



# *postscript.* A Letter from “Uncle Buck”

**B**y most accounts, James Shannon Buchanan was the best-known and best-liked man on the University of Oklahoma campus for more than three decades. He was known affectionately as Uncle Buck, a family nickname brought to OU by a nephew from his native Tennessee—or alternately as Dean Buck during his 14 years as the first dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Joining the faculty just five years after its founding, he did everything for the young institution—and did everything well.

He was a master teacher; his history and civics classes were extremely popular, full of human interest stories and the humor that also made him a consummate after-dinner speaker. He chaired the committee that selected the school colors, was a charter member of Beta Theta Pi fraternity in 1907, the same year he served as a member of the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention.

Buchanan had just been named OU’s second vice president in 1923 when President Stratton Brooks resigned; he was asked to step in as acting president while the search was launched that would eventually bring William Bennett Bizzell to Evans Hall in 1925. The “acting” was dropped after a year to give the Buchanan administration more credibility, but he made it clear that he had no desire to remain in that position.

Uncle Buck considered himself an academician, and the all-consuming administrative duties of the presidency held no allure for him. Still, while he was president, he intended to exercise every bit of his authority to make as valuable an impact as possible on the lives of the 4,700 young people who comprised his student body.

So, on April 2, 1925, he sat at his desk and composed a letter to the parents of those students on a subject that was greatly troubling him: the “poor scholarship and discipline” that was causing many to “neglect class work and preparation on daily assignments.” He had even been told that some students had managed to inter-

cept reports of unsatisfactory grades, leading their parents to believe all was well. But there was indeed trouble, right here in the Sooner City.

“There are two factors, which, in my opinion,” the president wrote, “are the chief causes . . . : first, too large monthly allowances, and: second, maintaining an automobile.”



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James S. “Uncle Buck” Buchanan

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Buchanan admitted that few students actually had their own cars, but many had access to their parents’ automobiles on weekends or special occasions, which they garaged off campus with friends or relatives. Besides being “a waster of time and money,” encouraging loafing and fre-

quent, unnecessary trips out of town, such behavior was a violation of University rules that could result in expulsion.

Students had no need of an automobile, the president insisted, and access to one greatly “increased our difficulties.” The excitement and fast driving of overcrowded vehicles frequently resulted in serious accidents, he continued, to say nothing of the drinking and immorality among young people existing “largely in connection with an automobile.”

“As a general rule,” he concluded, “the student with a car is a poor student.”

As for the generous allowances parents in this pre-Depression era were giving their college-age children, Buchanan noted that students who were working for their own expenses found \$55 a month more than adequate, while even the more affluent students could cover expenses and a liberal amount for incidentals and entertainment on \$80 a month—any more than that being “detrimental to good work.”

“Will you not cooperate with us by refusing the use of your car to your children while they are in the University?” he asked parents. “If they are spending an excessive amount of money, request an itemized budget. We shall be glad to assist you in any way possible.”

Buchanan feared that even under the most favorable conditions—which did not include inflated allowances and a car—“students do not take full advantage of the splendid opportunities they have. They should be better men and women when they have completed their college education.”

Three months after penning this letter, Uncle Buck returned to the vice presidency, an office he held until his death in on March 20, 1930. In *The Sooner Story*, Charles Long recorded that classes were dismissed for his funeral; the University flag flew at half-staff as did the state flag in Oklahoma City. “Thus ended,” another observer concluded, “one of the University’s most perfect student-teacher relationships.”

—CJB