Jacobson Hall was the New Library, the Art Museum, the music overflow. Now this historic little jewel of a building is all dressed up and ready for visitors.

**A Front-Door Welcome**

*BY MARY LYLE WEEKS*

He did not relish the task he faced. Around him in the Carnegie Library were approximately 30,000 volumes. All of them had to be moved to the New Library at the opposite end of the oval.

The New Library was a splendid building with its Gothic styling, curving staircases and solid oak woodwork. There were interesting views from its windows—the arch erected by the class of 1915, an array of Campus Corner businesses, and, under construction directly across the street, the Albert Pike Hall, a Masonic dormitory for men. But even before the New Library was occupied, the librarian suspected that it would be too small. Still, the books had to be moved.

Jesse Rader indeed did move 30,000 volumes from the Carnegie Library to the New Library. In mid-winter of 1920. Using only a push cart.

Thus the building now called Jacobson Hall was utilized for the first time. Over the years, it would undergo many changes, both in function and interior structure.

Today Jacobson's once time-worn and dull façade is again pristine. Inside, the woodwork, carved railings and massive red oak doors gleam with the patina of age, newly revealed from beneath layers of paint and the grime of years. The refurbished hall now is the Visitor Center for the University of Oklahoma, a place where the institution's history can be shared with alumni, students and visitors.  

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The major renovation of Jacobson Hall was accomplished under the direction of President David Boren, using in-house architects and carpenters. So ably was their task completed that the entry foyer and reception area renovation took second prize at the 1996 Associates of University Interior Designers competition.

Jacobson’s striking architecture, like that of Evans Hall and Bizzell Memorial Library, is of the style once described by Frank Lloyd Wright as Collegiate Gothic. The interior, with its high ceilings, paneling and carved woodwork, is testimony to the superb craftsmanship of bygone days.

Certainly the history of OU is evident from a visitor’s first step into the lobby. Leslie Baumert, director of the Visitor Center, says that today Jacobson serves as the front door of the University.

“The Center was President Boren’s idea,” she explains. “His concept is to emphasize service to the community and the state in return for the support they have given to OU. One major part of that service is to welcome alumni, visitors, students and prospective students to the campus and provide them with the information and assistance they request.” Baumert recalls that the University would not have come into existence in Norman had not the town’s citizens donated the land and raised $10,000 for the first building.

Jacobson’s main lobby features antique furniture from the Arts and Crafts movement in the early 1900s and distinctive rugs with a Southwest motif. The efficient but unattractive fluorescent fixtures of earlier years have been replaced by alabaster and brass hanging fixtures and free-standing Tiffany-style lamps. On the walls hang 50 historic photographs, ranging in subject from OU’s first student, Marion Donehew, posing on a dirt road in his Sunday best, to musical groups from the 1920s and 1930s, ancient and modern athletic teams, and the dances and soda fountains from the 1950s.

Atop a Mission Style library stand near the reception desk rests a black leather-bound journal labeled simply “OU Memories.” Alumni and other visitors are invited to record on its pages their fondest Sooner reminiscences. The first entries were penned by David Lyle Boren, ’68 J.D., and Molly Shi Boren, ’70 M.A., ’74 J.D.

Of particular interest is the mural high on the lobby’s south wall. The 31-foot painting by graduate student artist Robert Sisk was commissioned by President Boren. Titled “The Grand Entry,” the mural portrays the formal beginning of a ceremonial Native American pow-wow or dance competition.

The Indian motif has special significance in Jacobson Hall, which is named for Oscar B. Jacobson, who joined the OU faculty in 1915. A long-time director of the School of Art and the University’s Museum of Art, he directed the remodeling of the New Library into studios and a spacious exhibit hall in 1930 when the books were moved—again—to the new Bizzell Memorial Library.

Jacobson is known for finding and nurturing the Kiowa Five, a group of young Kiowa painters whose works awakened the art world to the beauty and high quality of Native American art. Some of their paintings are among the most treasured pieces in the permanent collection of OU’s Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

Occupying the center front of Jacobson Hall’s second floor is the Visitor Lounge, an area for rest and relaxation.
with compelling views through multi-paned, wood-framed windows. A courtesy phone sits beside a comfortable chair. The polished table and chairs, appropriated from the Bizzell Library, are centered under heavy, paneled ceiling beams and surrounded by oak recessed paneling. Other pieces in the room are of the antique Mission Style in the Stickley tradition. The origins of these furnishings and others throughout the building will be explained in a planned brochure.

In the northwest corner of the second floor is the Presentation Room, a facility that may be utilized for both civic and academic group meetings. Among the first to use the Presentation Room were the Norman Chamber of Commerce and the College of Fine Arts faculty. Surrounding the windows is the 1920s woodwork, restored to its original luster.

Gracing two upper walls of the Presentation Room is another mural commissioned by President Boren. Painted by student artist Louise Jones, the 50-foot mural is titled “A Walk Through OU History.” The chronological panels depict actual photographs taken during each decade of University history. Among the most interesting is Mex, the terrier who was the football mascot. When Mex died, students gave him a funeral procession across campus and buried him in the end zone of Owen Field.

