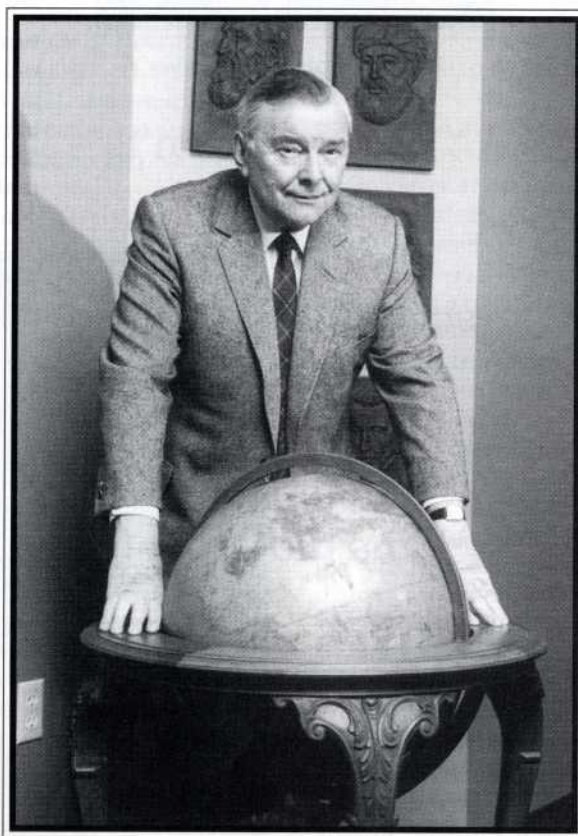


# Teachers and Books

Professor Duane Roller  
recalls the beginnings of the  
History of Science at Oklahoma.

BY DAVID W. LEVY  
Sam K. Viersen Jr. Presidential Professor



**T**wo days before Christmas 1948, Savoie Lottinville, director of the University of Oklahoma Press, wrote an excited letter to President George Lynn Cross. The letter concerned a suggestion made by an old friend of Lottinville's: "Mr. E. DeGolyer, Dallas, an alumnus of our University . . . said to me, just after someone had drilled a[n oil] producer on a large block of land he had south of Houston, 'Don't tell anyone, but I'm going back home and examine my income tax status. I had the idea that it might be a good thing to establish a library devoted to the history of science at the University of Oklahoma. Nothing may come of this, but I am going to think about it anyway.'"

This academic year, the University celebrates the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the initial volumes that the pioneering oilman and geophysicist Everette Lee DeGolyer sent to Norman. The very first was a book published in 1632

Honors accorded Duane Roller by the University—the McCasland Professorship, the David Ross Boyd Professorship, the Distinguished Service Citation—testify to his devoted curatorship of the History of Science Collections and his inspired teaching.

in the history of science. "You provide the faculty," he is supposed to have said, "and I'll provide the books."

Both sides of that old bargain between DeGolyer and the University of Oklahoma have prospered remarkably, and both have borne remarkable fruit. Building upon the gifts

by the great Italian scientist, Galileo. That treasure, which contained notes written by the author himself, was an auspicious beginning to what became a series of shipments from DeGolyer that eventually totaled hundreds of volumes. But just as important as DeGolyer's decision to house a collection of books at the University was his insistence that the history of science be taught as an academic discipline on the campus. Everette DeGolyer had a good deal more in mind than an assemblage of important old volumes, and he required as a part of his agreement with the University that an academic base be established



of DeGolyer, who died in December 1956, the History of Science Collections in Bizzell Memorial Library have become one of the principal jewels of the University. Nurtured by Cross and Lottinville, aided immeasurably by long-time librarian Arthur McAnally and his successors and supervised over the years by Duane H. D. Roller, Marcia Goodman and Marilyn Ogilvie, the Collections now consist of approximately 87,000 volumes and constitute one of the most important centers in the world for the study of the history of science. Each year scholars from across the nation and around the globe come to draw upon its riches.

In 1954 the University began to fulfill its side of the bargain by hiring Duane Roller as an assistant professor in the History Department. He was to teach half time in the new field, and he would serve, half time, as the curator of what was called the DeGolyer Collection. As time passed and the University was able, additional faculty were added, and the History of Science Department (which separated from the History Department in 1971) became the academic home of a small but distinguished group of scholars and teachers. More than 75 students now have earned the master's or doctor's degree in the history of science.

