Nathan Altshiller Court

By BILLIE RHUE WILEY, '37

IN 1911 a young Jew from Warsaw, Poland, landed in New York Harbor for the first time. He could neither read nor write a word of English. Within a few weeks this same young man was lecturing in a class on advanced mathematics at Columbia University, and at the end of the first semester he was asked to teach night classes in mathematics at this university. About twelve years later he published the first book in the world on modern plane geometry for university students. It was accepted and taught by the leading colleges and universities of America. Last month he published the first systematic presentation of modern solid geometry ever to be written or published for university students. It is entitled *Modern Pure Solid Geometry*.

This man, Doctor Nathan Altshiller Court, professor of mathematics in the University of Oklahoma, is a short, plump, little fellow with sparkling eyes and a whole head full of hair, worn Einstein fashion. His decided accent and charming personality, to say nothing of his many accomplishments, make him a most interesting person.

Mathematicians and scientists in Japan, France, China, Germany, and many other countries commented very favorably upon Court's book, *College Geometry*, issued by

Here is the all-victorious 1915 football team that was honored at Homecoming time. Front row, left to right—Elmer Capshaw, Norman; Mike Swatek, Oklahoma City; Rayburn Foster, Henryetta; Montford Johnson, Borger, Texas; Jess Fields, deceased; William Lively, Oklahoma City. Middle row—Cliff "Dutch" Meyer, Oklahoma City; Howard McCasland, Duncan; Willis Hott, Buffalo, New York; Oliver Hott, Medford; Frank McCain, address unknown; Homer Montgomery, Mineral Wells, Texas. Back row—Assistant Coach Ed Meacham, Norman; George Anderson, deceased; Captain Spot Geyer, deceased; Dr. C. Curry Bell, St. Paul; Leon C. "Red" Phillips, Okemah; Coach Ben G. Owen, Norman.

the Johnson Publishing Company in Richmond, Virginia, in 1925.

This famous University of Oklahoma professor is modest and he has an amusing sense of humor. When asked how he was able to lecture and teach in English after such a short time in America, he shrugged his shoulders, flashed a twinkling smile and replied, "It was swim or sink—I didn't sink. Besides," he continued, "tuition at Columbia was high, but if you were an instructor you could take any course offered without paying a fee."

Doctor Court was born in Warsaw, the present capital of Poland. At that time, however, Warsaw was a part of Russia. Also at that time Court's last name was Altshiller. He went to elementary and secondary schools in Warsaw but could not enter the university there because of the prejudice of the Czarist government toward the Jews. In 1907, Court went to Belgium, where he entered the University of Ghent. In four years he received his doctor of science degree and then came to America to join his parents. In America he immediately became associated with Columbia University as a student and instructor. In 1912, he was married to Sophie Ravitch, a girl that he had known in Warsaw. In 1913, they went to Seattle, Washington, where he was an instructor in the Washington State University for two years. The next year he taught in the University of Colorado, and then he came to the University of Oklahoma, where he has been associate professor of mathematics ever since.

In 1915, when Court published his first articles, these were on phases of mathematics that had never before been completely explored. He has written many mathematical papers in French for French mathematical magazines. Very often his writings appear in publications in India, Japan, China, Brussels and other foreign countries. His first book, *College Geometry*, has been translated into Chinese, and at present it is being used in many of the Chinese universities.

Court tells an interesting story about how a Chinese professor of mathematics wrote him from China and asked his permission to translate *College Geometry* into Chinese. Court and his publishers gave permission.

They did not hear from him again for four years. One day, the postman brought a Chinese version of *College Geometry*, a

big picture of the translator and a letter explaining the four-year delay. It seems that the Japanese had invaded China and had destroyed all of the printing presses. For this reason it had taken a long time to translate and print this book in Chinese.

According to Mrs. Court, her husband always whistles when he is busy discovering something new in mathematics or working a complicated problem.

When he was questioned about who published his first book, Doctor Court grinned and answered, "My wife, my son, and myself. We mimeographed and compiled my material on the dining-room table." The publishing houses rejected it because they were afraid it was too advanced and new to find a market. Later, however, it was accepted and was published with satisfactory results by the Johnson Publishing Company of Richmond, Virginia.

Court's second book, *Modern Pure Solid Geometry*, was rejected by this same company, with the following comment: "It is indeed an accomplishment when a man conceives and successfully publishes one book on advanced mathematics, but it is preposterous that his success with a second book can be repeated."

The Macmillan Company of New York was then given the book, and upon receipt, immediately started publication. The text is now being enthusiastically accepted by mathematicians and scientists everywhere.

Both *College Geometry* and *Modern Pure Solid Geometry* deal with a subject that was not taught to college and university students before the publication of these books.

In 1915, Nathan Altshiller decided to take out naturalization papers and have his name changed. He wanted to have his name changed not only to save his own time and energy by having to pronounce it so often for people, but to save their time trying to pronounce it. When he went to court and was asked what he wanted to change his name to, a blank expression covered his face which is usually so alert and aflame with self-possession and determination. It had never entered his mind that he should think of a name for himself. As they were in court, someone suggested the name "Court"— and Court it has been ever since.

One year a freshman enrolled in Nathan Altshiller's mathematics class and failed the course. A few years later, the same student came back to the University and enrolled in Nathan A. Court's mathematics class. When the student came to class and found that Nathan Altshiller and Nathan Court was the same person, we can only imagine his surprise.

To visit in the Court home is an unusual pleasure. It is filled with interesting old treasures brought from Poland and Russia. In this house you will also find an exciting combination of Russian, Polish, Jewish and American hospitality which will not easily be forgotten.