

Lest We Forget...

BY DAVID W. LEVY

Jesse Lee Rader: OU Libraries' founding father

Jesse Rader was born in Prairie Home, Missouri, in April 1883. He was eleven when the family moved to Newkirk, Oklahoma. The principal of Newkirk High School happened to be Maude DeCou, who, as an undergraduate, had been the University of Oklahoma's librarian. It was probably she who invited her former boss, OU President David Ross Boyd, to Newkirk to give his standard speech on the importance of education. Rader never forgot that talk and, in 1902, he came to Norman and enrolled in the Preparatory Department, the University's pre-college program. Two years later, he was ready for college work. If one were tempted to account for his lifelong love of books, one might well point to his classes with the legendary English professor Vernon Parrington.

Perhaps at DeCou's suggestion, the new librarian, Milton Ferguson, asked sophomore Rader to be his assistant. Rader knew that saying yes would mean giving up football, but he needed the money. And, in a decision fortunate for the University's future, he said yes. In 1908, when Ferguson left for California, Boyd asked Rader, then a senior, to serve as an interim until a new librarian was found. That new librarian had the sense to ask Rader, who already knew more about the library than anyone, to stay on. The new man lasted for only a year, and on September 11, 1909, the Regents named 26-year-old Jesse Rader the University's librarian at \$1,200 per year. He was to hold the position for the next forty-two years.

Rader was still in the Preparatory Department when the great fire of 1903 destroyed every book in the school's library except the few that students had checked out. He became Ferguson's assistant just as the Carnegie Building opened on the North Oval in January 1905, and no doubt helped carry the few books accumulated since the fire to their new home. By the time he earned his M.A. and took over as librarian, the University had around 15,000 books. One measure of Rader's success is to chart the total number of volumes he was able to add to the library, despite the often-miserly state appropriations: in 1920 there were around 35,000; in 1931, 138,000; in 1941, 226,470; and at his retirement in 1951, the library claimed to have 332,000 books, 250,000 pamphlets, and 11,000 volumes of government documents.



He was especially proud of stocking the Treasure Room, next to his own office, with several thousand old, rare, and first-edition books.

In 1920, Rader supervised the arduous task of moving the books from Carnegie to a new building (later named Jacobson Hall) and, during Christmas vacation of 1929, transplanting them again to the luxurious new library at the head of the South Oval. That building would be appropriately named for William Bennett Bizzell, who was its guiding spirit and tireless advocate. But it could have been almost as appropriately named for Jesse Rader, who was just as instrumental in planning its every detail and just as vigorous in lobbying

lawmakers for the necessary funds.

By the end of his career, Rader was regarded as the founding father of Oklahoma's system of libraries. He helped create the state association of librarians and served three terms as its president. In 1929, he established the University's School of Library Science: he was its director until his retirement. He served on the state's Library Commission and was on the board of the Norman Public Library for decades. He trained many men and women in the craft of librarianship (including his successor, Arthur McAnally, who was OU's librarian until 1972). He was consulted for advice by librarians across Oklahoma and beyond.

Rader never forgot what all those books were for. At his retirement, OU President George Lynn Cross said that to Rader, "books were always more than mere documents. Rather they served as doorways to new ideas, new experiences." In a personal note to Rader as he was leaving the work he had done so well and for so long, Cross wrote "that a great many students and alumni cannot think of the University Library without thinking of you."

Jesse Lee Rader died in June 1973, at the age of ninety.

In this column, David W. Levy, Professor Emeritus of the OU History Department, recalls a person from the past whose contributions to the University deserve to be remembered. He has chosen to celebrate those who have not been already memorialized by having their names attached to buildings or other features on the campus, but those instead who, in more modest, but in no less admirable ways, helped make this place what it is.