Thus Roller stood at the head of both parts of the DeGolyer-OU bargain of a half-century ago. Under his guidance, both the History of Science Collections in the Library and the Department of the History of Science at the University of Oklahoma grew steadily and wisely, paving the way for the field's present national prominence. Roller was, therefore, in a unique position to record the beginning of that important story. In 1994, in the weeks before his death on August 22, Roller started to write his "Final Reminiscences." He completed about a dozen pages—historians will wish that he had been permitted to write more. The document printed below consists of selections from those pages. In them, Roller says a few words about his own early training, considers the personality and background of Everette DeGolyer and describes the origins and early development of the history of science at the University of Oklahoma.



Philanthropist E. DeGolyer

***“You guys don’t  
want to just  
know what a  
scientist did, you  
want to know  
what he was  
thinking while  
he did it.”***

**H**ow am I to write about the events that produced the History of Science Collections? The problem is that those events (or at least my knowledge of them) are mostly autobiographical. They consist of my memories, sometimes documented, sometimes not. I see three obvious approaches in my writing.

First I could do as Professor Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz (1807-1873) did: write in the third person about my experiences. Somehow I cannot bring myself to discourse about the experiences of “Professor Roller” or “the author.” A second alternative is to write as American journalists are taught: simply lay out the truth and never say “I.” That too I find difficult, not having access to the truth. . . . Third, I can write autobiographically, in the first person, expressing what I consider to be the most accurate view of those events I experienced. And this I shall do. . . .

I entered Columbia College at the age of 16, in 1936, ill-prepared for college study. My father was a university professor of physics who, after obtaining the Ph.D. from California Institute of Technology under the direction of Robert Andrew Millikan (1868-1953), chose teaching over research. He became, I was to learn much later from his students, a superb teacher. He

found the history of physics a valuable tool in the only thing that mattered to him, teaching physics, and perhaps some of this interest rubbed off on me. Yet my majoring in physics at Columbia was an act of desperation: the college required some major and I chose my father's field.

At the beginning of my junior year I fell into a course in the history of science, taught by Frederick A. Barry. . . . In that class room he brought to life the past of science. He arranged access for me to a deserted room in the Columbia Library with marvelous books. . . . And most of all I found the writings of Pierre Duhem which made me realize that being able to read French was worthwhile. . . . As a consequence of Barry's influence I changed my major from physics to history of science and changed my academic habits sufficiently to obtain a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1942. . . .

[T]he Second World War, followed by a nervous return to physics as a graduate program that could lead to earning a living, intervened. After obtaining a Master of Science



degree and completing the course work for a doctorate at Purdue University, the Chairman of the Physics Department there, Karl Lark-Horowitz, sensing my restlessness, obtained a Carnegie Fellowship for me to work at Harvard, with then President James B. Conant (1893-1978). The work was in an experimental program, designing and teaching a course to inculcate an understanding of the nature of science along lines laid out in Conant's Terry Lectures at Yale. Heavy use of history of science was built into the plan. . . . For me it was an extraordinary learning experience. . . . Conant's book based on the Terry Lectures, *On Understanding Science*, had been published in 1946 and was read shortly afterwards by Everette Lee DeGolyer (1886-1956).

DeGolyer was socially the antithesis of Conant. He was born in a sod hut in Kansas, not into an upper class, well-to-do New England family; he was a graduate of the University of Oklahoma, with financial support earned as a waiter in fraternity houses, rather than a product of New England private schools culminating in Harvard. The teachers DeGolyer remembered the most at Oklahoma were Charles Newton Gould, who gave him the foundations of his profession in geology, and Vernon Parrington, an English profes-



The History of Science Collections experienced remarkable growth in number and significance under the guidance of its first curator, Duane H.D. Roller, left, and the collections' librarian, Marcia Goodman.

