

# Treasures from the Archives:

Fourth in a Series



## The Wit of George Lynn Cross

by David W. Levy

**U**niversity presidents are required, by the nature of their work, to come into constant contact with the general public. The tone and style of that contact varies greatly from president to president, and whether or not they are conscious of it, each has to define an image that he or she thinks will be effective. Partly that image is the calculated product of what each president judges will work in establishing credibility and good relations; partly it is shaped by beliefs about the nature and stature of the office of university

president; and partly the public image of any president is the result of personal temperament and natural style.

The presidents of the University of Oklahoma have varied considerably in the ways they have approached the general public. William Bennett Bizzell, for example, specialized in stern and sober dignity, while J. Herbert Hollomon was known for a relaxed and frank informality that many thought excessive and unbecoming. Few of the institution's chief executives, however, were

as successful as George L. Cross in cultivating good relations with those beyond the campus. Occupying the office for 25 years (longer than any other University president), he seemed consistently able to retain his hold on the respect and affection of large numbers of everyday Oklahomans.

Many factors contributed to Cross's success in this regard, and his achievement in public relations would be worth a careful study of its own. But surely one important ingredient in his public image was his sense of humor. His famous remark about building a university of which the football team could be proud is probably the best known example of his talent for repartee. Over the years, he became well known for his wit, his timing, his droll and dry humor. It was a rare speech among the hundreds of speeches he gave that did not contain at least one or two jokes. Some samples of Cross's sense of comedy and playfulness, chosen from scattered addresses delivered over the course of his presidency, appear below.

The fastest way to kill humor, of course, is to analyze it to death. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that there is a kind of gentleness and good will attached to George Cross's witticisms. They are never cruel or ill tempered; they are never told at the expense of another person or a rival institution. As will be seen, the most regular target of his jibes was himself, with here and there a pointed observation about the University he was leading.

---

*Acceptance speech at the Oklahoma Hall of Fame Banquet, Oklahoma City, 16 November 1951.*

I was very much surprised—almost startled—when I received word from a good friend several weeks ago that I had been selected to receive this honor. While I was deeply and humbly appreciative, my first thought after receiving the news was “Has the selections committee made a good choice? Can my selection be justified?”

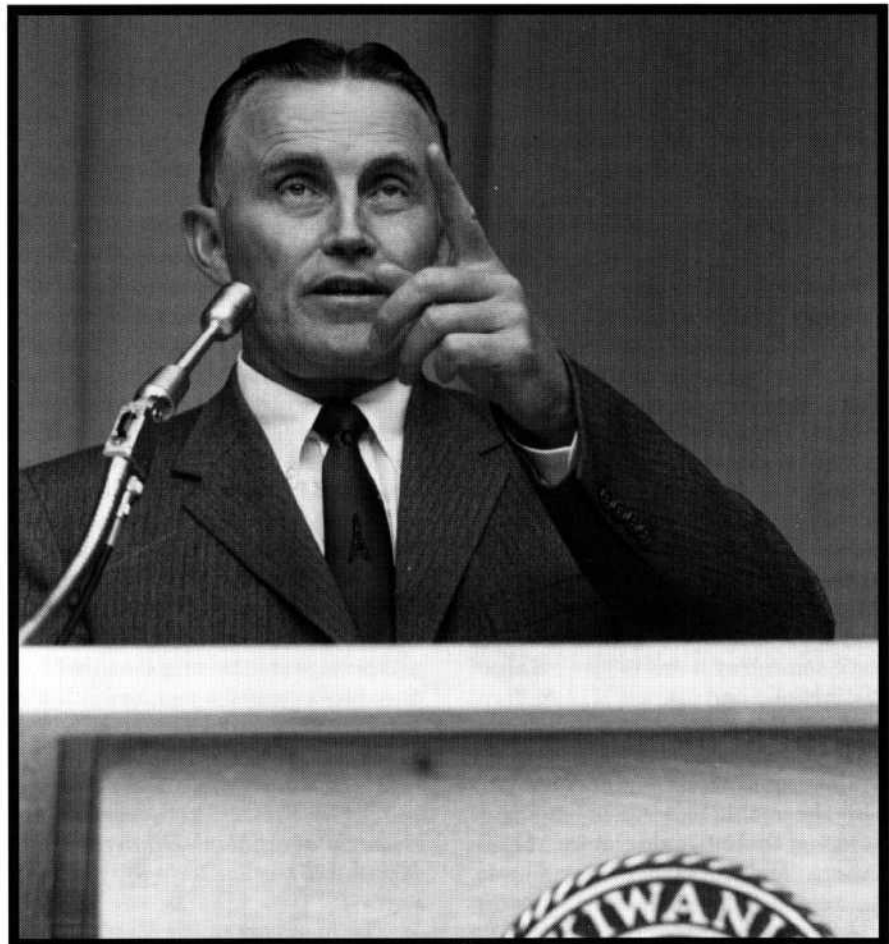
The answer, of course, had to be in the negative. Being pretty well acquainted with myself, I knew that I did not belong in *any* Hall of Fame; a Hall of Good Fortune perhaps—but *not* a Hall of Fame. I decided to accept the honor anyway because it has not been uncommon for me to receive things which I do not deserve. Mrs. Cross is perhaps the best example of this. My friends will think of many others.

