
PROLOGUE

Rediscovering George Lynn Cross: A rite of passage for succeeding generations

For those of us fortunate enough to have known him in his prime and to have experienced his 25 years of exceptional leadership as president of the University of Oklahoma, the rediscovery of George Lynn Cross by subsequent generations of OU students was a wonder and a delight.

Such revelations often occurred on the annual visits he and his vivacious wife, Cleo, paid to the President's Leadership Class—a favorite legacy from his administration—or on the anniversary of some momentous event in institutional history. At the behest of their more senior editors, young reporters would seek him out for anecdotes about the flood of returning WWII veterans and the overnight emergence of the Sooner City prefabs; admission of the first black student and the long struggle for civil rights; the "Red Scare," the anti-Communist loyalty oaths and the underlying issue of academic freedom; University acquisition of the Norman Navy bases; the tragedy of the BOQ fire and the NROTC plane crash; the Bud Wilkinson era in OU football.

Occasionally students researching some aspect of institutional or social history would discover that the man immortalized by the Parrington Oval statue still dwelt among them—the man whose name is found on a campus building, scholarships and awards, distinguished professorships, a lecture series, a dormitory complex, a city street. Then they timidly would ask to come by the Cross home on Mockingbird Lane—just as earlier generations had dropped by the president's home on Boyd Street for cookies and conversation.

He was a great storyteller, even into his nineties. Who, after all, had better stories to tell? Or a better right to tell them?

Cross came to the University at the height of the Depression as an assistant professor of botany. Rising rapidly through the ranks of academic administration to the presidency, he persevered in good times and bad, weathering the

challenges of underfunding, political interference, civil unrest, academic egos and panty raids.

OU's seventh president knew all about bucking the odds. An impoverished South Dakota farm boy with no college prospects, he unexpectedly received a football scholarship and a job washing dishes at the coed dining hall. There he met and fell in love with "the prettiest girl at South Dakota State College" and overcame her family's adamant objections to a marriage that lasted 71 years. When hard times drastically cut the budget of the department he chaired at

the University of South Dakota, he took a cut in rank to come to the University of Oklahoma where the future looked brighter. When the OU Regents tapped him as acting president, he was assured that he was not being considered for the permanent post. Eight months later he began the longest presidential tenure in the history of the institution.

Cross never accepted a shortage of resources as a justification for failure, often recounting that after Albert Einstein's death, friends found that he had used his Princeton University paychecks as bookmarks. Faculty members trying to leverage another job prospect into an OU counteroffer usually were congratulated by the president and wished well in their new endeavors. Cross understood professional and monetary success, recognition and acclaim, having experienced enough of each in his lifetime, but he valued other qualities much more.

His most recent successor, President David Boren, commented, "In an age when all too many people tend to use important institutions for their personal gain, George Cross, along with his wife, Cleo, lovingly and faithfully invested his entire life in building a great university for the people of our state. His example will always challenge us to be faithful to the best that is in us."

George Cross stood tall, literally and figuratively. A handsome man who carried himself with confidence, dignity and sophistication, he possessed a keen sense of

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**OU President Emeritus
George Lynn Cross
(1905-1998)**



ABOVE: Cross credited Cleo's charm and cooking ability with swaying the OU Regents in their choice of him as president, earning the couple invitations to 25 years of official receptions such as this one in 1958.

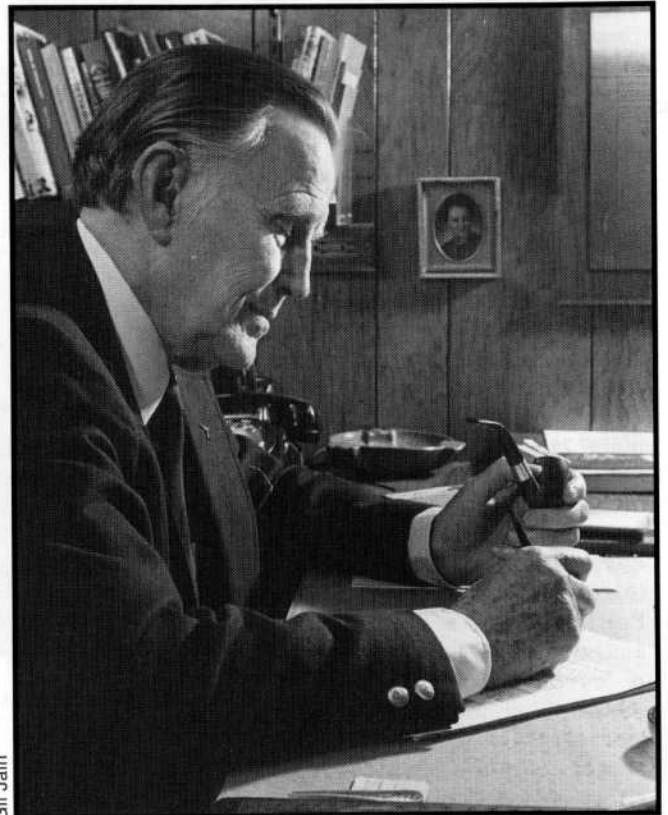
BELOW: Cross, at left with Bud Wilkinson, overcame Governor J. Howard Edmonson's desire to remove him as president and eventually forged a good relationship.



