

Tales from the Texoma Shore

SUMMERS AT THE OU BIOLOGICAL STATION
BUILT MEMORIES, CAREERS AND A LOVE
OF THE NATURAL WORLD THAT CONTINUES
FOR GENERATIONS OF SOONER STUDENTS.

BY DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI



In the summer of 1949, the University of Oklahoma Biological Station consisted of a small, prefabricated building mounted on a 20-foot by 69-foot barge. The barge, pulled by a diesel-powered boat, toted OU faculty and students across the waters of Lake Texoma as they studied various forms of aquatic life.

But that same year, Norman Brillhart, a 1917 OU alumnus and resident of nearby Madill, had a proposition for Carl Riggs, the station's first director. Brillhart's bank, the First National Bank of Madill, would donate two and a half lakefront acres and an unfinished concrete block building on the condition that OU use the property as a fisheries station.

On a warm July 2001 afternoon, standing on the shore of Lake Texoma 52 years after his momentous discussion with Brillhart, Riggs recalled his response. "I told Norman I didn't want just a fisheries station, but I did want a biological station," he related at a ceremony to dedicate the Carl D. and Patricia B. Riggs Library and Administration Building. "Regardless, I told him, I'd have to talk to Dr. [George L.] Cross, the University's president. Norman said he'd already spoken to Dr. Cross, who

thought it was a great idea."

Indeed Cross did. In his 1986 book, *The Seeds of Excellence: The Story of the University of Oklahoma Foundation*, Cross explained how the land and building had come into the bank's possession when a Madill developer planning a hotel and resort on the property defaulted on his construction loan. The bank foreclosed, repossessed the property and offered it to the OU Foundation. Riggs got what he wanted: a biological experimental station where scientists with a wide range of interests could conduct research and teach.

So the UOBS was born. The unfinished building was completed, and in October 1950, the station was officially dedicated. More land was purchased over the next decade, and apartment buildings, classrooms, laboratories, offices, a library, a maintenance building, pole barns, sheds and boathouses were added to the campus. An additional 282 acres, currently used for stream, pond and tank experiments, as well as ecological field studies, is leased from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Under Riggs' 19-year tenure as its director, the UOBS flourished, growing into a permanent field station offering opportunities for study and research





Dedication of the OU Biological Station in October 1950 was attended by State Senator, later Governor, Raymond Gary, left, OU President G. L. Cross, OU Regent T. R. Benedum, State Representative Paul Harkey and Norman W. Brillhart, who donated the property to the University.

in ecology and natural history to students and faculty the world over.

Last summer, as he stood before family, friends and colleagues gathered to honor him and his wife, Riggs reminisced about the station's early days and spoke hopefully about its future.

"This station is special in so many ways," he said. "Pat and I courted here. We were married in early June 1952, and the following week, the station opened for the summer, so we honeymooned here. All of our kids spent the first year of their lives here."

Riggs recalled how former Governor Raymond Gary, at the time the leader of the Oklahoma State Senate, helped acquire funding for the station. "He got us \$20,000 to complete the original building, which was a lot of money in those days. Research was conducted year round. For many years, the OU Regents met here at least once annually. Every OU president during my tenure as director visited. Dr. Cross, who was also a scientist, was very supportive and came down frequently."

The UOBS bustled with activity. In addition to its eight four-hour college credit courses, programs for high school students and 4-H Club members were

offered. OU faculty members who spent summers working there brought their families along. Organizations from around the state and region, including the Oklahoma Academy of Science, the Southwestern Association of Naturalists and the Southwest Association of Parasitologists, held meetings at the station.

Riggs, who retired in 1996 after a distinguished 25-year career at the University of South Florida, insisted he could never have gotten the station off the ground without the help and support of many of the 100 people who came to the dedication. Among those stalwarts were Ellen Rowe Phillips, daughter of Norman and Mildred Brillhart, who with her husband, Dick, have continued to contribute generously to the station, and former faculty members, including Harry Bishop and Chuck Carpenter. They, along with other faculty and students who taught and studied at the station over the last 50 years, have continued to visit the station and support its activities.

Retired OU zoology professor Bedford Vestal; former graduate student Julia Yoshida, now a physician in Concord, Massachusetts; Delmas Northcutt, son of Glenn Northcutt, OU Regent chair-

man in the early days of the station; and Bob and Jeanette Burns, who met at the station, were among those who came to honor the Riggses. They also helped create the newest station-based enterprise: the Friends of the University of Oklahoma Biological Station, an organization whose mission, says Vestal, its newly elected secretary-treasurer, is to support the activities of the station and to maintain contact among its alumni.

Some memories shared were vividly specific. Northcutt, for example, remembered a hot spring day when the station was just getting off the ground. "I was riding the bus home from school, and I looked out the window and saw my father and Carl digging post holes for signs to the station," he said. "They were breaking down rock to dig them. They were sweaty and exhausted, but they kept working because the station was so important to them."

Others, some of whom had not been to the station in decades, recalled the pure joy of living and working there in a simpler time. Bob Burns, an OU assistant professor of biology, left in 1963 for Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, where he taught for 29 years. His wife was an undergraduate the summer of 1959 when she spent the summer at the biological station and met her future husband. "I didn't think anyone else from my era would be here," she said, "but two of my three roommates from that summer came."

OU zoology professor Bill Matthews first came to the station in 1976 as a graduate student, returning three years later as a faculty member. "There are few places where you can live and work immersed in field biology," he says. "Most jobs involve constraints on your time. Here, you can do anything you want as long as it's core research. I tell my friends back home in Arkansas that it's like being a kid again. Then, I entered projects in high school science fairs. What I do here now isn't much different. It's a lot of fun."

