

Danney Goble:
Chautauqua Man

**From the cozy confines of Monnet Hall,
a genial historian delights in bringing alive
the colorful history of Oklahoma.**

by Anne Barajas

Should you ever be told that Oklahoma's history is less than fascinating, just send the doubters to Danney Goble's office tucked away in a corner of the old law barn. There, in the unassuming drawl of the very best Southern storytellers, he will quietly inform them that they are dead wrong.

Goble is the historian for OU's renowned Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, devoted to nonpartisan teaching and research related to the U.S. Congress. Goble also is a former Pulitzer Prize nominee, a sometimes-actor with several films to his credit, a national expert on political and Southern history and a true believer in the value of studying Oklahoma's colorful past.

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"I became a historian entirely by accident," confesses Goble, who is kept company in his corner office by framed black-and-white images of Angie Debo, the late grand dame of Oklahoma history, and students from the OU Class of 1906, frozen in time beside their '06 Rock.

"Basically, what happened is that I had an exceptionally good high school teacher, Miss Lelia Hall. There are five Ph.Ds in American history from the classes that graduated before and after me, and we all are indebted to the same high school teacher. I sometimes say she ruined a lot of lives."

For Goble, that ruination manifested itself in history degrees from the University of Central Oklahoma and the University of Oklahoma. But strangely enough, Goble had to examine his state from afar to learn just how interesting its history truly is.

"I think Oklahomans tend to have an inferiority complex — you see this even today," he explains.

"It wasn't until I was a doctoral student at the University of Missouri at Columbia that I discovered, really, for the first time in my life, that Oklahoma history was 'real history,'" Goble says dryly. "I always thought it was something the coach did, just after civics and before basketball."

The Edmond native does not mince words when discussing the manner in which our state's past sometimes has been presented. He feels that whole, vital chunks of Oklahoma's record have not received as much attention and appreciation as they deserve in textbooks. Especially distressing to Goble is the perception that the state's history ends shortly after April 22, 1889.

"Literally, when I took Oklahoma history at the college level, they discussed the Land Run of 1889 the day before the final exam. So, it lent the impression that nothing significant happened after the land run. But a bunch happened," he contends.

"To me, the most interesting period is between the two world wars. Among other things, you have, in terms of events, a major race riot in Tulsa and the devastation of the Dust Bowl; in terms of personalities, you have people like Jack Walton and Alfalfa Bill Murray; and in terms of processes, the

wrenching transition from agricultural frontier to something approaching a modern industrial state."

Goble acknowledges that some Oklahomans are uncomfortable with darker chapters in the state's history and would rather focus on the positive aspects of the past.

"I think Oklahoma history is interesting and terribly important, but that doesn't mean it's always boosterism," he concedes.

However, Goble insists that Oklahoma cannot declare turmoil as its own, personal territory.

"I wouldn't claim that Oklahoma is necessarily unique. There are a lot of things that happened, especially in modern Oklahoma, that occurred nationally. What makes Oklahoma interesting is that they tend to be exaggerated. Everybody had a Depression, but nobody else had an Okie Dust Bowl. Everybody else had problems with racial adjustment after World War I, but nobody else had a Tulsa race riot. Everybody had recovery during World War II, but nobody

else had Tinker Field.

"What you see," he says with more than a touch of pride, "is that Oklahoma's national and regional history, if not writ large, is at least writ dramatic."

Part of that drama is the inheritance of a former territory settled in the east by Native Americans and whites from the post-Reconstruction South and in the west by pioneers and Native Americans from the Plains and northern states. Remnants of those early Oklahoma cultures are evident even today and are responsible for the friction sometimes felt between the state's two distinct regions.

"I would argue that the former Indian Territory is as Southern today as Arkansas or Louisiana and that the former Oklahoma Territory is Western.

I think Oklahoma is, in effect, schizophrenic," says Goble, pointing out one unusual, but convincing, teaching aid: a color-coded national map revealing the location of Elvis Presley fan club members. Club members tend to have

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Southern roots, and Goble's map shows Elvis fans heavily present in the counties that comprised old Indian Territory, dropping off sharply in the counties of former Oklahoma Territory.

But regardless of where an Oklahoman hails from (or whether they love Elvis), Goble finds certain traits both east and west have in common.

"I don't know that I could intellectually define an Oklahoma culture as separate and distinct, but at the same time, if you put me in front of 10 people and eight of them are from Oklahoma and two of them aren't, I can immediately tell you which two aren't Oklahomans," he says.

"It has to do with everything from accents to common values and word

choices. For instance, the other day I was in the grocery store, and a guy working there asked me if I wanted the items in a bag. I said, 'You're not from Oklahoma, are you?' He said no, he was from Kansas. In Oklahoma, most people use the word 'sack.'"

Goble's studies on Oklahoma cultures and history have produced several books, articles and book chapters. Among his best-known works are his OU Press books, *Oklahoma Politics: A History*; *The Oklahoma Story*, a unique history text co-written with W. David Baird that is being adopted in high schools as the new, fuller standard for Oklahoma history; and *Little Giant: The Life and Times of Speaker Carl Albert*, co-authored with Albert.

