

# A Daughter Remembers

**SHE WAS THE YOUNGEST, AND THE LAST SURVIVOR, OF THE FOUR BROOKS GIRLS WHO LIVED IN THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE.**

BY DEBRA LEVY

Elizabeth Ann (“Betty”) Brooks Taylor was just a toddler in 1912 when her father, Stratton D. Brooks, was appointed president of the University of Oklahoma and moved the family from Boston to Norman. By the time his tenure ended in 1923 and the family relocated to Columbia, Missouri, where Brooks became president of the University of Missouri, she had accumulated enough fond memories to last a lifetime.

Stratton Brooks was superintendent of the public school system in Boston when he reluctantly interviewed for the OU post. At the time, according to Harold Keith’s account of those early days, *Oklahoma Kickoff*, East Coast educators were “still in a state of shock from the summary discharge of President Boyd and part of the [Oklahoma] faculty [in 1908].”

Brooks was finally persuaded by a challenge from Bob Wilson, Oklahoma’s superintendent of schools. “You told me . . . you wanted to build a great university,” he reportedly said to Brooks as he escorted the visitor around the OU campus. “This is the only state big enough to have one that hasn’t already got one.”



OU Western History Collections

A laughing Betty Brooks, left, posed with her sister Helen and their parents, Marcia Acorn and Stratton D. Brooks, the University of Oklahoma’s third president, 1912-23, after the family left Norman for the University of Missouri.

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Courtesy Robert Prickett

During their last year at OU, 1923, the Brooks family enjoyed a “spaghetti party” at the Norman Country Club. Betty is seated center, with her father, left, and mother, right.

Long an advocate of eliminating politics from the public schools, Brooks agreed to come on two conditions: First, that all faculty and staff appointments be made only on the recommendation of the president and not the State Board of Education [which then governed OU]; and second, that the board have nothing to do with the administration of the University. The board agreed.

“Father fought to keep politics out of education,” recalled Taylor in an interview from her Seaview, Washington, home shortly before her October 8 death at age 91. “In Boston, Mayor John “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald [father of Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] wanted to control the Boston school system. Father fought him and won.” In the process, Brooks revolutionized the system and made it one of the best in the country. One of his many accomplishments in Boston included establishing the nation’s first vocational education program.

Although widely renowned as an administrator, Taylor said her father was, first and foremost, a teacher. “He used to say he chose to become a teacher because he could get a whole dollar for it, which was more than he could get from farming.” But the truth was he loved being an educator, even if he only reached a handful of students. He once told his daughter, who also became an educator, that a teacher was lucky if he had just one good student in a class. “He said, ‘You can’t expect more than that,’” she said. “I may be biased, but I think Father was the best educator who ever lived.”

When the family first learned they were relocating to Oklahoma, she confessed, “Mother was afraid to come because she was afraid of Indians. But when we arrived, she was just embarrassed because many prominent Oklahomans, including then-Congressman [“Alfalfa Bill”] Murray and a Norman banker and lawyer, were Indians. Mother quickly got over her fear.”

While Brooks was OU president, his family played host to many distinguished visitors. “There weren’t any hotels in Norman, so we entertained all important visitors at our home,” Taylor recalled. “Famous people were in and out all the time.”

Most notable was the visit of President William Howard Taft. “Taft didn’t like fountain pens. He asked Mother if he could borrow a stick pen,” Taylor remembered. “Mother told him the only one in the house belonged to me. But I’d chewed

the tip of it. I gave it to him anyway, and he wrote a note to mother with it, thanking her for her hospitality.” Taylor later donated the note to Lincoln College in Lincoln, Illinois, where she was on the faculty.

When her father had a bout of shingles and the doctor told him that he needed to either start smoking or drinking to get rid of them, he chose tobacco as his remedy. “Two of my sisters revolted. They walked out of the house, saying they wouldn’t live in the same house as a man who smoked,” Taylor remembered with a laugh.

During his 11-year tenure, Brooks built OU from a school with few students and a handful of buildings to an institution with a national reputation. The University had an enrollment of less than

800 when he became president in 1912. When he left in 1923, the student population was more than 5,000. His many reforms included establishment of a permanent faculty salary schedule, permanent tenure and sabbatical leave, and he oversaw the construction of seven major buildings.

He also was known for his political acumen. As Keith noted, “although the president . . . never gave any outward indication that he participated in [politics], he was always thinking a couple of steps ahead of the embryo lawmakers, figuring out ways to block them before they blocked him.”

Ironically, politics was ultimately Brooks’ undoing as OU’s president when he was forced out by the state’s new governor, John C. “Jack” Walton, in 1923. According to a May 3, 1923, *Daily Oklahoman* news report, the governor announced that he would ask the newly appointed Board of Regents to remove Brooks as head of the University because of “alleged pernicious political activity and inability to restrain members of the faculty from similar pernicious political activity.” The governor, the report stated, planned to remove the schools of the state from politics—the exact educational mission Brooks had pursued his entire career.

In a statement, Brooks said, “I regret leaving the University of Oklahoma and the state, but recent political developments which have involved the university have made conditions there impossible . . . Forget me as quickly as possible and fight for the institution.”

“He fought politics in education all his life,” Taylor said, “but politics always followed him.”

Even after he left OU, Brooks’ stellar reputation lived on in the Sooner state. After she married and was living in Wichita, Kansas, Taylor recalled her father-in-law driving her to Tulsa to visit her sister. “He always drove the back roads,” she said. “Every time we stopped for gas, he’d tell people, ‘This is Stratton D. Brooks’ daughter.’ They all told me how much my father had done for the state and how he’d helped them all.”

According to Keith’s account, Brooks’ heart remained in Oklahoma right up to until his death in January 1949, following a stroke. “My wife is buried here, and here’s where I’ll be buried,” he reportedly told friends during a 1944 visit to Norman. They rest side by side, not far from the university he transformed in a little over a decade.