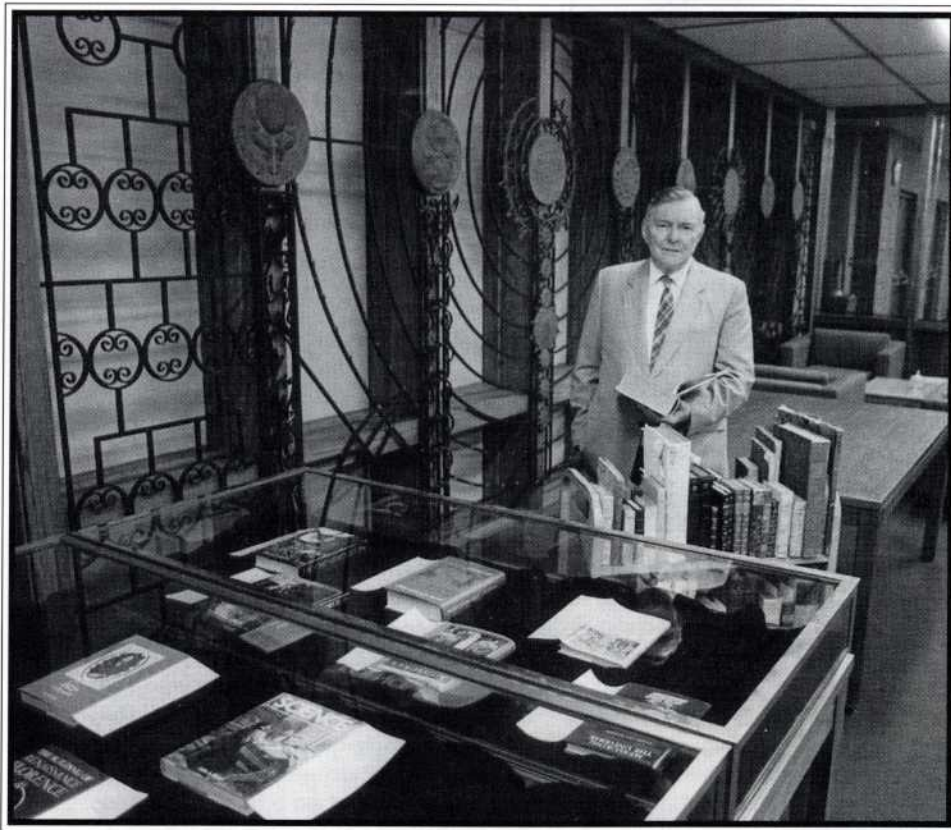
sor and a Harvard graduate, who taught him a love of beauty in literature and history and a love of books in general. DeGolyer went on to help to establish the field of geophysics and become the foremost of oil prospectors. . . . An avid reader, he often confronted others with the evidence that *they* had not read the pertinent documents. An example I remember is when we were discussing intellectual freedom and I alleged the persecution of J. Robert Oppenheimer. DeGolyer remarked that in a discussion with Norman Cousins concerning Oppenheimer he rebuffed Cousins by saying it was clear to DeGolyer that Cousins simply had not read the *Oppenheimer Report*. But this equally rebuffed me, for I knew that there was a copy of the *Report* among the books DeGolyer had sent to the University, which I had not read. Consequently I did the only graceful thing: I shut up. But then I returned to Norman, read the document, and on my next visit to DeGolyer said "I've read the *Oppenheimer Report*: let's talk about him."

The reading of *On Understanding Science* opened up a new world to him. "You guys [historians of science]" he once said to me, "don't want to just know what a scientist did, you want to know what he was *thinking while he did it*." DeGolyer had, perhaps for the first time, encountered the history of ideas, intellectual history, in the context of the history of science. He had already become an avid book-collector, probably in part due to Parrington's influence on him. It was a trait that ultimately reached bibliomania. The home he built in Dallas contained a two-story library room, with alternate windows and book shelves reaching to the ceilings. It was in this room that he once took a small book-alas, I don't remember the title—from the shelf and said to me: "This is very fragile; I estimate that it can be opened ten times without damage, so I am about to give you one-tenth of the book." Another time he remarked that he had a son-in-law (George McGhee) who was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, and perhaps in emulation of his father-in-law, began a collection of books on Turkey. "But," DeGolyer said, "there wasn't enough common ground between us to start an argument: he used a cheap bookbinder."

A third anecdote: "We used to have big dinner parties and the group would naturally gravitate to the library after dinner. It is, after all, the most livable room in the house. And there the guests would take books off the shelf and look at them. I understand why; they wanted to show that they were at home in my house. I understand that, I want our guests to feel at home, but I wish they'd keep their God-damn hands off my books."

DeGolyer collected books for the pleasure of collecting and, like many collectors, sought completeness. He, for some reason, became interested in a periodical entitled *The Texas Almanac* and finally put together a complete run, except for the first volume. Then he found a small college library that had *only* the first volume. What did this multimillionaire bibliomaniac do? As he told me, "Hell, I just gave them the rest of it." DeGolyer liked to collect books on a





The first specially designed facilities for the History of Science Collections, fronted by a Joe Taylor wrought iron sculptured screen, was part of the 1959 addition to Bizzell Memorial Library.

subject and when his interest had run the course, he would often give the collection to some library. This leads to the origin of what was originally called the "Oklahoma Collection."

