

**T**  
**o**  
**most alumni—**  
**David and Molly Boren**  
**among them—**  
**it never seemed**  
**quite right that**  
**OU's presidents**  
**should live anywhere**  
**but in the stately**  
**white house**  
**on the corner of**  
**Boyd and the Boulevard.**

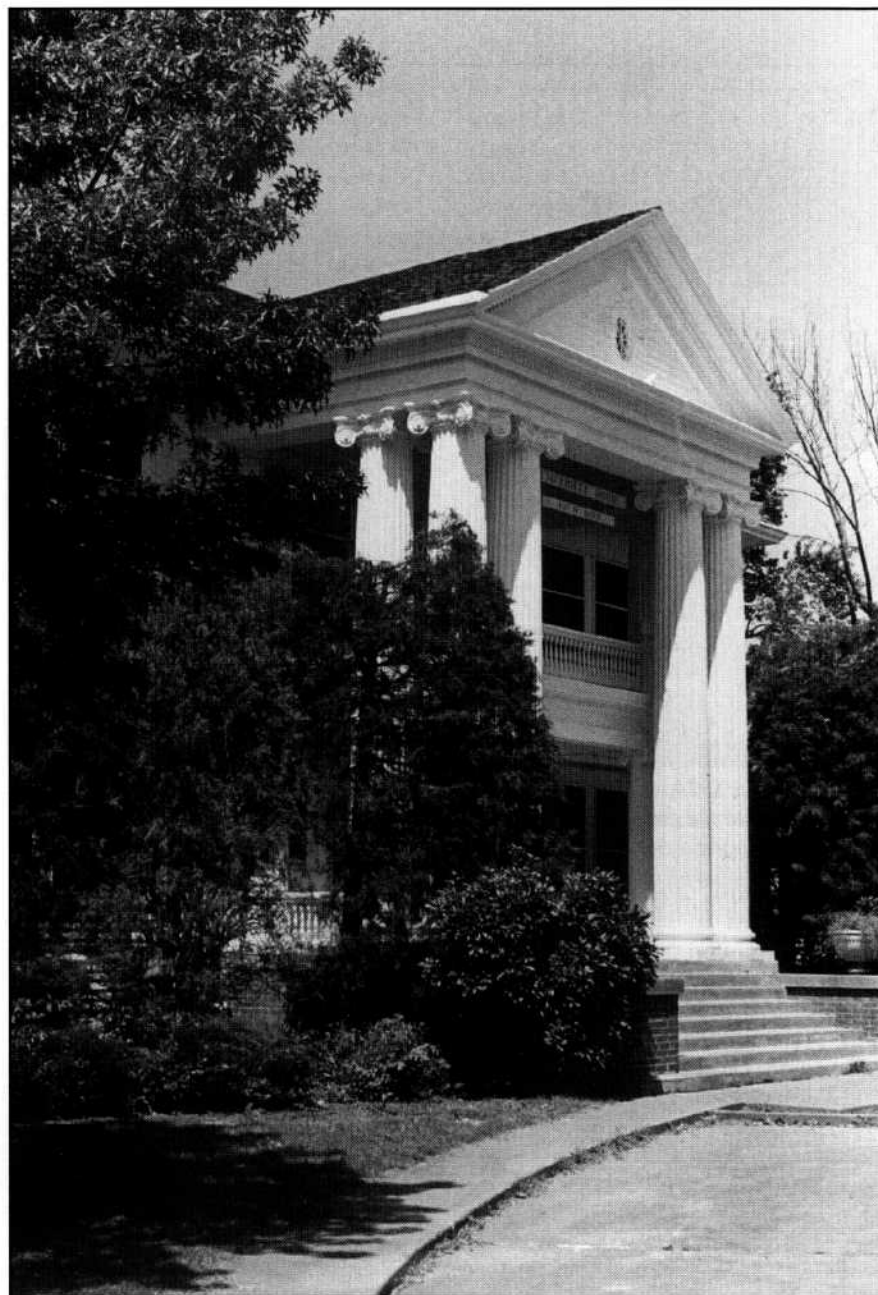
by Carol J. Burr

# Back to Boyd House

## Boyd House.

University of Oklahoma presidents lived there for more than 60 years; their children and grandchildren played in the yard and explored the cavernous basement and attic. Eleanor Roosevelt and British royalty slept there; poets, statesmen, elected officials and movie stars came to dinner. Spirited discussions of art, literature and politics enlivened its social gatherings. Distinguished scholars and nervous young faculty members brought their spouses to tea.

