



Photo by Bachrach

Robert McKinney: journalist, diplomat, corporate director, conservationist, poet.

# *A Tribute to Robert*

*Editor's Note: Robert Moody McKinney, OU Class of 1932, was a man who seized opportunity with both hands and wrung from life all it had to offer. Summing up this unique man's accomplishments following his death on June 24, 2001, at the age of 90, was a daunting task, but one that his good friend David Boren accepted gladly.*

When I first learned of the death of Robert McKinney, I tried to imagine what his entrance into heaven would have been like. It would not have been quiet or understated. He would have arrived in style with great fanfare and enthusiasm. I imagined him dressed in just the right suit made for the occasion by his London tailor, seated in the open Mercedes touring car that he used to drive around Santa Fe. I know one thing: Heaven will never be the same. It will be filled with energy, and those quiet souls who don't know what to do next will have someone to give them orders and to inspire them. There will be no shortage of projects in heaven with Robert there. Perhaps there will even be a few more practical jokes. One thing is certain: Heaven is a more interesting place than it was before he arrived.

The first word that comes to my mind to describe Robert McKinney is "irreplaceable." I'm not sure that our society is producing people like him any more. I worry about it. We need people like Robert who are not afraid to be individuals, to assume responsibility, to speak out and make a difference.

Robert Moody McKinney was a truly remarkable person. He was the man who

could carry a huge volume of statistics in his head and immediately spot errors in a financial statement, while at the same time he was the sensitive and creative writer who produced a book of poetry selected by *The New York Times* as one of the ten best works of poetry in the year in which it was published. This year, at 90, he won the New York Century Club's Silver Cup for the best short story written by a member.

He was a man who knew how to use the levers of power in the tough world of practical politics. But the man of politics was also the gentle man who recited in full from memory to his nurse the night before he died "Ode to a Nightingale" by Keats. He took comfort in reciting those words of peace and beauty. As he approached death, he felt a sense of continuity with the great figures from the classics and from history who populated his memory and imagination.

The history of Robert's life reads like an adventure story. He was a man of courage and tenacity. He was born on the dining table of a church parsonage in Shattuck, Oklahoma, in 1910, delivered by a legendary pioneer doctor of western Oklahoma named Newman, whose biography Robert had in his library. His father was a Christian Church minister with few financial assets. Robert's cousin, Josh Lee, who later went on to become a United States senator, was a speech professor at the University of Oklahoma. He provided the funds to supplement what Robert could earn from odd jobs so that he could attend the University.

Robert reached the University at a great moment in its history. President William B. Bizzell had gathered together

an extraordinary group of faculty members. Robert studied classics and literature from classics Professor Joseph L. Paxton. It was from him that he developed his love of literature and incredible memory of the classics. Last year he endowed a professorship in letters in Paxton's memory. From the great Oscar B. Jacobson, who came from Yale to head the School of Art, he learned art history. The works of the famed "Kiowa Five," Native American artists mentored by Jacobson, are hung on the walls of Robert's office in Santa Fe. From the eminent Paul B. Sears, Robert learned about the importance of the environment and water conservation. Sears went on to be dean of forestry at Yale and was known as the father of modern environmentalism for his book, *Deserts on the March*.

Robert soaked up all that he could learn from all his professors. He was hungry for knowledge. He earned a gold Phi Beta Kappa key but could not afford to buy it. Josh Lee surprised him by buying it for him.

When Robert struck out for New York in 1932 in the heart of the Depression, he shipped his belongings ahead, including the Phi Beta Kappa key. Unfortunately his trunk was lost, but he had insured the key and other contents. It was this small amount of insurance money that he used to start his first personal investments, which led to major financial success over the next decade. He purchased solid assets from bankrupt companies, mainly railroads.

Robert hitchhiked to New York with a friend. Since he had no money, he traded some moonshine whiskey, a gift from another friend, for gasoline. When

# McKinney

by PRESIDENT DAVID L. BOREN

he reached New York, he crossed over to Manhattan on a ferryboat. As he looked at the city skyline, one particular building had a crown, which glistened in the sun. "Some day," he told his friend, "I'll have my office at the top of that building." In a little over 10 years, he did. Along the way, he put together a group of investors who led one of the nation's first successful hostile takeovers. The group took over I.T.T., and Robert gained a seat on the board of directors. He was to serve on many other boards, including those of T.W.A., Martin-Marietta and the Rock Island Railroad.

Robert also had an overwhelming desire to serve. He wanted to make his life count for something beyond personal financial success. He wanted to give back to society and leave a mark. During World War II, he served in the Navy and was present at the invasion of Normandy. He was appointed by President Harry Truman to be assistant secretary of the interior for Alaska and the Pacific. He made a lasting contribution to Alaska, crisscrossing the territory helping to lay out roads and ports, airports and railroads.

Later President Dwight Eisenhower appointed him ambassador to the Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. He later wrote a multi-volume series on the applications of atomic energy. President John Kennedy named him ambassador to Switzerland, where he served with distinction during the tense time of the Cold War, which included the Cuban Missile Crisis. Later his close friend, President Lyndon Johnson, to whom he was an important and frequent personal advisor on both policy and politics, appointed him to the President's Task Force on International Investment.

