



Earl Leimmon Collection

# Soonerland's Picture Man

Roy Heffner never gained great fortune or fame through his photography, but he left behind a priceless collection of images that have become his OU legacy.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

**P**erched precariously atop the tower roof of the Masonic Dormitory, a solitary figure works to unfold a tripod and then intently affixes to it a large box camera. Below, the sidewalks connecting the Campus Corner merchant district to the University of Oklahoma campus are filled with students hustling between classes.

Even as the camera, high above head, begins to click off dozens of shots, the photographer's presence goes mostly undetected.

While people and faces were often his focus, on this day a crowd is the last thing Roy Heffner wishes to collect as he scans the southern landscape in search of the perfect campus snapshot.

"Roy would climb up on buildings and water towers and even old windmills at our farm—anything that would give him a higher vantage point—to shoot his pictures," says Vernon Schilberg, Heffner's 84-year-old second cousin. "He was fairly agile for a big man. I think he stayed in pretty good shape by riding his bicycle around to basically everywhere he went."

Everywhere Heffner went, he took along his Graflex Speed Graphic camera. Wherever he went, he got there on his trusty Schwinn bicycle.

From 1927 to 1948, Roy Edward Heffner documented every aspect of OU campus life with his photography. From sporting events to social gatherings to holiday parades and school functions—if it had anything to do with the University, Heffner was there to shoot it.

"He was everywhere, and he took pictures of everything," says Madge Radley Amspacher, describing Heffner's constant presence around campus. "You couldn't go to a school event and not see him there with his bicycle, tripod and his camera with its bellows."

Amspacher, a 1940 OU graduate whose late husband, Byron, was the sports editor of *The Oklahoma Daily* in 1939, recalls seeing Heffner setting up his camera in the middle of Lindsey Street to shoot pictures of various fraternity and sorority houses.

"My husband's family had a store called Southside Grocery at the corner of Lindsey and College Street, and Mr. Heffner was out there fairly regularly with his camera," recalls Amspacher. "When I was in school, Rickner's Bookstore was the place to hang out, and I would often see him peddling his bicycle up and down University Boulevard."

## Heffner Aspired to Teach

From the time he was graduated from OU with two degrees—an A.B. in mathematics (1918) and a B.S. in electrical engineering (1919), the Bessie, Oklahoma, native pursued a career in education.

In 1920, Heffner left Oklahoma to attend Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where he earned his master's and gained his first teaching experience as an instructor in the school's electrical engineering department.

That same year, Heffner purchased his first camera and initiated what proved to be a lifelong fascination with photography.

After just a few months of tinkering with his new toy,



Most of Roy Heffner's photography was printed in postcard form, black-and-white prints 3 3/8 by 5 1/4 inches, trimmed with a narrow white border. Heffner identified each of his photos, like the Great Reading Room above, by writing a short description on the picture itself.

Heffner's photos began showing up in various forms around the Cornell campus. By June 1922, his work had appeared in six different school publications, including the student newspaper and yearbook at Stetson University.

Heffner had taken an assistant professor position in the electrical engineering department at the Florida-based school that fall. From 1922-24, he steadily worked his way toward gaining full professor status, while teaching engineering and heading the physics department there.

Unfortunately, just when it seemed Heffner was on the verge of realizing his goal, an old affliction resurfaced to turn his world upside-down.

### Fighting for his life and livelihood

During his childhood and on into his teenage years, Heffner had suffered occasional episodes that doctors described as "epileptic seizures." Suddenly, and without warning, the ailment he believed was in his past, had returned.

Doctors advised him that he would be best served to seek a less extreme climate, which meant giving up his tenure at Stetson. He initially decided to return to Ithaca and concentrate on his photography until he could secure another teaching job.

But due to his affliction, there were no colleges or universities willing to risk hiring him.

Frustrated, heartbroken and financially strapped, Heffner opted in 1926 to move back to Oklahoma and take a part-time teaching job at Phillips University in Enid. But he continued to experience periodic seizures and eventually had no choice but to surrender his position there.

"I know it was extremely disappointing for Roy to lose the thing he loved most, which was teaching. He was such a smart man, a math genius, really," says Schilberg, who grew up on a farm not far from where his cousin was raised near Bessie. "But one of things people admired about Roy was his character and just how resilient he could be. With his nervous condition and all, he could have easily taken a cynical attitude about a lot of things.

"Instead, he always seemed to rebound from his setbacks with great enthusiasm."

At 32, Heffner believed he had two options as he determined what his next move would be—either hightail it back home to Bessie and fade into the woodwork or move to Norman, a place that had always remained close to his heart. It was an easy choice.





### Finding His Way Home

While a regular teaching job was no longer an option, Heffner was undeterred. His camera skills allowed him to start his own photo business near campus, and he also made extra money tutoring University students at his home.

With the photographic experience he gained during his stints in New York and Florida in tow, Heffner contacted OU officials about the possibility of becoming official school photographer in 1927. He sent letters to various administrators, including then-University president Dr. William Bennett Bizzell.

Nothing came of the high-level inquiries, but Heffner did get some positive feedback in the form of a note from *The Oklahoma Daily* sports editor Harold Keith, who was looking for someone to take pictures at various on-campus events.