The Presentation Room features special exhibits of three-dimensional art by OU School of Art students and faculty. The exhibits will be changed several times a year, providing visitors with examples of the art school’s creative talent. The room also contains a set of the Sooner Yearbook and an architectural model of the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, due to open in 1999.

Among all the restored facilities in Jacobson, one area remains largely untouched. In the northwest corner of the ground floor is a room that has been used primarily as a classroom in recent years and has not yet been renovated. Some classes still meet there, as does the Faculty Senate and a few student groups.

The room already has one spectacular feature, however—a superlative computerized video wall. Provided by the Phillips Petroleum Company, the 12-foot by 12-foot by 5-foot video wall can be operated by laser disk or video tape and can access the internet. Nine different images may be displayed at one time or various combinations may be used, such as four screens showing one large image bracketed by five other images in an L-shape.

“The video wall is a remarkable addition to the Visitor Center,” Baumert says with enthusiasm. “It gives us great flexibility and creative possibilities for presentations. The University is most grateful to Phillips for providing it.”

Jacobson also houses three of OU’s recruitment offices: Prospective Student Services, Minority Student Recruitment Services and National Scholars Programs. The second floor also is home to the Faculty Senate offices, a key component of University governance that provides vital services to faculty, the institution and the public. Prominent among these services is the well established and expanding Speakers Service, available to schools, civic groups and clubs.

In addition, one segment of the School of Music still occupies a portion of the building. The musicians, who were scattered in several campus buildings, occupied Jacobson when the art museum moved to the Fred Jones Jr. Fine Arts Center in 1969. Completion of phase two of the Catlett Music Center by winter 1998 will allow the last piano studio in Jacobson to move to the new facility.

Baumert says that a variety of tours are being planned at the Visitor Center.

“We’re thinking in terms of six different self-guided tours. One will be a walking tour and the second a driving tour that people can take anytime, at their own pace.”

Plans also call for two audio tours—one walking tour and one driving—both directed by audio cassettes.

“One of the ‘fun’ tours will be for grade school children,” Baumert explains. “They will have a type of scavenger hunt based on OU history.”

The children will be assigned such tasks as “Find the green owls on the Oval” (atop Monnet Hall, the former law building, the painting courtesy of OU engineering students) and “Locate the peace pipe” (held by the Indian figure in the Allan Houser sculpture, “May We Have Peace” centered at the entrance to the Parrington—or north—Oval).
Junior high and high school students will be issued a tour "passport" to be stamped as they visit outstanding OU attractions, such as the Western History Collections, the History of Science Collections or the new natural history museum.

Baumert says the University is extremely proud to have been designated a Local Tourism Information Center by the State of Oklahoma. In addition to OU information, tourism information for the entire state will be available at the Visitor Center, including vacation guides, state maps, events guides, museum and historic sites guides, and a variety of other brochures and pamphlets.

Except for University and national holidays, the Visitor Center is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 12 noon. Tours accommodating everyone from a single individual to groups of 300 may be arranged.

"In addition," she explains, "President Boren plans to share Jacobson Hall by making it available to interested groups for receptions and other appropriate events."

Information on any aspect of the Visitor Center and its activities or services is available by calling (405) 325-1188, toll free at 1-800-234-6868, e-mail lmbaumert@ou.edu, or writing to 550 Parrington Oval, Norman, OK 73019-3032. "We want everyone to know that the Visitor Center is fully accessible," Baumert says. "There is an entrance ramp, automated doors and elevator service."

In the late afternoon, when the alabaster and brass lamps have been extinguished and the occupants of the Visitor Center and other offices have departed, the empty main lobby of Jacobson Hall is lit by the indirect sunlight from the west. The brass captions on the historic photographs glow in the dimness. In the silence, surely to any student of OU's history, images of the past come to mind:

...Jesse Rader, patiently placing
Above. The Visitor Lounge on Jacobson’s second floor is available for special events as well as everyday hospitality. Last fall President David Boren hosted Phillips Petroleum representatives and the Phillips Scholars.

Right. Karen Renfroe, standing, center, Prospective Student Services associate director, briefs a group of touring prospective students and international visitors in Jacobson’s second-floor Presentation Room. The Louise Jones mural is an artistic representation of actual photographs from OU history.

books with the rich aroma of leather bindings on new shelves, wondering if there will be enough room for all of them;

...art museum curators and directors, arranging the pastels and slashes of bold color in paintings and sculptures for exhibit, worrying about a lack of space and climate control;

...music students at their pianos, the lilting notes mingling with the question of when suitable sound-proof facilities will be available;

...five young Kiowa painters, tentatively moving into the world of international art and acclaim, still to be amazed at the enthusiastic reception of their works;

...students and visitors of today, entering a splendid facility that harkens to the storied history and treasured traditions of the University of Oklahoma.

Were Oscar Jacobson alive in 1997, he would enter the building that bears his name, look up at the Native American mural and be proud that this place has become the University of Oklahoma Visitor Center, OU’s front door, open to the world.

(Answer to the Alumni Quiz: The pineapple, Colonial symbol of hospitality still widely used in Williamsburg today, is in the hand of the statue of David Ross Boyd in the niche on the west side of the entrance doors to Evans Hall. As early as 1912, OU extended its hospitality to all visitors.)

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