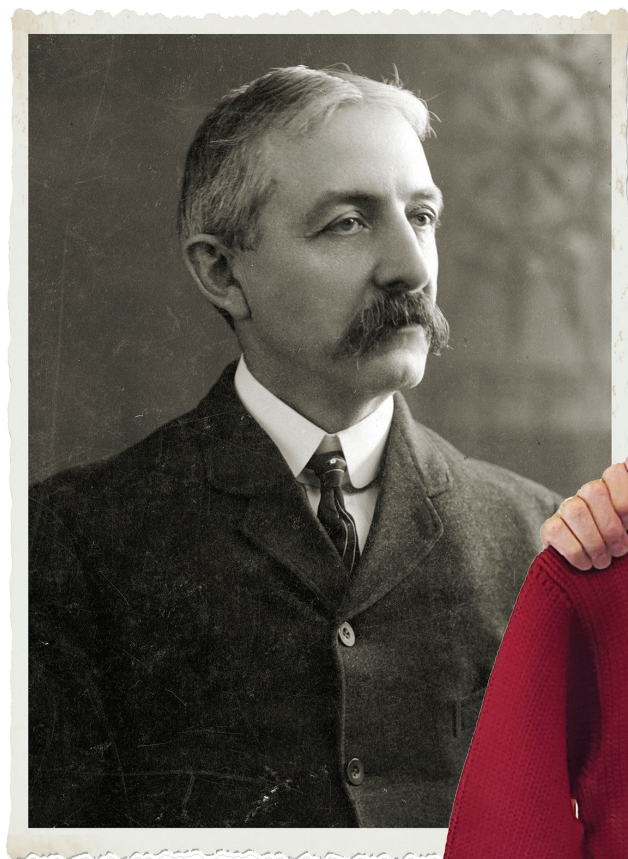


# Uncle David's sweater *comes home*



David Ross Boyd



David Axtell Boyd holds up the sweater that once belonged to his great-uncle, David Ross Boyd, the first president of the University of Oklahoma.

## BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

Even as a boy, David Axtell Boyd knew his great-uncle was someone out of the ordinary. Every summer his family would make a pilgrimage from their home in Albuquerque, N.M., to Glendale, Calif., where the elder Boyd had retired, and his only child, Mary Alice Boyd, still lived. The adults spoke often of her late father in reverential tones.

“Although I was too young to have met him, I knew he was a university president and that I had been named for him,” says Boyd. “He and my paternal grandfather were brothers and when talking about him, we always called him ‘Uncle David.’”

“My family adored Mary Alice, who was not only Dad’s cousin, but also my godmother. She was warm and thoughtful—an intellectual. She knew a lot of things about a lot of things.”

Some would say she inherited those traits from her father, David Ross Boyd, the first president of the University of Oklahoma. Boyd, who served from 1892 to 1908, laid a foundation for excellence—literally and figuratively, from recruiting students and faculty to establishing curriculum and overseeing the construction of the university’s first academic buildings.

When David Axtell Boyd was 11, Mary Alice presented his mother with a perfectly preserved, heavyweight sweater, knitted of crimson wool and adorned with a cream-colored ‘O’ on the front and three matching stripes on the left shoulder. She said it had belonged to her father and she wanted David to have it when he turned 18.

In the fall of 1968, David was entrusted with the wearable family heirloom as a freshman at the University of New Mexico, where David Ross Boyd had served as president after leaving OU. The younger Boyd says he wore the sweater frequently.

“I remember tooling down Central Avenue with the top down on my MGA wearing Uncle David’s sweater. I felt like king of the road,” says Boyd. “Even when it was really cold, that sweater kept me warm. They had to shear like 20 sheep to make it, it was so heavy. It probably weighs 10 pounds.”

Boyd’s best friend in college was Oklahoman Kirk Chalmers. After their freshman year, David started spending summers with Kirk’s family in Tulsa. The two kept in touch even after Chalmers transferred to OU to work on a civil and environmental engineering degree, which he completed in 1973.

Meanwhile Boyd earned a master’s degree in speech and language pathology from UNM in 1975. He later attended Concordia Seminary in Missouri and became a Lutheran minister. As frequently happens while establishing careers and families, the friends would lose touch for a few years, but always pick up where they had left off.

During a telephone chat in the summer of 2021, Chalmers

finally connected dots between his friend and OU that “blew his mind.”

“David told me once that he had a sweater owned by his great-uncle,” says Chalmers. “It took 40 years for me to put together that his great-uncle was David Ross Boyd.”

“Kirk bleeds crimson and cream and he went kind of nuts,” says Boyd. “I told him I had talked to my family and we all thought the sweater should go back to the university as a part of its history. I said, ‘Should I send it to OU?’ And Kirk said, ‘No, come out to a football game and we’ll give it them in person.’”

Chalmers invited Boyd to the Sept. 25 game against West Virginia since Boyd now lives in the nearby Shenandoah Valley.

Boyd had never attended an OU football game nor spent time in Norman. So, before kickoff he and Chalmers walked around campus for hours, taking in his great-uncle’s legacy.

“I knew there was a Boyd Street, but I did not know there was a Boyd House or a Boyd Professorship, nor did I know about the tree-planting,” says Boyd.

Based on President Boyd’s own qualities of outstanding teaching, guidance and leadership, the David Ross Boyd Professorship was established by the OU Board of Regents in 1945 and is one of the highest honors bestowed upon OU faculty, while the first president’s prolific tree-planting is legendary in OU history. It has been reported that President Boyd planted 10,000 trees on the once-barren campus during his first 18 months in office, all at his own expense.

Despite being credited as one of OU’s founding fathers, President Boyd fell victim to partisan politics after Oklahoma Territory became a state in 1907. One of the first acts of the new Oklahoma governor, Charles N. Haskell, was to replace many of the original faculty at the University, including Boyd.

It is for that reason and family history that David Axtell Boyd does not believe the sweater was given to his great-uncle when he left the University of Oklahoma in 1908.

“I believe that came later when he was inducted into the University of Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1930,” explains Boyd. “He was brought back to campus to receive the honor of president emeritus and was given the letter sweater then.”

University officials were thrilled that the sweater given to OU’s first president had found its way home, due to the friendship between Chalmers and Boyd and the generosity of the Boyd family.

“We are grateful to the Boyd family for their generosity and thoughtfulness in sharing this family heirloom with the University of Oklahoma,” says OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. “It will soon be given a permanent place of honor in Boyd House, where it will stand as a symbolic reminder of President Boyd’s everlasting contributions to our university.”