

# Lest We Forget...

BY DAVID W. LEVY

## Jewel Wurtzbaugh: *Scholar, teacher, eccentric*

The nineteenth-century American humorist Josh Billings once remarked that he had never known anyone who had lived to be 110, and who was “remarkable for anything else.” No doubt there are cases where a person’s unusual and obvious trait (in this case, longevity) has the effect of eclipsing anything else that might be said about that person’s character or accomplishments.

This fate has befallen many of the University’s most famous eccentrics—those loveable campus characters, memorable for their bizarre behavior, their harmless oddities and antics. And there are examples, one suspects, where, if you subtracted the eccentricities there would not be much left. This was, however, emphatically not the case for fabled English professor Jewel Wurtzbaugh.

She certainly had her curious and striking traits and was well known and often satirized for them on campus. Some of her behavior derived from bouts of illness, culminating in the removal of a lung in the 1940s. Her fear of germs was legendary. She insisted that the front rows in her classroom be kept vacant; any hapless student who sneezed or coughed was unceremoniously asked to leave. She regularly wore a surgical mask and always (even in summer) appeared in a black wool overcoat, a scarf, and a black hat. Her home on Flood Avenue was protected by thick curtains and sealed windows. She carried a black umbrella and if a cyclist came too close, she was known to thrust it into the spokes.

She was easily agitated and had “a great deal of nervous energy,” wrote her chair. “At times she gets worried and excited over matters that seem a bit unimportant to others.” President Cross’s secretary once reported that Professor Wurtzbaugh was “near hysteria” when she telephoned to complain about the wording of a form letter. Her dean was “puzzled—and somewhat disgusted” by one of her many spirited letters complaining (with much justification) about the salary discrimination she suffered for decades. She was known around town for her determined crusade to change the name of the street behind Jenkins Avenue, called Jenkins Rear, to “Faerie Queen Lane” after the 1590s poem of her scholarly hero, Edmund Spenser.

But to measure and remember Jewel Wurtzbaugh by her eccentricities would be unjust and a serious mistake. She was

born in Jefferson, Texas, in 1895. After earning an M.A. from Barnard (the women’s campus of Columbia University), she taught English at Tarlton College, an institution affiliated with Texas A.&M. The president of A.&M. happened to be William Bennett Bizzell, and a lifelong mutual esteem between the two was born. She revered his administrative skills and upright character; he admired her superb teaching and devotion to scholarship. (After his death in 1944, Wurtzbaugh devoted herself to writing Bizzell’s biography, spending months interviewing those who had known him; unfortunately, she never finished the work, and no trace of a manuscript seems to exist.)

When Bizzell came to Norman as OU’s president in 1925, Wurtzbaugh hoped to follow him, and he was encouraging: “I do not know of anyone whom I would rather see here than you,” he wrote. A place in the English Department was found for her a year later, and she taught there from 1926 until her retirement in 1966. Along the way she earned a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins and became a full professor in 1939. Her specialty was late medieval and Renaissance literature, and she was internationally known for her work on Spenser. She also published work and presented numerous papers on Shakespeare, Milton, and Donne. She was active and often an officer in half a dozen learned societies. Students were devoted to her, and many of them found her inspiring. Her chair called her a “superior teacher.” The dean who found her “puzzling” also said that, in interviews with good students, “she was mentioned as a great teacher more times than any other faculty member.” When the University considered her for a David Ross Boyd Professorship in 1958 (five years earlier, she been one of ten professors awarded \$500 for “extraordinary excellence” in teaching and counseling), dozens of former students came forward to testify to her abilities in the classroom, her solicitude for their personal problems, her help in getting into graduate school or finding a job.

Beyond the eccentricities, she was quite “remarkable.” Jewel Wurtzbaugh died in Norman in June 1972, at the age of seventy-six.

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