In the same week in March that *The Oklahoma Story* was named the 1994 Book of the Year by the Oklahoma Historical Society, Goble won the McCasland Award for Excellence in Teaching of Oklahoma History from the Oklahoma Heritage Association.

The book on Speaker Albert earned Goble the Oklahoma Book Award for Outstanding Work of Non-Fiction and his 1990 Pulitzer nomination. Goble is happy to show visitors the only tangible proof of the latter literary distinction—a simple form letter he keeps in a desk drawer. Pulitzer nominees do not receive even so much as a plaque or a certificate, only a letter with nominations attached. In his case, Goble's name was forwarded both by the OU Press and by an entire class of Oklahoma State University students who read *Little Giant* as part of their study of political figures who had an impact on education.

Goble was teaching history at Tulsa Junior College when a "set of accidents" brought him to Speaker Albert's door and, eventually, back to OU.

In the 1970s, Goble was a graduate student at Missouri, supporting a wife and children on his teaching assistant's salary.

"I was making \$209 a

month and had rent and a car payment of \$169; that left me with \$40 cash for the entire month," he recalls. "So I boldly decided, 'I'm not going to say here and starve. I'm going to go get a job in Oklahoma.'"

He found a job at the newly opened Tulsa Junior College, which was hiring an entire faculty. Between teaching classes, Goble devoted his energies to writing a doctoral dissertation to complete his Missouri degree. The going was slow, especially since the new TJC had no research library. So Goble selected a topic he knew well: Oklahoma history. He focused on the state's colorful political life and set to work with a co-author, historian James R. Scales. Seven years later, they had written the text known as *Oklahoma Politics*.

The OU Press sent a review copy to the state's highest-profile politician, Speaker Albert, hoping for a kind word or two for the dust jacket. Instead, the Press received a glowing recommendation. "Nothing I have read in a long time has fascinated me so much," Albert wrote. "This is something that has been needed for years. . . . To all Oklahomans who love our state this book should be extremely interesting. It is certainly extremely important." Goble was shocked and thrilled.

"I certainly had never met him. A couple of years later, he called me up and said that he was interested in doing his own memoirs, he had read my book and would I help him out?" Goble remembers. "Boy, I jumped all over that."

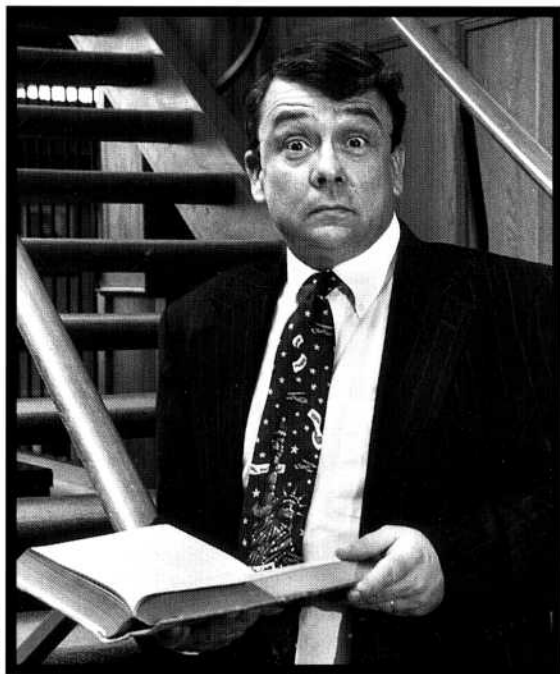
Writing Albert's memoirs not only gained Goble literary kudos but also gifted him with an insight and a personal relationship he treasures.

"The one word I would use to describe Carl Albert would be 'humility,'" Goble reflects. "It's a striking thing. Even with all of the awards that have come his way, I can honestly say he is one of the most modest people I've ever met. He's Carl Albert from Bugtussle.

"I asked him one time, 'Of all the achievements and honors you've received, what are you most proud of?' He had to pause a long time, and then he finally said, 'Winning a high school speech contest in 1927.'"

Opposite: Danney Goble, right, and his wife, Sharon Vaughan Goble, join OU President David L. Boren, left, and Carl Albert in the centerpiece of the Carl Albert Center, a replica of the Speaker's office in Washington, D.C.

Below: Chautauqua actor Danney Goble assumes his Huey Long persona. Ironically, the controversial Louisiana governor spent his freshman year at the University of Oklahoma.



Gil Jain

Today Goble is balancing his work at the Carl Albert Center with co-writing the memoirs of two other treasures of Oklahoma history—former Governor Henry Bellmon and Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher, the elegant and poised woman whose Supreme Court civil rights struggle integrated OU.

“Ada Fisher is one of the most interesting people I’ve ever worked with,” Goble says. “Mrs. Fisher is, among other things, charming, courageous, funny and very insightful. I’m especially fond of her.”