Cornelius Photocraft



Ever the scientist, Cross as president often visited the Bebb Herbarium in the botany department for coffee with his faculty colleagues, the late Howard Larsh, left, and the collection's curator, George Goodman.



Gil Jain

After his retirement, Cross maintained an office in the botany microbiology building until a few years before his death. There he wrote seven books on University history, six published by the OU Press and one by the University of Oklahoma Foundation, the private funding vehicle he established in 1944 and served as trustee until 1997.

President Cross made himself available to students, both officially and personally, stopping to talk as he strolled the campus, dropping by afternoon athletic practices. Here he and Dean of Students Paul MacMinn, left, don the headdresses of Pe-et, the senior men's honorary society.

OU Western History Collections



Robert Taylor

Immortalized in bronze for the generations of Sooners who will not experience his wry wit and uncommon wisdom, George Cross attended the 1996 unveiling of the Paul Moore statue that stands in front of Evans Hall.

humor and a quick wit that often caught his listeners by surprise. In addressing even the gravest concerns, Cross mixed intelligence, objectivity and common sense with just enough wry comment to put matters into perspective.

Most faculty and staff returning from professional meetings were savvy enough to include a couple of jokes in their trip reports to Cross' office. They knew that their input was valued there—and not merely to spice up the president's speeches. Cross was from the faculty and for the faculty. They repaid his advocacy with loyalty and service to the University. The pay was not great, but here they could be heard.

One veteran political science professor recounts coming to Oklahoma after WWII, intending to stay only a couple of years. But the place was addictive. "If I had an idea, and my department chairman had turned me down, and the dean had turned me down, I knew that I could still walk into the president's office and make my case. He might say no, but he would listen, and that's what counted."

If his head was filled with faculty concerns, his heart belonged to the students. He met with them, counseled their leaders, kept them talking when times were tense. Moreover, he was interested in them as people.

When Cross retired in 1968, a year-long love-fest ensued as campus organizations vied to express their admiration and appreciation. The nationally known university Cross was leaving bore little resemblance to the small, regional institution he had inherited in 1943. Then largely clustered around Parrington Oval, the campus had added or enlarged 37 buildings, acquired hundreds of acres from the former Navy bases, expanded housing from 250 in Hester and Robertson halls to 7,218 single-student and 778 family units.

Graduate enrollment had gone from fewer than 100 to more than 3,600; doctoral fields had increased from 9 to 35. In 1943, the University had awarded 75 doctoral degrees in its entire history; by 1968 some 150 doctorates were being awarded each year.

Cross became chairman of the board of a Norman bank while maintaining an office in the botany-microbiology building that now bears his name. He taught some undergraduate botany courses and wrote seven books on University history. And for another 30 years he and Cleo continued to charm and enthrall the University community.

When Cross lost the love of his life in 1997, the spark went out for this remarkably resilient man. With Cleo standing staunchly beside him, he had parlayed his schoolboy strength and athletic prowess into a most remarkable academic career, achieving everything he ever could have imagined along the way.

On New Year's Eve, 1998, at the age of 93, he put down the burdens that such a long life imposes. On January 15, 1999—a glorious, unseasonably beautiful Oklahoma day—a grateful University family, his own family and friends of many years gathered at the Cross statue in quiet tribute to the passing of an era never to be equaled.

Well done, dear friend.

—CAROL J. BURR