---

*Banquet speech, Phi Eta Sigma Initiation, Texas Technological College, Lubbock, 22 April 1954.*

A few years ago, the University museum purchased a pair of earrings and a brass brazier of Egyptian origin to be used as laboratory materials in certain classical studies. Somehow, in the records at the State Capitol, the word “brazier” became changed to “brassiere.” This greatly excited a member of the Oklahoma Senate who made a speech to the effect that the University had been spending its appropriations on earrings and brassieres.

A legislative committee was set up to conduct an investigation. The business manager of the University and I were summoned before the committee. As we waited in the outer office of the chairman of the Senate investigating committee, a group of reporters descended upon us, and the leader of



the group, a good friend of mine, asked, "Well, are you boys going to admit that you have been wasting the state's money, or are you going to give the committee a lot of double talk?" The business manager, Mr. Roscoe Cate, made the most appropriate answer to the question that I have ever heard. He said, "With the exception of the brassiere, we're going to make a clean breast of the whole thing." However, it took a few long distance calls to insure that his answer would not be carried in the afternoon papers, thus creating the impression that the University was treating this serious matter in a facetious vein.

A few days later, a friend sent me a card with some printing on it which read, "Count the day lost when you

genuine distinction. Though lacking in hemorrhoids, my adventures on the campus through the years have given me the needed look of concern.



*Talk at the Inaugural Luncheon for Robert Kenneth Carr, ninth president of Oberlin College, 22 October 1960. [Oberlin's new president had been a professor of government at OU from 1931 to 1937 and, therefore, for three years a colleague of Cross, who was then a professor of botany.]*

I bring to Oberlin College and to President Carr greetings from the University of Oklahoma. I bring these greetings from every segment of the

**W**ith the exception of the brassiere, we're going to make a clean breast of the whole thing."

don't get hell for something." I looked at the card some time ago and reflected that probably I had not lost a single day in over 10 years.



*Introduction of Governor J. Howard Edmondson, 27 October 1959.*

At a meeting of the Association of University and Land-Grant Presidents in New York last May, some thought was given as to why certain presidents serve longer than others, and the qualifications for a successful tenure were discussed at some length. There was final agreement that two qualifications, and only two, were necessary for a president to get along: (1) he must have some gray hairs to give an air of distinction, and (2) he should have hemorrhoids to give him a look of concern.

Some of my friends wondered why I had been able to serve so long without even these two minimum qualifications, and my answer was simple. An air of distinction is not an asset in the Southwest unless it is based on

University family—the student body, the faculty, the administration, the Regents and the alumni. I am sure that these groups would agree enthusiastically that this be done, even though I have never known them to be in agreement on anything else.

It gives me great personal pleasure to participate in Robert Carr's inaugural ceremonies. A part of this may stem from the fact that I did not have an inauguration of my own when I became president of the University of Oklahoma over 16 years ago. Mrs. Cross and I have considered the possibility that this omission, like the omission of a marriage ceremony, may cast doubt on the legitimacy of my relationship with the institution, but we take comfort in the thought that after all these years the relationship probably has attained a common law status.



*Remarks at the Men's Dinner Club, 14 March 1961.*

The members of the Men's Dinner

Club, individually and collectively, make reasonable effort to meet their social, educational, political, cultural and eugenic responsibilities. One of these responsibilities is, of course, the replacement of the population. Most members of the club have accepted this responsibility in all earnestness and some with enthusiasm. They have tried, not only to replace the popula-



tion in a numerical sense, but to improve its quality—something greatly needed in the light of our jumbled, modern affairs.

