

— *Treasures from the Archives* —

# Why Did You Come to the University?



Pioneer President David Ross Boyd had been touting his fledgling institution to prospective students since 1892. Now in 1904 he wanted to know how well his sales pitch had gotten through.

BY DAVID W. LEVY

Illustrations: OU Western History Collections

Exactly 100 years ago, during the spring semester of 1904, President David Ross Boyd gave one of his classes an interesting homework assignment: he asked each student to prepare a list of reasons why the young people of Oklahoma and Indian territories should come to the University of Oklahoma. Boyd's 41 students pondered the matter and dutifully handed in their lists. Two of them came up with no fewer than 18 reasons; two others could only think of eight; the others listed between 10 and 15.

For some unknown reason Boyd saved their lists, and by a miraculous bit of luck they survived the devastating fire that destroyed the University's main building in December 1907. Now, a century later, those old papers still survive—on faded, yellowing, crumbling paper, in an ancient manila folder, hidden away deep in the University's archive in the basement of Monnet Hall. As far as I can tell, no one, in the intervening 100 years, has ever looked at them. This is a great pity, because these remarkable documents provide us with the best understanding



we will ever have of what these pioneering students thought about their 12-year-old University. Their lists also give us fascinating (and sometimes surprising) glimpses into their ambitions, their attitudes, their ideals.

Boyd's students that semester ranged from those still in the Preparatory Department (not yet ready for college-level work) all the way up to those about to graduate. Some of them were well-known campus figures: Chester Reeds, the football star; Jesse Rader, soon to begin his 50-year career as the University's librarian; Hugh Carroll, one of the founders of the University's first fraternity. Others were destined to make names for themselves in Oklahoma: Tom Carey, later a pillar of the Alumni Association; George C. Smith, eventually a prominent railroad and industrialist.

Those who were to graduate two years later were fated to have their pictures taken for the *Sooner Magazine*, as they regularly returned to pose around the famous '06 Class Rock that still adorns the North Oval. Each anniversary, inevitably, their numbers grew smaller, but one of Boyd's students of 1904, Lilla Miller, made it to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and was rewarded by having her picture on the magazine's cover. But mostly Boyd's students were just typical Oklahoma youngsters, coming to the University from farms or small towns. And now they were being asked to tell their professor what they liked about the place.

One finds in these little papers unem-

"The town of Norman is comparatively free from vice. It has a church for almost every Christian denomination."

Guy Baker



Tom F. Carey

Reasons why one should attend Oklahoma University:

- \* 1. Norman is a healthy locality.
- \* 2. A faculty of experience.
- \* 3. A faculty large enough to give personal instruction.
- \* 4. A non-sectarian institution.
- \* 5. High religious and moral character of the members of the faculty.
- \* 6. High religious and moral character of the student body.
- \* 7. Large number of courses to select from.
- \* 8. Large number of electives to select from.
- \* 9. Less expense than any other school in the southwest.
- \* 10. One meets and associates with the men who are to do more than any other the most in mould

Oklahoma's future. The men Oklahomans will have to deal most with ~~most~~ in the future.

- \* 11. A well equipped gymnasium with under a competent director which ~~increases~~ maintains the health of student body.
- \* 12. Student organizations such as debating societies and athletic associations to aid in mental and physical development.
- 13. Well equipped and commodious buildings.
- \* 14. Building with all modern conveniences.
- 15. Laboratories for personal research.

Tom F. Carey.





**Jesse Lee Rader**

I. The student has only himself to support: the University is supported by the territory.  
 II. A library and reading room of 4000 volumes.  
 III. Compulsory physical culture: a gymnasium for men and a gymnasium for women: a director in physical culture: hot and cold baths.  
 IV. Four buildings: a Carnegie library and a Science Hall new building.  
 V. One can select courses in:  
 College of Arts and Sciences.  
 School of Medicine  
 " " Pharmacy.  
 " " Engineering.  
 " " Music.  
 Preparatory School.  
 VI. A nonsectarian school, and yet possessing influences for building good character.

VII. Four large laboratories.  
 VIII. An opportunity to get acquainted with bright and live Oklahomans.  
 IX. A Corps of 30 instructors and assistants all graduates of high grade Universities.  
 X. A G. M. C. A. and a Y. M. C. A. three literary societies devoted to the study of Parliamentary law, debate, etc.  
 Jesse Rader.

barrased appreciation and honest gratitude, wide-eyed wonder and youthful energy, enormous ambition to succeed. These students seemed to feel acutely that they were privileged to be here and that great possibilities were opening before them. Above all, they took nothing for granted.

