
PROLOGUE

Carl Albert's place is secure in history and in Sooner hearts

God must have envisioned Carl Albert on a pedestal. Just look at his statue in front of the Oklahoma Memorial Union. At 5 feet, 4½ inches tall, there was no other way he could have seen the parade—unless, of course, he happened to be leading the parade—which fortunately he always was.

Already a national champion high school orator and class valedictorian, Albert came to the University of Oklahoma with \$20 in his pocket, a poor boy from an economically deprived hamlet with the unlikely name of Bugtussle. Yet he fit naturally into campus leadership roles as he would later in the halls of the U.S. Congress, admired for his intelligence, integrity and political savvy.

Albert was elected president of the OU Men's Council, then president of the student body, outstanding senior man, Phi Beta Kappa, Rhodes Scholar. Armed with a 1931 B.A. in government from OU, he went to Oxford University, where he collected a bachelor of arts in laws and a bachelor of civil laws in 1934.

Back in Oklahoma, he worked for the Federal Housing Administration and practiced law until 1941. World War II drew him into the armed forces, entering as a private, briefly with the Third Armored Division, and emerging as a lieutenant colonel in the Judge Advocate General Corps. With his wife, Mary Harmon Albert, whom he had married in 1942, he returned to McAlester to pursue his life's goal, election to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Politics was a blood sport in Oklahoma's Third District, the Democratic nomination being tantamount to election. Here, in 1946, the legend of the "Little Giant from Little Dixie" was born. Albert edged his runoff op-

ponent by a mere 329 votes, swept the general election and never was seriously challenged for the next 30 years.

His congressional tenure encompassed both Republican and Democratic administrations, saw the implementation of the programs of the New Frontier and the Great Society, experienced the turmoil of Vietnam and Watergate. His inspired service on major House committees quickly caught the eye of the Democratic leadership, notably Sam Rayburn and John McCormack. By 1955 he was Majority Whip, then Majority Leader in 1962 and Speaker of the House in 1971, the highest governmental office ever held by an Oklahoman.

Twice during his speakership, when scandals of the Nixon administration rendered the vice presidency vacant, Carl Albert was next in line of succession to the presidency. A lesser man might have used these times of crisis to propel himself into the Oval Office; Albert's only concern was the strength and stability of his government and his country. When Albert retired from the House in 1976, returning once more to McAlester, he left with respect and admiration from both sides of the aisle.

Carl Albert's papers—1,000 cubic feet of materials documenting an extraordinary political life, complete with books, memorabilia and the furnishings of his office while speaker—were donated to his alma mater. The University added the Albert papers to those of 50 other current and former members of the Congress to form the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, the premier resource in the field.

To most of the world, perhaps, this was the end of the Albert story—not so for his home state or the University of Oklahoma. For two more decades, Carl Albert reigned as Oklahoma's

elder statesman, sought out by veteran and fledgling politicians alike for counsel, encouragement, endorsement. Nothing meant more to a worthy cause seeking public validation than support from "Mr. Albert."

He relished any opportunity to visit the OU campus—and there were many. He could be seen at football games, dinners and award ceremonies. But he seemed to cherish most the occasions in which he could interact with students. The activities of the Carl Albert Center offered abundant possibilities.

One of the most mutually satisfying relationships Albert maintained was with the recipients of the annual Carl Albert Award for the outstanding senior in the OU College of Arts and Sciences. Established in 1966 by Julian J. Rothbaum, Albert's lifelong friend and political ally, the award is more than a prize and a plaque. Recipients assume an obligation "for future service." Albert kept track of these promising young people, corresponding with them, encouraging their endeavors and following their careers with intense interest. Every five years, Rothbaum brought them back to the campus to renew their ties to Albert and the University.

As befitting Oklahoma's most illustrious citizens, Carl Albert shares with Will Rogers the naming honors on facilities throughout the state—public schools from elementary to college, streets and highways, bridges, buildings and memorials of all types. Both men achieved their greatest fame far from Oklahoma, but in Albert's case, he always returned. Home for Carl Albert never changed location. As one longtime friend said, "He said he was born in Pittsburg County, and he hoped he would die in Pittsburg County." On Friday, February 4, 2000, at age 91, "he got his wish." —CJB