Eventually, the presidential families abandoned the house at 407 West Boyd for more modern quarters away



from the campus. The decision was incomprehensible to thousands of alumni who, 25 years later, still consider the grand, old, white-pillared structure a symbol of Sooner tradition and continuity. The University's new president, David L. Boren, agrees with them.

Plans to reinstate Boyd House as the presidential residence and hospitality center began with Boren's selection in May 1994. Six months and very little effort later, an enthusiastic private sector response to the proposal is within \$100,000 of the \$1.3 million required to completely renovate and expand the house on the corner.

Built in 1906 as his personal residence by the University's first president, David Ross Boyd, the house has gone informally by several names—the President's House, the White House, University House—and in 1982 by regental decree, Boyd House.

The original Queen Anne-style, wooden clapboard structure, painted tan or yellow and trimmed in white, faced south across Boyd Street from the main entrance to the campus. Basically it was a two-story box (three stories counting the full attic), with a small one-story wing on the west. A long porch led east from the front door to a sidewalk connecting with Univer-



From 1908 to 1914, the University leased the home, now known as Boyd House, from the departed president, who built the Queen Anne-style residence in 1906.

sity Boulevard. Palladian windows were located in the second-story, gabled dormer on the front and under the eave on the east.

As the Boyds' house took shape, *The Norman Transcript* observed, "President Boyd's new residence on the boulevard is looming up in the distance, the frame work being already completed. It is certainly going to make a beautiful structure—one that Norman as well as Mr. Boyd can be proud of." The cost of the house and a "barn" was reported at \$7,000.

Unfortunately, the Boyds had only two years to entertain the territorial worthies in their new home before the political turmoil of Democratic statehood swept Republican Boyd and several of his faculty out of office. Never one to hold a grudge, Boyd agreed to lease his house to the University as a home for his successors. In all, seven more presidential families—Evans, Brooks, Buchanan, Bizzell, Brandt, Cross and Hollomon—would live there between 1908 and 1969.

The University took title to the property—the house and several adjacent lots to the west—in a 1914 trade with Boyd for other University land. President Stratton D. Brooks, a nationally recognized educator who gen-

erally is credited with elevating the status of the University through sweeping educational and organizational reforms, felt the presidential house should reflect the institution's new image.

Between 1915 and 1922, Brooks had the house completely remodeled in a neoclassical revival style. The dormer and front porch were replaced with a full-height portico, an inset porch and balcony with a fluted triangular pediment. The house, now painted white, acquired an open one-story porch on the east, which later was enclosed as a music room. On the west a second-story sleeping porch was added to the existing wing and yet another one-story addition. The carriage house—later a garage with an upstairs apartment—were built at the same time.

Brooks paid for the four massive ionic columns from his own pocket; he was never reimbursed. Years later, after he had left the state for the presidency of the University of Missouri, several of his grandchildren returned to OU as students and were granted in-state tuition status by regents' action. The eldest grandchild, Theodocia Prickett, who was born in Boyd House, recalls Brooks comment-

ing that at last he had gotten his money back for those columns.

When William Bennett Bizzell settled his multi-generational family into Boyd House in 1925, the neoclassical transformation had been completed. The Bizzells numbered Will and Carrie, their daughter Elaine and Will's mother Sarah, with an older son, William, and his family as frequent visitors. The Bizzells never had owned a home of their own, having lived in two other presidential residences, at Texas State College for Women in Denton and at Texas A&M.