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The least surprising reason they gave, and the one most often repeated, is that the University was affordable. Thirty-seven of the 41 included in their lists the fact that the University was tuition-free. Many of them mentioned this as the very first reason, and one student, Bowen Blair, who gave 12 other reasons in ordinary print, put this one in capitals: "BECAUSE THE TUITION IS FREE IN ALL DEPARTMENTS." Fourteen of them pointed out that the tax dollars paid by their families supported the University and that they would be silly not to avail themselves of what they had already bought. Alfred Cherry gave as his seventh reason, "Because you or your parents support the University through taxation. If you do not attend, you lose, in a sense, what you have paid for." Almost half of the students (19) noted that the cost of

living in Norman, the precious money they had to lay out for room and board, was as reasonable as anywhere else in the Territory.

But their praise for Norman was not confined to its low cost of living. Overwhelmingly, the students praised the town for other reasons. According to George Smith, "Norman has a fine climate, is easy of access, has good churches, and progressive inhabitants; a fine system of water works and electric lights." Another student lauded Norman's "fine wide and shady streets with good side walks and an abundance of good boarding houses."

Interestingly, almost half the students (18) pointed to Norman's high moral character. "The town of Norman," wrote

Guy Baker, "... is comparatively free from vice. It has a church for almost every Christian denomination." The churches of Norman were quite often given as reasons for coming to



“I had an ambition to teach the young buds how to shoot and thought it would be best to get myself sprouted first.”

*Fannie Cromwell*

the University, and many students seemed to know that there were exactly 13 churches in town. Egerton Paddock (who also taught bookkeeping while taking classes), testified that “Churches in the city of the leading denominations extend a welcome to all students.”

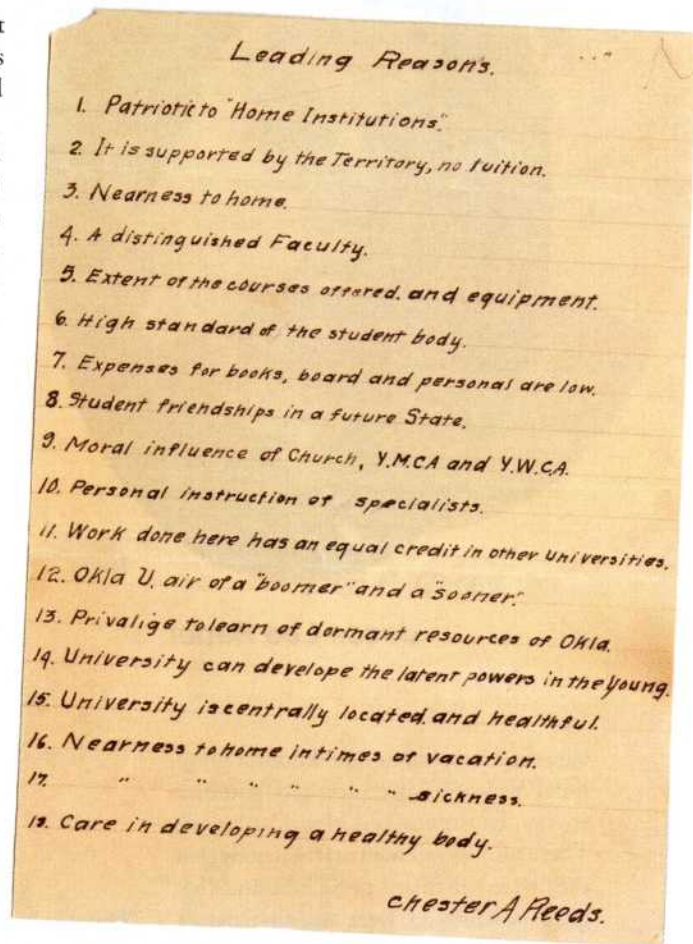
Four students noted that Norman harbored none of the dreaded sins of the Big City: C. W. Davis recommended Norman “because there are not the enticings for the young man or woman, that the larger cities always have.” “The University,” echoed J. C. Port, “is in a healthy city free from the vices of larger cities,” and W. J. Pointer considered Norman to be “a model town for its moral influence over the students. It is free from the vices common in larger cities.”

The University’s faculty received warm acclaim from 32 of the 41 students. The professors (there were 26 teachers in 1904) were celebrated about equally for their expertise in the particular fields they taught, for their general culture and broad learning, and, revealingly, for their moral character. William Ferguson thought that “the faculty are men of the best moral and Christian type that can be secured. . . ,” and Tom Carey similarly applauded the “high religious and moral character of the members of the faculty.” So many students pointed out, in almost identical words, that their teachers had been trained in America’s

best universities that we must suspect that this idea was drummed into them by Boyd and the others.

If the students appreciated their teachers, they also liked the University’s setting. Five of them referred specifically to the “beauty” of a campus that modern eyes would regard as barren and ugly. No fewer than 32 of them had something nice to say about the facilities. They praised the equipment, the laboratories, and most of all the buildings. This is especially remarkable because when they wrote their lists the University had only one substantial building. Science Hall was under construction and was to open the next fall, and the Carnegie Building, to house the library, was also under construction and not to open for another nine months. Nevertheless, 20 students listed the library, which claimed a scant 4,000 volumes, as a reason for coming. Of the 32 who praised the buildings, 19 singled out the makeshift, wooden gymnasium for special notice. Alfred Cherry gave as one of the reasons: “Because at the University is furnished you a well equipped gymnasium with hot and cold baths in connection. All of which is free.”

