When a serious, young scientist meets “a real dazzler,” good things happen

When prominent people are fortunate enough to live long, productive lives, their obituaries sometimes read like résumés. Paragraph follows paragraph with dates and titles, awards and achievements. Other prominent people pay glowing tribute to their accomplishments and attest to their finer qualities. A number of obituaries and other testimonials have appeared in this space. This is neither an obituary nor a testimonial. This is an old fashioned love story.

They met in 1924 as students at South Dakota State College in Brookings. His football scholarship included a job as a dishwasher in the women’s dining hall where one of the fringe benefits was checking out the freshman coeds on the first day of classes. He spotted her in a breakfast line of 50 or 60 young women—“a real dazzler, a stunning girl.” George Cross looked no further.

Amazingly, she was in his zoology class the following Monday, and he was delighted to discover that the prettiest girl at South Dakota State was also vivacious, charming and bright. And she was a bit taken with him, too.

Cleo Sikkink’s parents were less enthusiastic about George. They doubted that the young botanist had much of a future. Cleo knew better. In spite of her family’s best efforts to keep the two apart, they were married as soon as he completed his bachelor’s. He then earned a master’s and taught while she finished her degree—with honors.

George went on to a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago, while his wife became the breadwinner, working at the athletic ticket office and the guidance and placement office. They returned to South Dakota where he spent four years as chairman of the botany department at the university before accepting an offer from the University of Oklahoma.

The offer was not a very good one—only an assistant professorship and a slight salary increase. But the future in drought-stricken South Dakota was dismal, and the young couple was determined to prove her parents wrong.

Life was good for them in Oklahoma. Cleo enjoyed her role as faculty wife and mother. Soon George was department chairman, and one administrative post after another came his way. The faculty selected him to chair the search committee for a successor to the departed President Joseph Brandt.

Then the Regents surprised everyone in December 1943 by naming George Cross interim president. A reception was to follow the Regents’ announcement, and Cleo recalled later, “George was such an unlikely candidate that I had been put in charge of the guest book.”

George Cross swears that, without Cleo, he never would have become OU’s seventh president. And perhaps he is right. The Regents had assured him that he was not a candidate for the permanent job, but it was wartime and the search went slowly. Meanwhile the Regents dined monthly at the Cross home, falling under the spell of Cleo, ever gracious, lively, witty—and a marvelous cook.

Perhaps they came to see this quiet, dignified, rather introspective fellow as she saw him. An intelligent, well-respected scientist and academician, to be sure, but also a man of humor, strength and integrity—a perfect choice for the long haul.

The rest is Sooner history. Cleo’s 25 years as OU’s first lady were replete with stories too numerous to recount here—students dropping by for her fresh-baked cookies, the faculty dinners she cooked, the student’s dog she boarded until he could take it home at Thanksgiving, her insatiable curiosity about everything and everyone she encountered, her delight in good times, her staunch support and defense of her husband in times of crisis, her care and comfort when tragedy struck, her extraordinary hats.

And, yes, there was life after the presidency. When her husband retired a few years early to go into banking, Cleo merely shifted her focus from the campus to the town. Her volunteerism—especially as it concerned children and health care—was known throughout the state, even nationally.

She should have lived forever, but it does not work that way. A traffic accident, a fall and then several strokes finally confined her to the home she and George had built when he retired from OU. Last fall she was able to visit the Cleo Cross Room, which dominates the new addition to the president’s home, now known as Boyd House. He represented them both at other special OU events, such as the dedication of the George Cross statue that bears her image on its base with the words, “Cleo Cross: First Lady, Mentor, Friend.”

What would George Cross’ life have been without Cleo—or hers without him? Fortunately we will never know. Certainly they would have missed out on more than 70 years of a remarkable partnership, marked by challenge and achievement, love and a lot of laughter.

Cleo Cross was 90.

—Carol J. Burr