"Someone once asked me what effect it had on children who always lived in state houses," reflects Elaine, who lived in Boyd House until 1928 when she married OU student body president and law graduate Lee B. Thompson. "Well, it never occurred to me that it wasn't my house; I never thought about it as anything but my home."

The Bizzells brought some furnishings with them, but they also inherited the taste of others. Barbara Bizzell Barry, William's daughter,

**"All she could say was 'Wiley and Will are dead!'"**

recalls her distinguished grandfather sitting in an easy chair in the east room in front of a wall mural of "four diaphanously clad ladies, representing the four seasons, I suppose. The artist, a woman on the faculty, had even painted in Aunt Sis's (Elaine's) little dog Togo. It was a very interesting picture, but with Mother Carrie's Victorian nature, I'm sure she didn't care for it very much." Better received was a treasured painting by the famed OU art director Oscar Jacobson, which

hung over the dining room mantel.

Barbara and her older brother, Bill, and the three Thompson children, Lee B. Jr., Ralph and Carolyn, were regular weekend visitors, riding the Interurban from Oklahoma City to the Norman station, to be met by their presidential grandparents. They remember hiding in the darkly menacing cloak room, stacked floor-to-ceiling with "Gran's" books or in the closet under the stairway, trying on the big hats stored in the attic along with an outgrown baby carriage and other family cast-offs.

The Bizzell grandchildren were less welcome in the kitchen, where a Mrs. Shelton reigned supreme, a wonderful cook, but according to Carolyn Thompson Zachritz, "the meanest woman you ever met," at least when it came to children under foot. Mrs. Shelton received better reviews for the large receptions and dinners that the Bizzells hosted.

"Back in those days, you didn't have caterers," Elaine Thompson explains. "We had Mrs. Shelton and Grandma in the kitchen—I don't know how the

two of them ever worked that out—and my mother. Several friends, like Bennymae Kraft (wife of physical plant director Walter Kraft) would come in to help make those little chicken salad sandwiches—and 'reception' chocolate, the most evil chocolate you ever had. It was really just a chocolate paste . . ."

". . . and a big silver bowl of chilled whipping cream and a pitcher of hot milk," Barbara Barry breaks in. "You'd ladle this chocolate into the cup, pour in the hot milk and put the whipped cream on top. To die for."

Other memories of Boyd House days had historic overtones. Bill Bizzell was not quite eight the day he coasted up the driveway on his bike to find his grandmother Carrie standing on the front porch crying and wringing her hands. "All she could say," he recalls, "was 'Wiley and Will are dead!' Of course she meant Wiley Post and Will Rogers, who had just been killed in a plane crash in Alaska. But 'Will' was what she and Grandma called my grandfather. It gave me a brief but severe shock."

Carrie Bizzell finally got a home of her own in 1941 when the retiring president purchased a big, white-frame house on Elm Street across from the present Dale Hall parking lot. But the nostalgia surrounding Boyd House remained for the family. In 1986, when Thanksgiving Day coincided with Elaine and Lee Thompson's 58th wedding anniversary, the Bizzell/Thompson clan took possession of the house for a day, dining before the fireplace where the Jacobson painting once hung, exploring their childhood haunts, restaging family photographs in the living room.

Unfortunately, the three years Joe and Sallye Brandt lived in the house did not produce such cherished memories. The Brandts were constantly under fire—from within for the innovative president's reorganization agenda and from the press for Mrs. Brandt's supposedly "extravagant" purchases for the presidential home.

Reminiscing in 1979, Brandt recounted his embarrassment when the state auditor, who was running for another office at the time, went public with his refusal to pay for two silver serving dishes. The president and his wife paid the \$70.44 themselves but left the offending dishes behind when they beat a hasty retreat from Oklahoma's political climate in 1943.