Only three students mentioned football. Four times as many (12) cited “athletics” in general, but they usually meant the kind of physical education intended for the average student, not the exceptional athlete. And if three considered football important, more than twice as many (7) cited the University’s oratorical society, and five times as many (15) listed the four literary and debating clubs as reasons to come. Twice as many students (7) valued the musical opportunities on the campus—both for performing and for just listening—as mentioned football.



Surprisingly, a third of Boyd’s class (14) praised the YMCA and YWCA, both for their wholesome social activities and for their contribution to the elevated moral tone of the campus. Only three students, however, called attention to the daily chapel services, while five others, who appreciated the religious influence, also celebrated the fact that the institution was non-sectarian, not under the supervision of a particular denomination.

They were not blind to the economic advantages of a college degree. Beulah Long thought Oklahomans should come to the University “for obtaining knowledge of special lines of work so that we may be able to make our way through life; not a slave to toil, but master.” J. M. Best recognized that “the student will gain new friends who will be helpful to him in after life,” and Egerton Paddock observed that “the graduates are usually successful





**Chester Reeds**

in obtaining good positions.” “It is getting to be,” complained W. V. Blackburn, “so that a uneducated man is a tool in the hands of a man who has an education. So I think you would rather be an educated man.” Ten other students agreed that the University promised professional success.

But, perhaps surprisingly, more of them (17) emphasized the social and political advantages of coming to college in Norman. F. E. McReynolds contended that “this is the best place to become acquainted with and secure the friendship of the people who will fill the prominent positions in Oklahoma during the next generation.” Alfred Cherry thought “you will here meet the ‘to come’ of the Territory. The student of today will be the leading citizens of tomorrow.” C. W. Davis was frank about it: “Because you become acquainted with the young men, and women that are, to take the lead in our state affairs; thus enabling you to get in line.”

Indeed, more than half the students (22) gave, as one of their reasons, the quality of their fellow students. Tom Carey praised the “high religious and moral character of the student body,” and J. C. Port believed that “you will be

placed in company with the most ambitious class of young people in the territory.” Several pointed out the friendliness with which older students greeted the newcomers. J. L. Lysinger thought that “the student body is made up of congenial democratic young people, culled from such a class of people as can be found only in Oklahoma.” But young Lysinger also struck a note that will sound strange to modern ears. It is now the fashion to celebrate the benefits of diversity; he celebrated the fact that the students were pretty much alike, at least economically: “The student body is homogeneous and therefore the student is not thrown in contact with a class of people whom he feels to be superior to him and in trying to keep up with whose fastidious society he is tempted to spend more money than he can afford to spend.”

Sixteen of the students offered, as one of their reasons, an appeal to territorial patriotism. To Lysinger it was clear-cut: “The University is the product of your Territory. It is *the* mark of evidence of our phenominal [sic] development. Be patriotic.” Jay Conway agreed that “Oklahoma students should attend the University of Oklahoma because it is the representative institution of the territory.” W. J. Pointer may have put it most clearly. Students should come to Norman, he felt, “because it is a home institution and every young man and young woman in The Territory should be patriotic enough to strive to build up a better institution than other neighboring states have.”

Most touching are those who praise the University for its role in the development of character, its instruction in idealism, its work in preparing one for a noble life. Even the virtually illiterate among them got the message. One student, who could barely write (he addressed his paper to “Prof. Boid”), fully understood the point: “In carefull study and hard work, we may become more powerfull, and make a man out of ourselves . . . [and] become usefull men and

women.” This youngster believed that “the University is a great blessing to the student in many ways, one of the greatest is to make usefull sittisons of our great commonwealth.”

A dozen of them touched upon these themes of self-development, the duty of service, the nobility of a life lived decently. And they were sometimes capable of moving eloquence. Beulah Long, for example, gave, as one of her reasons, that “we owe something to the world in return for our living, and should fit ourselves for becoming great scientists, mechanics, teachers, artists and leaders in noble works. The training for all this can best be gained in the University of Okla.” A student named F. A. Herzog thought the University “will reveal your weak as well as your strong points of character and furnish the best conditions in which to develop into that crown of God’s creation: a man or woman with a sound mind in a sound body; a fit habitation for a human soul.”

It is very hard, in thumbing through these old and tattered papers, not to be touched by these young people’s enthusiasm for life, their sense of unlimited possibility, their gratitude for the chance the University was providing them, their determination to cultivate their characters and apply their lives to worthy purposes. If any single item in the lists of reasons deserves special prominence in this regard, it may belong to Fannie Cromwell, a young woman from Norman who wanted to be a schoolteacher. She deserves to have the final word: “I had an ambition to teach the young buds how to shoot,” she wrote, “and thought it would be best to get myself sprouted first.”

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