My days as first university president

Told by Dr. David Ross Boyd to Dr. Roy Hadsell, '04, and Betty Kirk, '29

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THE university was an infant in everything except the hopes and ambitions of its founders. Norman was to be its cradle, the old stone building its not very dainty dress. Its only possessions were a toddling present, hope for the future, but no past.

These phrases are extracts from "The University in the Old Stone Building" an article written by Dr. W. N. Rice and published in the Sooner for 1911. They tell better than we may hope to of the first students who attended classes in the old stone building which now houses Warren's Second Hand store on West Main street. The top floor of that building then contained the Territorial University of Oklahoma. We shall quote further from Dr. Rice's article describing it.

"In comparison with the magnificent plants of older and wealthier states, it seemed a gross exaggeration to call that stone building and its modest contents a university. Only three rooms without ornament, barely comfortable, cheaply furnished with tables for teachers' desks and with chairs for the students; no libraries, laboratories, traditions.

"Recall the scene on that opening morning early in September, 1892, three and a half years after the 'run.' Up the steps of the old stone building come the university students to enroll. All are very quiet, some painfully bashful, and not a few extremely awkward. Most of them are the unspoiled products of pioneer life, without pretension and without conventionalism. But, best of all, they are in dead earnest and feel that they are facing a great opportunity. After a short conference with President Boyd, in which they make known their attainments and deficiencies, he gives them a tentative list of subjects which it is presumed they will be able to pursue successfully. Then they seek the heads of the departments to be enrolled in classes and have their work assigned.

"I am constrained to admit that the work was very elementary. Many found it necessary to take a course in reading, spelling arithmetic, grammar, geography, physiology and history of the United States. Nearly all were required to begin in Latin, but only the most advanced took civics, general history, algebra, composition and kindred subjects. As there was scarcely a well organized high school in Oklahoma, it was the policy of the university to take the young people as it found them, to accommodate itself to existing conditions. We were building for a future, and for the sake of a thereafter, it seemed better to grow up than to blow up. I am not disposed to blush as I record these humble beginnings.

"The large room upstairs was the center of university life. At the first, it was the administration building, the assembly hall and many recitation rooms. Here, on every school day, we met in chapel with the faculty and the entire body of students usually present.

"Our class exercises were almost wholly recitations. As we were few, the teacher could come near enough to the student to know how he felt and how he looked at things. With all its conveniences, the old stone building helped to keep us close to one another in our sympathies.

"And this was the more important because our social advantages in other ways were very limited. We had no receptions, literary societies were unorganized, and fraternities and sororities were unknown. Indeed I do not now recall that we had either a football or a baseball team. We were from everywhere and we had neither customs nor traditions in common."

After reading this article recently Doctor Boyd and Doctor Hadsell began to reminisce. Doctor Hadsell did not enroll in the university until 1900 but he said he had heard Doctor Rice tell of the grief caused to students by the stairway. They were used only to one story buildings and as they went up the steps they scuffed their shoes!

New shoes were a rarity to these pioneer students, as were most of the conveniences and luxuries which we take for granted today. Doctor Boyd recalls these students as serious, sober, eager for learning.

The students of those first classes were older," he says. "Among them were grown men and women. You can even note in an early picture that the men had heavy moustaches. There are several reasons for this age.

"The first was that most of them had moved into the territory with their families in '89 to stake claims. Though they had been to school previously, after they reached the territory the schools were so scarce or their labor so essential in clearing a living from the prairies that they could not go to school. Their real desire for an education may be seen in their coming to Norman after this three year lapse.

"It was the hardness of the prairies, the days full of labor, the necessity of facing life in the raw that matured them more than your college boys and girls of today. And it was the realization that at home, in dugouts and cabins and one room shanties mothers and fathers were sacrificing to aid them and dreaming that education would lift their children from the drudgery of the soil.

"Such was our institution, such our students, but rather than feel humble at our meager estate we felt proud of it. For we had our 'hope for the future' in our new building and first campus which were to be provided for us during the next year."