A lack of appropriate hotel accommodations and dining facilities in Norman made the president's home the inn of choice for notables visiting the University. Oklahoma governors and presidents of other universities, such as David Starr Jordan, Stanford's first president, and Milton Eisenhower, then at Kansas State, stayed the night. Among others entertained in Boyd House were poets Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg



Courtesy: Barbara Bizzell Barry

*The family of OU's fifth president gathers in the Boyd House living room for Christmas photographs. Standing, from left, are Carrie and William Bennett Bizzell; Edith and son William S. Bizzell; and son-in-law Lee B. Thompson. Seated are grandchildren Barbara Bizzell; Lee Jr. and Ralph Thompson; the president's mother, Sarah Wade Bizzell; grandchildren Bill Bizzell and Carolyn Thompson; and daughter Elaine Bizzell Thompson.*





*The Crosses often awoke to evidence of the students' imaginative mischief. Here in 1954, the president and his daughter, Mary-Lynn, contemplate the return of trophies liberated from sorority and fraternity houses by Halloween tricksters.*

and Sir Rabindranath Tagore; scientists Niels Bohr and Sir Alexander Fleming; evangelist Billy Graham; screen stars Jeanette MacDonald and Van Heflin; philanthropist E. DeGolyer; band master John Philip Sousa; ex-presidents William Howard Taft and Harry Truman; Eleanor Roosevelt; and Britain's Lord and Lady Halifax.

The absence of a staff of servants in the house sometimes complicated the hosting of such distinguished guests. When the Halifaxes spent the night, President and Mrs. George L. Cross were faced with an unexpected dilemma. Upon retiring to their room, the titled couple left their shoes in the hall to be cleaned and polished. Somewhat startled, the Crosses dutifully collected the shoes, polishing and returning them to the Halifaxes' door.

Mrs. Roosevelt's 1958 stay with the Crosses also had its awkward moments, as when son Braden left the photo of his hero, Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower, above the bed when vacating his room for Mrs. Roosevelt's secretary. Nevertheless the visit indirectly led to a vast improvement in access to the house

that Cleo Cross had wanted for years.

The 73-year-old former first lady arrived in a driving rainstorm and was escorted under large umbrellas up a very long sidewalk from the curb on Boyd Street to the front door. (Cleo Cross's sensible suggestion that her guest be taken to the back entrance where there was a portico had been rejected by the host committee of Young Democrats as "unsuitable.") Thus began Mrs. Cross's campaign for a semi-circular drive by which guests could be deposited at the front steps. The project was delayed for the planned widening of Boyd Street, but by 1962 the new drive was in place.

Braden Cross was born in 1946, two years after his family moved into the president's home. In fact, George Cross was on his way to visit his wife and son in the hospital when a spontaneous student demonstration occurred on the front lawn. Cross exited the back door and, unrecognized, circled to the back of the noisy crowd to ask what was going on. Told that the students wanted the president to declare a holiday, Cross suggested that the president's administrative assistant, Royden Dangerfield, was the man

to see and offered directions. The students left for the Dangerfield home while Cross proceeded to the hospital.

In the 24 years that the Crosses occupied Boyd House, their children—Mary-Lynn, Bill and Braden—grew to maturity, and two sets of grandchildren found willing babysitters in OU's first family. The attic was perfect for Braden's extensive electric train layout, while downstairs in the second floor sleeping porch, Cleo made the magnificent hats that became her trademark in the '50s and '60s. A swing set occupied the side yard and usually accommodations for a family dog. Once a freshman student called Cleo and asked for help with a puppy he had acquired but could not keep in the dormitory until it could be taken home at Thanksgiving. With a vacancy in the Cross dog house at the time, OU's obliging first lady readily agreed to board the animal.

The resourceful Cleo Cross was equal to most emergencies, canine or childhood. A granddaughter knocked out her front teeth in a swing set collision. Her grandmother calmly scooped up the teeth, dirt and all, and rushed the little girl and the spare parts to a dentist, who successfully reinstalled the original equipment. A short time later a second grandchild found a razor in the presidential medicine cabinet and sliced off the tip of his finger. Coolly, Cleo retrieved the finger piece, wrapped it in a damp cloth, grabbed the child and raced to a doctor for reattachment.

Daughter Mary-Lynn summed up such heroics with, "Well, Mother, it just proves that you should never throw away the scraps."

