

A Wabunaki Centennial

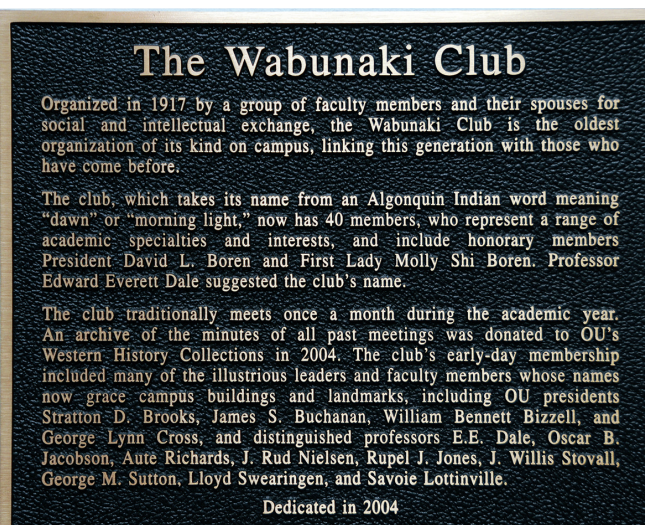
*A historic university-wide club
looks back at its first hundred years
of promoting friendship among faculty*

BY WILLIAM RIGGAN JR.

On the wall above the piano in Oklahoma Memorial Union's Beard Lounge hangs a modest and largely unnoticed plaque whose inscription begins: "Organized in 1917 by a group of faculty members and their spouses for social and intellectual exchange, the Wabunaki Club is the oldest organization of its kind on campus, linking this generation with those who have come before." Now in its 99th year, the club continues to provide an opportunity for faculty and spouses to socialize and exchange ideas with those in academic disciplines across the University of Oklahoma.

The Beard Lounge plaque, dedicated in 2004, also lists the names of early Wabunaki members who are as familiar today as the campus buildings and landmarks named for them. OU Presidents William Bennett Bizzell, James S. Buchanan and George Lynn Cross, and distinguished professors E.E. Dale, Oscar B. Jacobson, Aute Richards, J. Rud Nielsen, Rupel J. Jones, J. Willis Stovall, George M. Sutton, Lloyd Swearingen, and Savoie Lottinville are just a few of the notables on the club roster.

During its first 20 years the University of Oklahoma experienced considerable political and administrative turmoil, leading to frequent and extensive turnover among its faculty and staff and culminating in the dismissal of President David Ross Boyd in 1908. "With the arrival of President Brooks on May 1, 1912," writes Tom Love, unofficial Wabunaki Club



The Wabunaki Club is commemorated with a plaque in Oklahoma Memorial Union's Beard Lounge.

historian, "the University entered a period of relative stability and steady growth."

This tranquility was disrupted in the spring of 1917 by the U.S. entry into World War I, as many of OU's students and, to a lesser extent, faculty were called to serve. "It is in this setting," Love observes, "that Wabunaki was organized as a literary and social club for members of the faculty."

Taking the lead in the club's formation, with support and



OU's third president, Stratton D. Brooks, seen here at his desk in Evans Hall, encouraged the formation of the Wabunaki Club in 1917 as a literary and social outlet for faculty.

encouragement from President Brooks, were director of the School of Education Dr. Warren W. Phelan, history professor E.E. Dale, and English professor A.R. Ramey. According to the plaque in Beaird Lounge, Dale is credited with proposing the club's name — an Algonquin word which translates as “morning light” or “dawn.”

At its first meeting in 1917, the club had a robust membership of 42; 23 faculty members — three of them women (Alberta Braggs in music, Lucile Dora in French and Harriet



Internationally recognized Western history expert and OU Department of History Chair Edward Everett Dale was among the early founders of the Wabunaki Club and gave the organization its name.

Reconsidered,” “The Passing of the Range Cattle Industry,” “Japanese Color Prints of the 15th Century,” “An English View of the American Revolution” and “In Defense of Lawyers.” A notebook for recording the minutes of each meeting was in-

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Hopkins in domestic science) — and 19 spouses. Since the university had only 100 or so faculty members at the time, nearly one in four were Wabunaki members during the 1917-18 academic year.

No records were kept of the club's initial meetings in 1917-18, but a list of the program topics does survive. Among the presentations were, “The Doctrine of Separation of Powers

roduced at the end of that academic year, with its first entry reporting on a talk by law professor H.H. Foster on the subject of “Popular Superstition Exploded.”

The December 21, 1920, meeting began a holiday tradition at the home of President and Mrs. Brooks, Love reports, and featured “a delightful program by Music professor L.S. Salter on the origin and characteristics of Christmas carols around

the world” and a visit from Santa Claus with gifts for the members’ children in attendance. President Bizzell and his wife continued this practice of hosting each December’s meeting during the late 1920s and 1930s, and President and Mrs. Cross later opened their doors for a number of club meetings as well, both during and after Dr. Cross’s 24-year tenure.

Some half-dozen meetings between October 1923 and November 1924 were notable for the attendance of OU President Emeritus David Ross Boyd (inducted as an honorary member in 1923) alongside Interim President James S. Buchanan, whom Boyd had hired in 1895. At the October 1924 meeting Dr. Buchanan’s program consisted of a detailed history of the early years of the university, replete with photographs of the campus and faculty from those days — surely a nostalgic trip for President Boyd and for all those present that evening.

From the 1940s through the mid-1990s the club’s membership remained steady at 40 to 50 individuals. Recording secretaries counted among their number such gifted scribes as OU Press art director Will Ransom, Botany/Microbiology professor George Goodman, and longtime OU archivist Gaston Litton, each of whom stamped the club’s permanent record with such a unique style and wit that their reports be-

came a regular feature in *The Norman Transcript* for most of the 1940s and 1950s.

Among the more notable programs from 1940 to the early 1990s were famed OU ornithologist and bird artist George M. Sutton’s detailed account of the oral literature of the Eskimos, Dr. Cross’s frequent presentations (following his retirement from the OU presidency) on state politics and university history, and sculptor Joe Taylor’s numerous improvised talks on matters both artistic and agrarian, always accompanied by drawn-on-the-spot illustrations of whatever his topic happened to be, whether famous artists and artworks from centuries past or the domestic and wild animals found on his “north woods” acreage.

Today the club has an active membership of 42 and includes four current or former college deans, the current director of the OU Press and the former mayor of Norman. Programs over the past five years have covered “Odysseus and Ulysses,” “Fun With Science,” “The Salman Rushdie Affair” and “The Life and Legacy of Edward Everett Dale,” plus numerous concerts of holiday music and comedic skits by The Fabled Wabunaki Players — i.e., all the club’s members, regardless of their talent level.

Like Love, each current club member appreciates the friendships and viewpoints he or she has gained through association with the group. The club will celebrate its centennial on Feb. 1, 2017, with a banquet and reception for all members, past and present. University administrators and dignitaries are also invited. Included among the honored guests will be OU President David L. Boren and First Lady Molly Shi Boren (both honorary members since 1994) and Provost Kyle Harper, who will deliver the keynote address at the banquet. For more information, contact Cheryl Frech at cfech@cox.net. 



Carrying on a century of OU intellectual and social tradition are current Wabunaki Club members, from left, Bill Riggan, recording secretary; Eileen Young, corresponding secretary; Susan Nostrand, treasurer; Sherry Enrico, vice president; and Cheryl Frech, president.

William Riggan Jr. is the recording secretary for the Wabunaki Club and former editor of World Literature Today.