Robert was every bit as much involved in public service at the state and local level as well. Santa Fe retains much of its true character today because of the historic preservation city ordinances that he worked to get adopted. He helped bring St. John's College to Santa Fe and served on several state boards and commissions during the administrations of Governor Bruce King.

He was also a remarkable journalist.



Robert Taylor

A shared enthusiasm for the University of Oklahoma, lives of public service and Santa Fe, where one lived and the other vacations, forged a close friendship between Robert McKinney, left, and OU President David Boren, shown here during a 2000 campus visit.

*The New Mexican* was his greatest passion. He truly loved the paper and loved publishing it. He even created its Indian blanket motif masthead, which won national awards. Owning the paper fulfilled a childhood dream formed when he was still a young boy during his first visit to Santa Fe with his father. He bought the paper in 1949. It was his main instrument for making his life count. He wanted to inform the community and inspire it and mobilize it to action.

He had no small goals. He set out to make *The New Mexican* the very best local newspaper in the United States. He was proud of the great writers that he brought to the paper—such as Tony Hillerman, also an OU graduate, and others. Those who did not meet his high standards did not last long at the paper. It was a standing joke that the carpet in Robert's office was red because of the blood spilled there by employees who didn't measure up. It was deeply satisfying to him that his daughter, Robin Martin, shared his love of newspapering and of the community. He was immensely proud of her character and ability and knew that the newspaper would continue under Robin with the same values and perspectives.

When the Gannett Company Inc. purchased *The New Mexican* in 1976 and Robert felt that they had broken their agreement to allow him quality and editorial control, he fought a decade-long legal battle to get the paper back in one of the most famous cases in American journalism. After he prevailed, Robert said that he had made the fight because he wanted to "give the paper back to the community." After the smoke cleared, Al Neuharth, CEO of Gannett, came to a dinner in Santa Fe and toasted Robert for his spirit and standards.

Robert McKinney was remarkable in another very human way—for his wit, his sense of fun and his great story telling ability. He never lost the mischievous twinkle in his eye. Last year, he came back to the University of Oklahoma almost 70 years after graduating and spent an evening speaking to a student organization, the Crimson Club, which studies University history. His presentation to the Crimson Club lasted until almost midnight as the students begged for more stories and refused to leave.

He regaled students with stories of his exploits during his student days. He told about the time he and his pals sent Norman firemen on a wild goose chase

looking for a nonexistent fire in a college building while Robert and company stole the fire truck. They hid it under a haystack on the outskirts of town but then gave the firemen hints on where to find it in case it was needed.

Robert and another group of friends, who were packed into an open car, were taken to the city jail where they were put into a cell for suspected overindulgence in strong spirits. They signed into jail under names like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. When the jailer left and carelessly left his keys within reach, the college boys escaped. For days they watched to see if the local newspaper would report the jail escape of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. This minister's son obviously enjoyed the freedom of being away from home.

He was once expelled from the University for writing a story of seduction in the school's literary magazine, *The Whirlwind*, which he edited. It was a very tame story by modern standards, so innocent that the young man and woman in the story, whose characters were based on real people, went to the library to read a reference book in order to learn about the physical side of romance.

Unfortunately, the story coincided with another story in which a very unattractive main character was clearly recognizable as the dean of women. She expelled Robert. Cousin Josh Lee appealed to Governor "Alfalfa Bill" Murray, who reinstated Robert at the University after reading the story himself.

Robert never grew old, even in his 90<sup>th</sup> year. He was always curious and always looking to the future. In the last year of his life, he read all he could find about the impact of the Internet on journalism and was deeply involved in the effort to improve Santa Fe's public schools. He had enormous energy and never wasted a minute. When Robin was a young girl, he taught her poems on the way to school and later, even once at a dinner last year, tested her on how well she remembered them. He made up stories for her about Lancelot the Hedgehog. He marched her around Europe on educational tours, which always had a theme.



Courtesy The Santa Fe New Mexican

Editor/publisher Robert McKinney regains control of *The Santa Fe New Mexican* in 1987 after the decade-long battle with the Gannett corporation that made journalistic history.

One summer it was Roman ruins.

A few weeks before Robert died, Robin, her husband, Meade Martin, and the grandchildren, Laura and Elliott, came to New York to visit him. Robert was so excited to be with them that he left them exhausted with a dawn to midnight schedule of museums, plays and musicals.

One story Robert loved telling over and over to his family involved a personal experience during World War II. He told of standing as a very young officer with an older officer on a rooftop in London during the blitz. As the bombs began to fall, Robert suggested that they should take cover. The older man replied, "An officer never takes cover." Robert believed that leaders face head on whatever comes their way. In this age of the anti-hero, Robert McKinney never shrank from assuming responsibility. His spirit

was fed by those great heroes from the classics, who were larger than life and set out to change the world and craft their own destinies.

Who was Robert McKinney? I would say that he was the quintessential American. He started out his life with almost nothing but his dreams, his determination, strong character and his native ability. He was armed with the tools of a great public education. He believed that tomorrow could be better than today.

Tennyson wrote in *Ulysses*, "I am a part of all that I have known." Robert will always be a part of everyone who knew him. He will inspire us. When we have a mischievous thought, he'll be with us. When we are determined to make a difference, he will urge us on. May America never be without the spirit of Robert McKinney.