At that moment, a 20-year relationship was born. The following year, Keith became OU's sports publicist—a job he would hold for more than three decades—and he needed a photographer with a good eye for athletics.

In between sporting events, Heffner somehow found time to attend and shoot every school social, pep rally, theater production and band practice. His tireless efforts earned him a measure of celebrity with the student body and respect from the University.

"Roy took a lot of pictures for my dad over the years. He was very active in everything that was going on around the University, and my dad definitely kept him busy shooting sports stuff," recalls John Keith, who took over for his father as OU sports information director in 1967 and remained in that position until 1978.

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**TOP:** Roy Heffner, whose epilepsy had denied him a college teaching career, nevertheless became a familiar campus figure through his tutoring and especially his photography, which took him to every sporting, social and theatrical event and other student activities. **BOTTOM:** Heffner would climb onto the roofs of buildings, up ladders to the top of water towers, anywhere that he could get a good vantage point for his campus photographs, which were sold in local stores like the Campus Corner's Varsity Shop.



Love found Heffner late in life. In 1947, at age 52, he met and married Edna Spencer. Happier than he had ever been, Roy looked for ways to “make a difference with his life.” He and Edna signed up for a three-year teaching mission in Ethiopia, but their happiness was short-lived. He died in 1949.

### Making Ends Meet

Although his tutoring and photography kept him busy and paid the bills, Heffner still struggled financially. He admitted in a 1936 letter to his father, Edward Heffner, in Clinton, Oklahoma, that he was “a rather poor manager from a business point of view.”

For that reason, Heffner always found himself scrambling to make ends meet. What little money he did save went into the purchase of two old houses—one he rented and one (at 517 South University Boulevard) in which he lived and ran his businesses.

As he grew older, his bouts with epilepsy ceased. When World War II created a shortage of professors at many university campuses, Heffner was hired by OU as a part-time physics instructor.

Over the next five years—from 1943 to 1948—Heffner worked on and off for the University, including stints in the astronomy and math departments. He continued to tutor as many as five nights a week, and of course, he regularly crisscrossed campus with his trusty Graflex.

“When I was little, I remember going over to Roy’s house and looking at the moon and stars through the big telescope he had. He knew everything about astronomy and the universe, it seemed, and that was pretty impressive to a 10-year-old kid,” notes Clinton resident Paul Schilberg, Heffner’s great nephew. “We knew Roy wasn’t rich, but I always figured he had money because he had a big house and things like that.”

### The Closing Chapter

By 1947, Heffner had basically resigned himself to a life he described as “merely existing.” Photography remained a passion, but the 52-year-old was still scraping by financially, and in a letter to his sister, Veda Hutson, he admitted to being dissatisfied with his contributions to society.

But all of that began to change in the spring when he met Edna Spencer, an instructor for deaf children at the Jane Brooks

Institute in Purcell. Heffner, who had never made time for much of a social life, fell madly in love with Miss Spencer.

By May, the couple was engaged, and they were married on June 1, 1947.

“They were happy to find each other,” says 94-year-old Mabel Spencer Porter, Edna’s sister who still lives in their native Connecticut. “Neither of them had been married when they met. Roy was a quiet, unassuming man. Both of them were very intelligent—and they just got along right from the start.”

Less than a year into their marriage, Roy Heffner suffered a near-fatal heart attack and remained bedridden for several weeks. By May 1948, he had recovered, but his brush with death caused him to further explore potential ways to “make a difference with his life.”

That summer, he saw a national ad in an Oklahoma City newspaper that sought to hire 250 teachers for a three-year mission in Ethiopia. Heffner proposed the deal to his bride, and she agreed it would be a rewarding adventure. On August 17, 1948, the couple signed up to go to Addis Ababa.

Heffner’s contract with OU had expired, so he was available to join the mission group set to depart New York City on September 10. Edna, however, could not get out of her teaching contract until December, at which time she would join him.

“Even though they were there only a short time together, it was something special they shared,” offers Porter.

Four months after her husband landed in Ethiopia, Edna Heffner joined him. Over the next nine weeks, the couple settled comfortably in to their new jobs and new digs. They loved everything about their new world.

But just as suddenly as he had come into Edna’s life, Roy Heffner was gone. He died as a result of a cerebral hemorrhage he suffered on March 5, 1949.

“I no longer have Roy, but I have happy memories to take into a new life, a life that began after death changed mine,” wrote Edna in *Ethiopia, Land Beyond the Rift*, a 1957 book she dedicated to her husband’s memory.

The year after Roy Heffner’s untimely passing, his widow donated to the OU Western History Collections approximately 30,000 prints and 50,000 negatives depicting campus scenes and various personalities. More than five decades later, the Roy E. Heffner collection is still one of the most extensive reference and research aides available from that era.

“Roy Heffner was a fixture on campus and all over Norman for a number of years. He helped document campus life during his time there—from people to pet dogs to sports, and everything in between,” offers Jack D. Haley, former assistant curator of the Western History Collections. “There’s no doubt Heffner played an important role historically in the way his work captured so many one-of-a-kind images that otherwise might have been lost.”

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