The idea of a Collection in the history of science stemmed from a large number of identifiable roots in DeGolyer's past. These included his interest in science and technology, the latter being his profession; his interest in history apparently acquired largely from Parrington; his interest in literature and books, also originating with Parrington; the encounter with the history of science in Conant's book as a branch of intellectual history; and his belief that books are important to education, which he occasionally expressed by ranking the essentials for education in the order [of] students, books, teachers, although he never went as far as to suggest only the first two were important. Each of these "roots" is known to me through personal contact and communication from DeGolyer. Collectively they caused him to turn to a (necessarily) bibliographical interest in the history of science and the possibility of expressing that interest through the University of Oklahoma. But although he thought in terms of books and although others thought in terms of the University acquir-

---

"This is very fragile; I estimate that it can be opened ten times without damage, so I am about to give you one-tenth of the book."

---

ing (valuable) books, it is important to remember that DeGolyer's interest was in the discipline and in education in the discipline. . . .

These interests involved him with intellectualism, with history, with publication, and people in the publishing world, including Savoie Lottinville, director of The University of Oklahoma Press. . . . In late 1948 Savoie Lottinville returned to Norman, Oklahoma from attendance

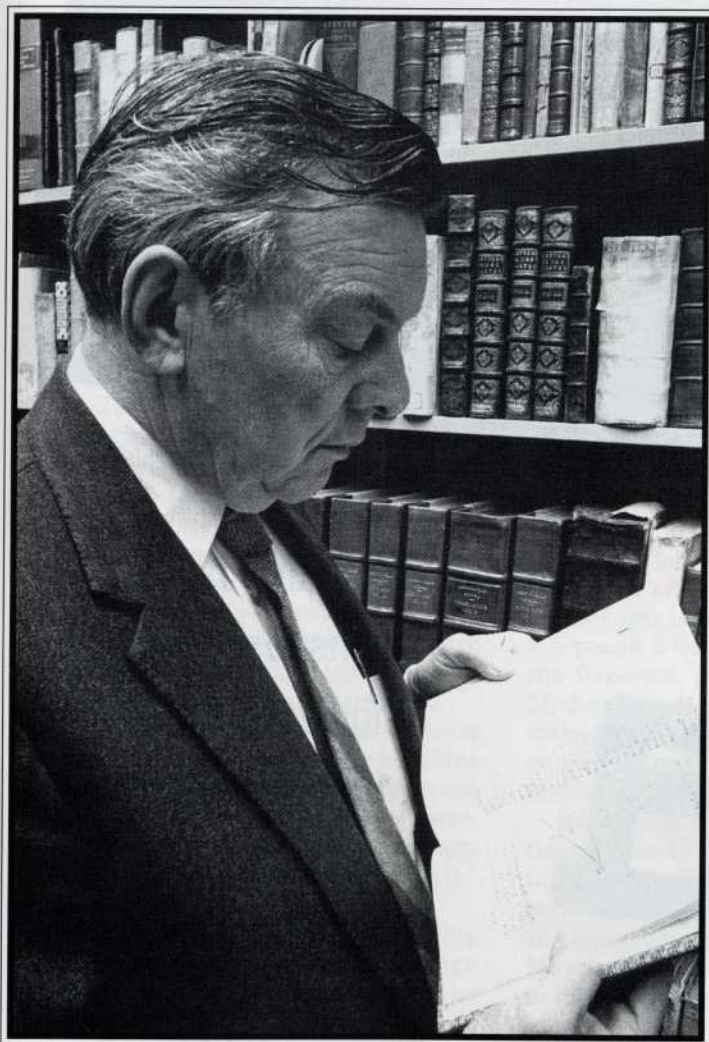
at a Rhodes Scholarship meeting in New Orleans, where he had met DeGolyer. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December he wrote to George L. Cross, President of The University of Oklahoma, confirming that DeGolyer had suggested the possibility of a library in the history of science at the University. Lottinville found the idea exciting and he knew DeGolyer was wealthy, deeply interested in history, books, and science and his *Alma Mater*, a spectrum of interests that could have important consequences for the University.

