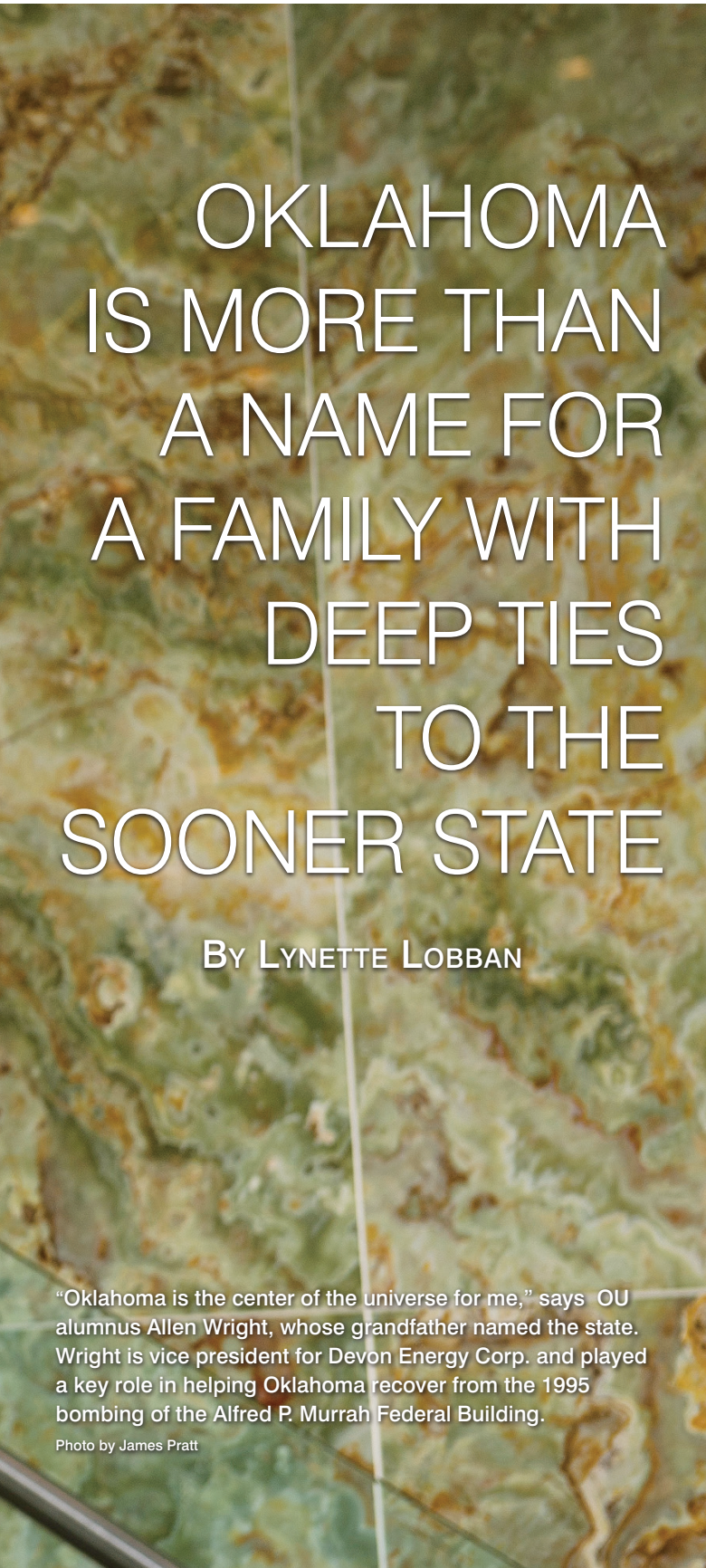
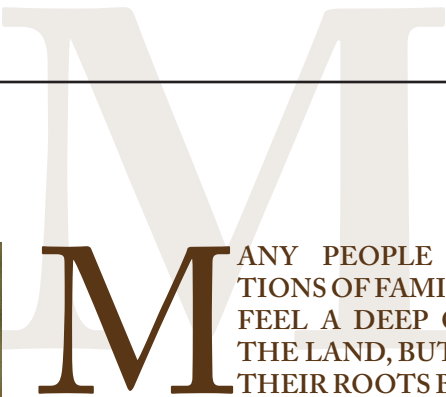


Sooner Nation





OKLAHOMA IS MORE THAN A NAME FOR A FAMILY WITH DEEP TIES TO THE SOONER STATE

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

“Oklahoma is the center of the universe for me,” says OU alumnus Allen Wright, whose grandfather named the state. Wright is vice president for Devon Energy Corp. and played a key role in helping Oklahoma recover from the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

Photo by James Pratt

MANY PEOPLE WITH GENERATIONS OF FAMILY IN OKLAHOMA FEEL A DEEP CONNECTION TO THE LAND, BUT FEW CAN TRACE THEIR ROOTS BACK TO THE MAN WHO GAVE THE STATE ITS NAME. One who can is OU alumnus Allen Wright. In 1866, his great-great-grandfather, a Choctaw chief, suggested the words “Okla,” meaning “people,” and “humma” or “huma,” meaning “red,” for the territory that would become the 46 state. His family’s ties with the University of Oklahoma go back nearly as long.