Yoshida, a graduate student at the station in 1966, returned to visit with friends and mentors, including Chuck Carpenter, her major professor when she



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pursued her master’s degree, and to lend her support to the future of the station. “I have such wonderful memories of this place,” she said, “and I want to help make sure the station continues. It has tremendous potential for field work.”

The children of faculty who began the station half a century ago offered some of the most poignant memories. Dan Riggs, one of Carl and Pat’s four children and now a Tampa, Florida, pediatric intensive care physician, spent every summer at the station. “It was like summer camp without the counselors. We could do whatever we wanted, confined only by the lake and the grounds,” he remembered. “It was a real family here. Everybody—faculty, graduate students, staff—looked out for us kids. You had the feeling you’d met adults other than your parents that you could trust. My innocence was here.”

Caryn Vaughn, OU professor and director of the Oklahoma Biological Survey, spent every summer except one at the station until she was 17. “Growing up there had a profound influence on me and is undoubtedly a major reason that I am a professional biologist today,” she said. “At the station, you were always surrounded by nature and by people with a keen appreciation for the natural world. This instilled in me a love of natural history and a strong environmental ethic.



Courtesy UOBS
Biological Station Director Larry Weider uses a zooplankton net to take a sampling from Lake Texoma in fall 2000.

“I got to see firsthand from a very young age how research is carried out—not only the successes but also the frustrations. I think that this has helped me to persevere when I have run into obstacles in my own research program. And probably most importantly, the faculty and students at the Biological Station were

passionate about their work. From them I learned that if you do what you love and work hard, you will be successful.”

There are the staff members, like facilities manager Richard Page; Donna Cobb, assistant to the station’s current director, Larry Weider; and administrative secretary Kelli Brown, who do not want to work anywhere else. “I grew up here,” says Page, who lives in nearby Willis. “My dad helped construct the first building in 1950. My mom and my aunt were the station’s first cooks, and my sister was Dr. Riggs’ secretary. I’ve gone other places, but I’ve always come back.”

Today, the station is experiencing a renaissance. Weider is an energetic and creative force who is full of ideas for expansion of both facilities and research opportunities. Last fall, with the help of OU Provost Nancy Mergler and numerous station benefactors, the station purchased an additional 7.3 acres adjacent to the current site. Weider hopes to construct more residential facilities for guest researchers and their families and a nature center to support outreach programs in the natural sciences for kindergarten to high school students.

Here the Friends of the UOBS come in. In July 2000, at the station’s 50th anniversary and reunion, the group was formed to help promote the station and to raise money for its expansion and maintenance. “Larry Weider has the ideas about what to do,” said Vestal. “One of our jobs is to help raise the funds to make them happen.” That began with the land acquisition last fall. “The money donated by members of the Friends made a big difference, and we can help with scholarships for studying at the station.”

Central to the station’s resurgence are renovated laboratories containing state-of-the-art scientific and computer equipment that, in turn, have attracted top-notch faculty. From a conference room, for example, a student can video-conference into a class on the Norman campus,

Founding Director Carl Riggs and his wife, Pat, center, were honored at the 2001 UOBS reunion by the dedication of the station’s Library and Administration Building.



Debra Levy Martinelli



Courtesy UOBS

Chad Hargrave and Andy Marsh seine the waters of Lake Texoma in this July 1999 photo. The boat, a SeaArk, was purchased with grant funds from the Army Corps of Engineers to study aquatic and sediment eco-effects.



Courtesy UOBS

This 2001 Wildlife Conservation class is part of the many educational programs scheduled during the warm-weather months at the Biological Station.

or a faculty member at the station can confer with colleagues elsewhere. “What we’re doing here,” explains Weider, “is combining standard field research and technology-based research.”

Four OU faculty members are based at the station. Weider and David Hambricht are full-time station faculty,

while Matthews and Gary Wellborn split their time between the station and the Norman campus. Each teaches one academic course per year, which allows them the time and flexibility to conduct graduate and undergraduate research training at the station. Other faculty from OU, around the country and the world go

there to study and teach. Former students from all over the globe who studied at the station before going on to academic careers at other institutions, still return to the station to study; they send their students there as well.

The station provides research opportunities for graduate students interested in ecology and evolutionary biology, who often spend the academic year on the Norman campus and the summer at the station’s research facilities. Each summer, the station also offers intensive two-week courses for both undergraduate and graduate credit in subjects ranging from bird ecology to wildlife conservation. Scholarships and teaching assistantships are available to qualified applicants.

“It’s interesting to scan down the list of scientific publications that are the result of research conducted at the station,” says Mergler. “They include ecology, natural history and population biology. Riffle beetles, thread-legged bugs, plains minnows, pocket gophers, aquatic salamanders, three-toed box turtles. Want to know more about tail luring in the death adder? Or how about introgression of the Florida largemouth bass genome into Oklahoma? You need only to check out the bibliography of research at our biological station.”

Whatever a visitor’s interests, a trip to the UOBS always provides an experience not to be had anywhere else. Vestal, for example, shared one with the others as they prepared to depart the station after the dedication weekend. “As we looked out the window after breakfast Sunday morning, we saw some adolescent swallows practicing their flying,” he said. “Where else could you see something like that? It’s those kinds of experiences that make the station special.”

As Donna Cobb noted, “Words and pictures just don’t do justice to this place. You can’t take a picture of the atmosphere. You can’t know what it’s like until you’re actually here.”

Such feelings keep station enthusiasts coming back. The station’s next reunion, scheduled for 2003, already is being planned. 🍷