For the next five and one-half years Lottinville and Cross unflinchingly bulldogged the problem of getting a sometimes lukewarm, usually slow-acting, and generally uninformed group of faculty members to move through the necessary actions until a gift of books and periodicals in the history of science became the property of the University. Lottinville repeatedly commented to me after my arrival in 1954 how difficult it had been to get the faculty committees involved to act. Cross, in an oral communication made to me in March 1990, remarked on the tremendous importance of Lottinville's role in obtaining the Collection for the University.

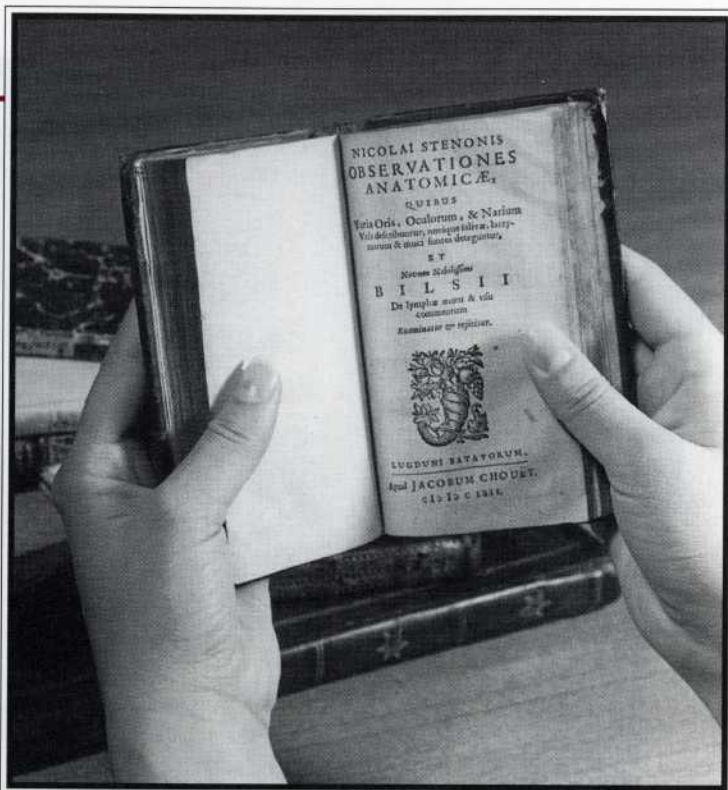


Yet the complicated problem of faculty action to satisfy DeGolyer, involved not books—he knew all about them—but education. His deal with Cross was that the University would provide the staff for a teaching program in the history of science and DeGolyer would provide a collection of books on the subject. Thus DeGolyer wanted to co-opt the best of two sources: his own ability to build a special collection of books on a given subject and the University's ability to provide instruction on that subject. . . .

There are three distinct periods in the development of the history of science at the University of Oklahoma. First is the period *before* December 1948, when Lottinville's letter to Cross initiated University action concerning the history of science. This is a period in which DeGolyer's interest in the history of science developed and, of utmost importance, he acquired a



Duane H. D. Roller was a great teacher, but the picture of the man that comes to mind most often is of the curator in the stacks of the History of Science Collections—the teacher with the books.



The 50,000<sup>th</sup> addition to the History of Science Collections was a tiny, 338-year-old, first edition of *Observationes Anatomicae* by Nicolaus Steno, published in 1662 and acquired by the University in 1982.

view as to what the history of science is. Second is a period of intense activity in the academic world of the University toward bringing the University in line with DeGolyer's ideas, with the understanding that a gift of books would follow. This period continued until the hiring of a teacher of the history of science, 1 July 1954, and the vetting of that teacher by DeGolyer to be certain that he was a professional and not some sort of unprofessional retread, and the consequent release of ownership of books to the University. DeGolyer was far more sophisticated than any faculty member as to both the history of science and the idea of "professional" in a new profession. . . . Third is the period beginning two years later with the death of DeGolyer in 1956 and the lack of any kind of endowment of the Collection, which introduced a period of limbo in growth, followed by a conscious decision of George L. Cross to raise private funds to continue the growth of what was now named *The History of Science Collections*. This period continued until the Curator reached legal senility (age 70) in 1990 and was forced to retire.

[Source: Professor Roller's *The DeGolyer Collection and the University of Oklahoma: Final Reminiscences of Duane H. D. Roller* (1994) was edited by his son, Duane W. Roller, Professor of Classics at Ohio State University, whom the author wishes to thank for calling this document to his attention. The full version can be found in the "Collection Archive" of the History of Science Collections, Bizzell Memorial Library.]