“My father and my grandfather, my mother, my sister, my nieces and nephews all graduated from OU,” says Wright. His wife, Jacque, her sister and her father, Jerry Wilkes, who played football for Bud Wilkinson, are also OU grads. This spring, Wright’s older son, Allen Brookes Wright Jr., joined the club when he graduated from Price College of Business.

“Oklahoma is the center of the universe for me,” says Wright, whose view from the 45th floor of Devon Tower seems to confirm that statement. Wright has been with the Oklahoma City-based energy company since 2009 and serves as vice president of Public and Government Affairs.

“My work is to create a positive public policy environment for Devon to operate in by advocating for pro-business and pro-energy policies. I care about the rest of the nation, of course, but I want Oklahoma to grow,” he says. “We’ve had booms and busts and dust bowls and I think our character as a people has been shaped by that. To work for what I believe is the marquee company in the state that is a major driver and contributor to prosperity in Oklahoma—that’s the world’s best job.”

Prior to Devon, Wright was chief operating officer and vice president of public affairs at Koch Industries/Flint Hills Resources. Before that he served Oklahoma Congressman Frank Lucas as chief of staff. He and Lucas were in Dallas the morning of April 19, 1995, when they received word that a federal building in Oklahoma City had been bombed. Wright’s office was across from the Murrah Building. “I had a two-story glass window on my desk,” he says.

Wright led the staff that helped Lucas write precedent-setting legislation allowing Oklahoma to receive federal disaster funds for an act of terrorism. “In most natural disasters you have to exhaust your insurance funds before the federal government will come in. We said, ‘This isn’t a hurricane. It was an attack on the government, so the government should step in.’ It changed the way aid could come into a city.”

Lucas and his team also wrote legislation to create the Oklahoma City National Memorial and to allow cameras in the courtroom during the trial of Timothy McVeigh so that victims’ families could watch if they chose to do so. “After 30

“My dad gave me his name, but I think our family collectively has that heightened sense of connection to and pride in Oklahoma.”

years of professional work, that time is most rewarding because I believe it helped my community heal,” he says.

One could say the same about his great-great-grandfather. Born in Mississippi in 1826, as Kiliahote, he moved with his family to the Choctaw Nation in Indian Territory before the mass relocation of southeastern tribes on the Trail of Tears. The family settled near Broken Bow in McCurtain County, but harsh conditions left the boy orphaned. He was taken in

where he was ordained a Presbyterian minister.

Allen Wright devoted his adult life to serving the Choctaw Nation. He was elected twice to the Choctaw House of Representatives and was chosen to serve as national treasurer on three occasions. He was elected Principal Chief in 1866 and was re-elected in 1868. He also represented the Choctaw Nation in Washington, D.C., translating legal documents from English into his native language. A strong proponent of education, he created the first Choctaw dictionary for use in tribal schools.