It has been customary for us to set aside one program each year for the submission of tangible evidence that we have been successful with the population replacement responsibility. We designate this program as "Father and Son Night."



*Welcoming speech to the Fourth Annual Conference of University Surgical Residents, 3 May 1962.*

It is a pleasure to join with my



several colleagues this morning in greeting and welcoming you to the University of Oklahoma. Like all college presidents, I do this sort of thing frequently. It has been said that the average college president probably makes as many speeches of welcome as Samson slew Philistines and, in many instances, uses the same implement.



Introduction of Governor Henry Bellmon at the Forum Lecture Series, 28 January 1964.

During my tenure as president of the University of Oklahoma, I have had the privilege, and sometimes pleasure, of serving with six governors of Oklahoma. The six have varied greatly in personality, quality of executive effort and attitude toward the University of Oklahoma. However, I have had one experience in common with all of them. Each has had one or more friends get in touch with me with the story that the governor needed foot-

ball tickets. Invariably the story would be that the governor thought it would be a bit embarrassing to approach me himself and, therefore, had asked the friend to make the request. I learned early not to send football tickets to the governor through his friends, but to send them direct.

When Mr. Bellmon was elected to office in 1962, three games remained to be played on our schedule. Almost immediately I received two calls from friends of Mr. Bellmon. The newly elected governor needed six tickets for each of the remaining games—was embarrassed to ask for them because he would not take office until January 1963.

This didn't make sense to me because I had already sent tickets to Mr. Bellmon's secretary, so I called him to find out precisely what his needs might be. He told me that he would not be able to attend any of the remaining games . . . He said further that he would not accept complimentary tickets to athletic contests at the state institutions and that he was returning the tickets I had sent. He said he planned to see some games in the future but that he would purchase his own tickets when he did so. This was a unique, if not an astounding, experience for me. Probably at no time in the history of the University of Oklahoma had anything like this happened before.

Later we were able to convince Governor Bellmon that a box had been provided for the governor's use at the time the stadium had been constructed and that it would be most confusing if he did not accept the box.

*Remarks at the "Salute to Excellence" banquet, 7 March 1964.*

You young people are here this evening because you have shown evidence of having extraordinary ability and talent during your high school careers. The older people are here for the most part because they found themselves to be parents of extraordinarily talented sons or daughters. Some of the parents are probably a little surprised at this.

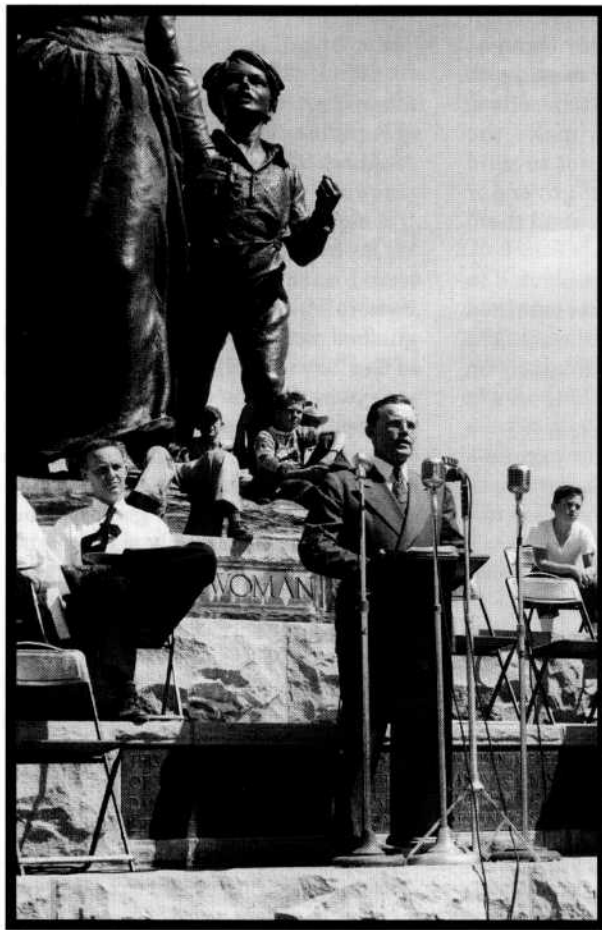
*Remarks to the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, New Orleans, 28 April 1965.*

I congratulate my dear friend, Dr. V. E. Monnett, on having been selected as the recipient of the Sydney Powers Medal. Dr. Monnett's distinguished record as director of our School of Geology is well known to geologists everywhere. His performance there was appreciated so thoroughly that as his retirement approached the alumni saw fit to present him with a Cadillac automobile. It almost goes without saying that he is the only non-member of the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics who has received a Cadillac from alumni. As a matter of fact, he is the only member of the faculty who has received a gift of rolling stock of any kind from alumni—even a pair of roller skates.

