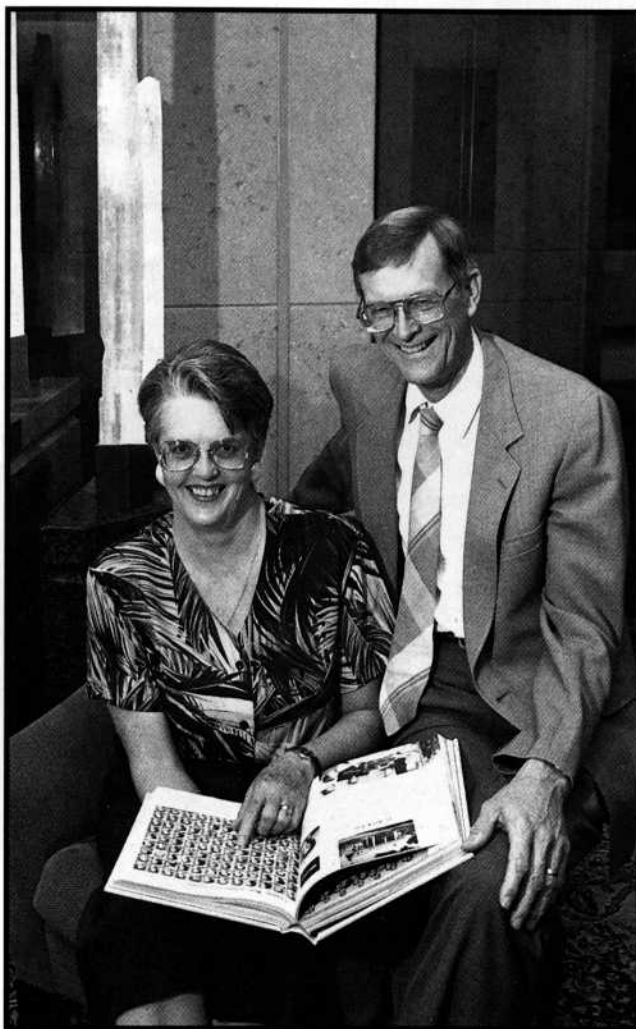
He encourages those who worry about our world self-destructing to take a look at the big picture—the *really* big picture that encompasses thousands, even millions, of years. The Earth, Gilbert believes, will survive with or without us and always find its balance.

"If there's one thing I can say about geology, it's that you learn about earth rhythms," he says. "To be

successful in occupying the planet and manipulating it to your best use, you have to know something about earth rhythms.

"If you know something about the earth and how it behaves, you know something about what you're doing."

—ANNE BARAJAS



*Proving that Sooners can come home again, alumni Mary Carol and Charles Gilbert review yearbook memories of their student days on the University of Oklahoma campus.*