

Lest We Forget...

BY DAVID W. LEVY

Paul Ruggiers: *A Renaissance Man Who Taught Medieval Literature.*

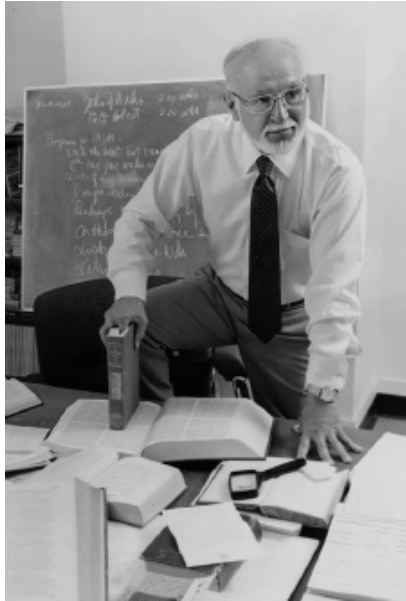
Until the creation of the David L. Boren Professorship in 2016, the University's highest faculty awards were the George Lynn Cross Research Professorship, given for outstanding research or creative activity, and the David Ross Boyd Professorship, given for outstanding teaching. Since their inception in 1944 and 1946, 116 individuals have been named Cross Professors and 125 have been named Boyd Professors. Astonishingly, in those long lists of 240 names there is only a single repetition. Paul George Ruggiers became a Boyd Professor in 1964 and a Cross Professor in 1972.

He was born in Patterson, New Jersey, in April 1918. In 1940, he received a B.A. at Washington & Jefferson College in Pennsylvania and immediately started graduate work at Cornell University. After three wartime years in the Army, he returned to Cornell and completed his Ph.D. in 1946. That same year, at twenty-eight, he took a job at the University of Oklahoma. He had exuberant energy and very wide-ranging interests, but his special passion was the late Middle Ages and, particularly, the works of Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) and Dante Alighieri (c. 1265-1321). He was to spend the rest of his life at OU.

If anyone had suggested in 1946 that the little town of Norman would become a world center of Chaucer scholarship, the laughter would have been deafening. But Paul Ruggiers made it happen. Between 1950 and 1980, he wrote a dozen articles and books about Chaucer. In 1967, he became the general editor of a variorum edition of the poet's works. In that connection he enlisted a multitude of leading Chaucer scholars from around the world, assigning each of them the task of studying and annotating the textual history and reviewing the critical commentary on one of Chaucer's writings.

This involved meticulous word-by-word comparison of more than thirty manuscript and printed versions of that work. Each scholar's draft would be painstakingly reviewed and edited by Ruggiers and one or two assistants. To date, twelve large volumes have been completed and published by the OU Press. But he was not finished.

In 1977, he founded the "New Chaucer Society" and was director for its first five years. That same year, he started a



new journal, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*. He began the "Pilgrim Press" to publish Chaucer facsimiles and other monographs. At the time of his death, he was working on his *Chaucer Encyclopedia*.

"Before the end of his first year at Oklahoma," wrote three deans in 1964, "he was spoken of as an outstanding teacher, an evaluation which has continued steadily since." After more than a decade at OU, his department asserted that he engaged both undergraduate and graduate students and that his energy and enthusiasm were contagious and stimulating: "He likes to teach, and his students enjoy being taught by him."

Ruggiers is also notable for a host of contributions to the University. Early on and more than any other person, he insisted on addressing the educational

needs of superior students—he helped design and was the first director of the Honors Program (1963-1969). He was the principal founder, in 1976, of the Medieval Fair—initially a gentle and relaxed gathering on the South Oval to celebrate medieval culture. (One wonders what he would think of today's food trucks, the thousands of visitors, the sword fights, sales booths and traffic snarls.) He was active in the Faculty Senate and on a score of committees. He taught adult courses at OU's Center for Continuing Education.

Ruggiers was an involved member of numerous learned societies. He was an artist of some skill, giving away his works to his friends. He was a lively member of his church and a concerned citizen of Norman. "You can't imagine that he ever slept," said Daniel Ransom, his assistant and faculty successor. Ruggiers was respected and admired on and off the campus, and honors—in addition to those Cross and Boyd professorships—were heaped upon him. He won a Ford Fellowship, a Guggenheim, and a Fulbright to Italy. He was inducted into the Oklahoma Educators Hall of Fame in 1997, a year before his death.

And yet, despite his far-flung activities, his boundless curiosity and his readiness to engage himself, one has the sense that at the center of his intellectual life remained commitments to scholarly research and the classroom. In Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" (and who knew it better than this OU professor?), the poet beautifully describes an old Oxford scholar, declaring that, "gladly would he learn, and gladly teach." It could have been Paul Ruggiers' motto.