*Remarks for the visit of U.S. Senator Robert Kennedy to the campus, 13 March 1967. (Kennedy was accompanied by his senatorial colleague from Oklahoma, Fred R. Harris.)*

Senator Fred Harris, as most of you know, is a product of the University of Oklahoma. I remember when he first appeared on our campus as a freshman several years ago. He didn't look then like a potential U.S. Senator. On the contrary, he appeared to be somewhat underprivileged—a freckled, rather skinny youngster, without much perceptible promise. But Fred did well as an undergraduate and later in Law School at the University of Oklahoma, and after graduation he developed a successful law practice and became a politician of competence and reasonable respectability. I remember well when I first started taking cautious pride in his career. I now take enormous pride in his development at the national level.

I have often thought how useful it would be if a University president could look into his student body and predict the destiny of its constituents—which ones would become members of the State Legislature, future gover-



nors, U.S. Congressmen, Presidents of the United States and industrial giants with the ability and inclination to augment the University's meager budgets for operations and capital improvements. After 23 years of experience as president of OU . . . , I have come to the conclusion that you can't rule anyone out.

*Luncheon Address, "OU Day in Tulsa," 13 April 1967.*

When Mr. Davidson asked me to speak at this luncheon, he suggested that I might reminisce concerning my more than 23 years as president of the University of Oklahoma. I believe one of the Tulsa papers reported that I would do this. But in making the suggestion, Jim relegated me to a role which I am not quite ready to accept. So, while I may indulge in some reminiscing, I want mainly to analyze for you briefly the current situation on our campus

and on college campuses throughout the country.

A few weeks ago the University chapter of the American Association of University Professors asked me to speak to a group at their regular monthly meeting on the "unsolved problems that would face my successor" when he arrived on the campus. For a few minutes I was overwhelmed with the magnitude of the assignment and not quite sure that in the time available I could cope with it at all. I was about to protest, and then it suddenly occurred to me that they might have asked me to talk on the "solved problems," in which case I wouldn't have had a subject at all.

*Remarks at the Frontiers of Science Foundation luncheon honoring James G. Harlow Sr., 26 July 1967.*

I approach my assignment today mindful of a remark once made by Adlai Stevenson—that a toastmaster should have about the same relationship to a luncheon program as a fan has to a fan dancer, namely, call attention to the situation but not try to cover it entirely.

*Commencement speech, New Mexico Junior College, 29 May 1970.*

I am not overly impressed by the importance of my being here. I am not overly impressed by the importance of any commencement speaker. I say this because I remember my own commencements. My first was when I graduated from the eighth grade. I recall that the girls wore white shoes and dresses and

the boys were in suits—usually too large or too small because hand-me-downs didn't always fit. I don't remember the commencement speaker. I remember vaguely that when I graduated from high school the salutatorian and the valedictorian presented brief offerings before the "speaker of the evening" was introduced. It runs in my mind that the speaker suggested that each of us should "hitch our wagon to a star," a typical adjuration of the 1920s. Most graduates found this a little hard to do. . . . I was present when Mrs. Cross received her bachelor's degree from South Dakota State College. The speaker told the graduating group that "the world was theirs," and followed this comforting assurance with suggestions as to what they should do with it. The graduates soon found reasons to discount most of what he had said. . . .

I've often questioned the advisability of having a commencement speaker. I know that the fine group assembled here tonight did not come to hear me speak. Members of the graduating group are here to receive their diplomas. Parents and relatives are here to see them receive their diplomas. A few friends have come to see if it is really true that certain members of the group will receive diplomas. The diplomas are the important part of this program. No one has come to hear the commencement speaker.

In view of this I have asked myself the question "Why have a commencement speaker?" and after much thought I think that I have the answer. The purpose of the commencement speaker is to delay things a bit and build up suspense for the final grand moment when the diplomas will be presented. [E]

**[Source: President Emeritus Papers of George Lynn Cross, Boxes 4, 6, University of Oklahoma Archives, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries.]**

**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.