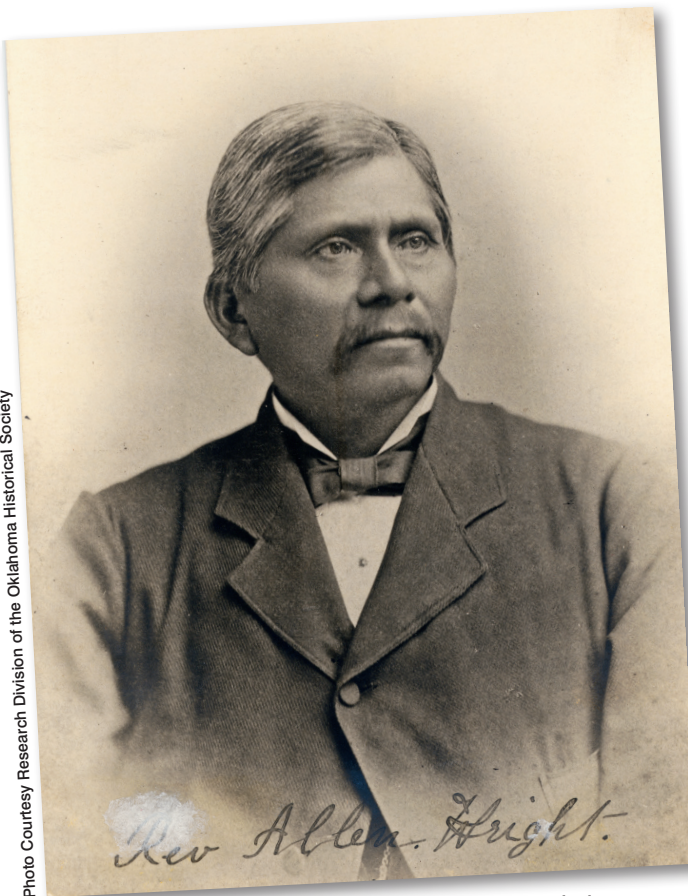


Photo Courtesy Research Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society

Choctaw Nation Chief Allen Wright was born as Kiliahote and came with his parents to southeastern Oklahoma before the Trail of Tears. He would become a Presbyterian minister, a powerful voice for the Choctaw people, and the author of Oklahoma’s very name.

by the Reverend Cyrus Kingsbury, who gave him the English name Allen Wright after the famous Presbyterian minister, Alfred Wright. A gifted student, the young man was sent by the Choctaw Council to attend college in the East, where he graduated from Union College in Schenectady, New York. He later attended Union Theological Seminary in New York City,



Photo Courtesy Research Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society

Allen Wright’s granddaughter, Muriel Hazel Wright, broke gender barriers as an Oklahoma historian with four books to her credit. Wright later followed her grandfather into Choctaw tribal politics.

“I am inspired by him,” says the younger Wright. “My dad gave me his name, but I think our family collectively has that heightened sense of connection to and pride in Oklahoma.”

That is certainly true of Wright’s great-aunt and Chief Wright’s granddaughter, Muriel Hazel Wright, who was born in Lehigh, Choctaw Nation in 1889. Unusual for a woman



A portrait of Choctaw Chief Allen Wright, commissioned by the Oklahoma State Senate Historical Preservation Fund, was unveiled at the State Capitol in March 2012. From left are: Senate Historical Preservation Fund founder Charles Ford, sponsor Jacques Wright, artist Mike Larsen, and Chief Wright's great-great grandson Allen Wright.

at that time, Wright studied southeastern Oklahoma's geography, mapped the Choctaw Nation, and conducted fieldwork almost every year from 1922 to 1929. Together with Joseph B. Thoburn, journalist and Oklahoma Historical Society board member, Wright collaborated on a four-volume work, "Oklahoma: A History of the State and Its People" (1929). She also wrote three Oklahoma history textbooks for public schools and for nearly 50 years published articles in "The Chronicles of Oklahoma". For giving voice to Oklahoma's past, she was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1940 and received OU's Distinguished Service Citation in 1948.

"That history was a part of our family. I've understood it better over time," Wright says. "I had a great aunt named Harriet Wright O'Leary. She lived in McAlester and was on the Choctaw Tribal Council for a number of years in the 1970s and '80s. She took up the torch for the family and was very involved in tribal politics. She was a big influence on me as well."

Sharing his name with a historical figure, let alone a relative, created a fascination early on. Wright took his sons, Allen and David, on a road trip to find the family patriarch's birthplace. They ended up retracing the Trail of Tears in reverse. "He was born near Jackson, Mississippi and worked his way to Vicksburg, where they took boats or wagon trains that followed the Ouachita River into southeastern Oklahoma.

"We know he was born near the Yockanookany River and my objective was to find that river in Attala County, Mississippi, and we did."

Another time while driving from Princeton to Dartmouth Universities with his son David, Wright swung by Union College in Schenectady to see where his great-great grandfather had gone to school.

"It was stunning to me to see how a Choctaw boy of 20 could end up that far from home in the 1840s. And to think how he physically got there—by train, horseback, buckboard? Seeing his birthplace and where he went to school are the bookends of trips I wanted to take," says Wright. "I read a lot about him when I was a kid and wanted to know what his world looked like."

A few years ago, Wright was working in Washington, D.C., when a man stopped and asked him if he was Choctaw. He introduced himself as R.D. Folsom, descendent of Israel Folsom—a member of the Choctaw Nation who was buried near his good friend Chief Allen Wright in Boggy Depot.

"We'd never meet," says Wright, "and here we are in D.C. Our ancestors were friends and we continue to be friends.. The connection to Oklahoma is strong. When I go to OU football games and look into the south end zone and see 'Oklahoma,' it's not just a word, it's family."