The only year that J. Herbert Hollomon, Cross's successor, and his wife, Margaret, spent in Boyd House was not a happy one. Mrs. Hollomon was ill much of the time and finally returned to the East, where she died soon after.

President Hollomon preferred to live away from the campus, and in 1969, the regents purchased a house on the corner of Lindsey and Pickard from former OU law dean Earl Sneed. That home subsequently was occupied by the families of presidents Paul F. Sharp, William S. Banowsky, Frank E. Horton and Richard L. Van Horn. David and Molly Boren will live there

until the renovation of Boyd House is complete.

For two years after the Hollomon evacuation, Boyd House stood virtually empty, except for a couple of staff offices in the upstairs bedrooms. With its other rooms boarded off, the old building suffered from neglect. In 1970, Vice President David A. Burr reopened the structure as University House to house the newly formed Office of Development and a Visitors Center. It also accommodated some official entertaining. Unfortunately no funds were available for any but the most basic repairs.

Help came in 1976 when University House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The house underwent a major exterior facelift with the assistance of a \$10,000 federal grant-in-aid through the Oklahoma Historical Society's historic conservation program and matching University funds.

In 1979 the Office of High School and College Relations, recently renamed the Office of Prospective Student Services, replaced the development staff as the house's major occupant and custodian of the Visitors Center. The interior has been reconfigured from time to time to ac-

commodate its varying office functions, but the accommodation has been an uneasy one at best. Boyd House was meant to be a home, and so it will be again.

From the beginning of his discussions with the OU Regents, David Boren expressed a desire to return the president's residence to Boyd House, not just as his home but also as a center for University hospitality and a place of interaction between students, faculty, alumni, visiting scholars and guests of the institution.

The regents authorized the University of Oklahoma Foundation to study the feasibility of complete renovation and expansion of the 90-year-old structure and to receive private contributions made exclusively for that purpose. Internationally known architect Hugh Newell Jacobson's affinity for the house as a building type and his expertise in historic restoration made him the natural choice for the Boyd House project. Among the important historic buildings he has restored are the Hotel Talleyrand in Paris and the Renwick Gallery, the Smithsonian Museum and the West Front terraces of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., where he resides.

Completed architectural plans for

the project are due in February 1995, and the reconstruction is expected to take at least a year. The basics, however, are known; the house will remain true to its historic neoclassical style with little change to the facade.


The one-story wing on the far west will be removed and the kitchen and breakfast room area reconfigured. The east wing, previously known as the music room, will be removed to enable the living room to open onto a stone-surfaced terrace where the original Brooks porch stood.

Steps from the terrace will lead to a private, enclosed garden entertainment area, a memorial to Mary Ellen Monroney, wife of the late Sen. Mike Monroney. Before her death, Mrs. Monroney donated a number of antiques to be displayed in Boyd House.

A two-story addition on the back of the property will provide a large, first-floor multi-purpose music room, also opening onto the terrace, that can seat 60 for dinner. The room will be named for Cleo Cross. The second floor will be redesigned to accommodate three guest bedrooms and baths within the existing structure and a new master bedroom, two baths and a study in the new addition. A new sitting room will open onto the second-floor balcony with its view of the Arches and Parrington Oval.

An elevator will serve the basement, first and second floors, while the main entrance and the restrooms will be made handicapped accessible. The entire house will be rewired and replumbed, and its interior plaster walls and ceilings, with their decades of patches, repatches and layers upon layers of paint, will be replaced, while retaining as much of the wood trim and moldings as possible. The result, architect Jacobson says, should not look like a new house but rather should evoke the spirit of Stratton Brooks's renovation of 1915.

The surviving members of the presidential families, reflecting the response of the campus population and the alumni, are thrilled by the prospect of returning Boyd House to its original purpose.

Bizzell granddaughter Carolyn Zachritz spoke for them all: "You tell David and Molly Boren that when they get that house finished, we all want to come." 



OU Western History Collections

*Tranquil as this photo may appear, Joe and Sallye Brandt left Boyd House with fewer pleasant memories than most presidential families.*