Goble had an unusual opportunity to experience the turbulence of 1948’s *Fisher v. the University of Oklahoma* firsthand when he was selected to play the state’s attorney general in the highly acclaimed drama, “Halls of Ivory,” which was written by Goble’s former student James Vance and performed by the OU School of Drama.

However, “Halls of Ivory” is just one of Goble’s acting credits. He also worked as an extra in every S.E. Hinton movie, all of which were filmed while he was teaching at TJC.

“You showed up, put in your time and got this interesting line for your vitae,” Goble says, adding that the closest he ever came to a moment of fame happened during the filming of “Rumblefish.” Director Francis Ford Coppola spent 12 hours setting up a shot centering around Dennis Hopper in a Tulsa cemetery. Goble positioned himself slightly behind Hopper, confident that he finally would appear on film. Instead, Coppola moved Goble twice, and in the end, he was not anywhere near Dennis Hopper.

“I ended up behind a tombstone,” Goble says with a smile. “And the whole scene ended up on the cutting-room floor. But it was an education.”

Education also is the key component of his current foray into acting. Goble is active in Chautauquas, which bring historical figures to life during performances across Oklahoma. Scholars portray the late and famous, bringing a special perspective to their performances, which last nearly an hour and feature period costumes, accents and mannerisms of the historical subject. Goble plays three very different men who made their mark on Southern history: Louisiana Governor Huey Long; Confederate General James Longstreet; and “attorney

for the damned” Clarence Darrow, the defense during the famed “Scopes Monkey Trial.”

“The tricky part is, you also take questions from the audience for about 20 minutes,” Goble says. “In theory, anything anyone would ask Huey Long—were he in fact there—you answer as Huey Long, ideally, with his words. To get to that point, you basically immerse yourself into the character. You read everything written about or by the person.”

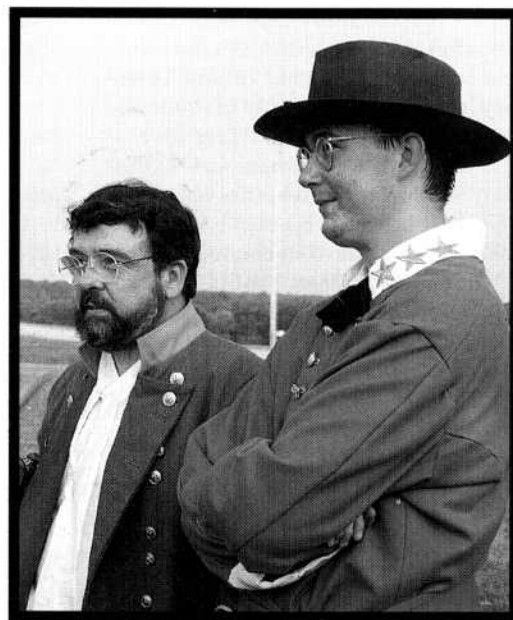
Goble began reading about Darrow as a 14-year-old when he purchased the book, *Clarence Darrow for the Defense*. He employs all of his knowledge during Chautauquas, particularly when he steps out of character to comment on information he has gained from researching and playing the individual. In Darrow’s case, audiences may be surprised at what they hear.

“I basically step out of character to argue that the fundamentalists whom Darrow had poked such fun at had been receiving an unfair press for several years. And the views that Darrow was defending, properly understood, were not nearly as enlightened as they would seem.

“There was a lot of buffoonery on both sides of the case — in fact, a lot of danger on both sides,” Goble says, adding that he shocked one audience with excerpts from the actual textbook John Scopes used in his Dayton, Tennessee, classroom.

“I read a section that talked about the hierarchy of races, that white Europeans were supposedly superior to the Orientals, who were superior to the Native Americans, who were all superior to blacks. I read the section that advocates euthanasia, the killing of ‘defectives,’ and also read the section that spoke hopefully of new experiments of racial purification being conducted in Europe. *That’s* what they were teaching in Dayton, Tennessee.

“I think that was probably the best teaching experience that I’ve



Danney Goble, left, is a familiar figure to participants in Civil War reenactments as Confederate General James Longstreet. Here Goble prepares to go onstage in *Ada*, escorted by a Confederate reenactor.

ever had,” Goble says. “Granted, it’s teaching at an entirely different level, an entirely different audience, an entirely different form. I like to think that audience knew a lot more about Clarence Darrow than if they had read about him—but also had been shaken in some of its convictions. Chautauquas are such a powerful educational tool because they are entertaining. They allow the audience to think of things in an entirely different way.”

Helping the public think about our past in a different way is one of the greatest bequests that Goble, as a historian, would like to leave behind.

“I would like for my students and other people to understand that history is less a series of events than an intertwined process and that it’s more important to grasp, not history’s facts, but its relationships. That’s the essence of history.”

Pulitzer nominations and other national recognition aside, Goble also has a deeply personal wish for his work’s legacy. “I hope that my family would be proud to be Oklahomans and proud to be my family.”