Professor R. V. James, teacher, administrator, engineer, businessman, gives a group of students a problem during one of his classes. As chairman of the School of General Engineering, he is known as a patient man and a thorough instructor as well as a teacher who can throw a tough exam.

Portrait of an Engineer

Born in the corn country of Illinois, R. V. James moved to Oklahoma when he was seventeen. He’s been here ever since—most of the time on the University campus.

By ROBERT TALLEY, ’55

Richard Vernon James has been a part of this university for more than 34 years and for an uprooted Illinois farm boy, he has done well here. He is a successful engineer, teacher, administrator, businessman.

To his students he is known as a friendly, patient man, thorough in his subject with a capacity for throwing some of the hardest exams imaginable. He has done and does hard work, and he would like his students—to do the same.

As a professor of engineering and chairman of the School of General Engineering, he is one of the real old-timers on the campus. As a person he belies his age, typifying what one might imagine an engineer to be: quiet, stable, devoted to his field, an exacting person.

James, now 61, grey-haired, brisk, was born in the blacklands country of central Illinois in 1892. His father farmed 100 acres in some of the most fertile land in the United States, and James led the life of the boy on the farm, morning and night milking two cows and riding five miles to school in a buggy.

In free time—and there was little of it—he walked two miles to a stream to fish and he hunted rabbits in the snow. In high school, he played basketball using a deserted store as a court. Football had been outlawed as too dangerous.

However, he and neighboring boys more successfully trapped muskrat and shipped the skins to St. Louis, where brokers were paying a going price of 35 cents a pelt. Not much but a quarter and a dime would bring home seven pounds of sugar or buy one of the best meals in town with 10 cents left over for brown sugar or several dips into the cracker barrel.

Illinois being corn country, it was in...
R. V. James, chairman of the School of General Engineering, looks over his white-face cattle on a visit to his farm east of Norman. James who bought his first parcel in the 1940's, now owns more than 400 acres, much of it fertile river-bottom land, the remainder "blackjack."
street maps, road surveys and profiles. Characteristically, he never washed dishes, but at the end of the school year he would return to farming, twice following the wheat harvests near Yukon.

"There was one summer," James commented, "when I went more than 100 nights without sleeping in a bed," adding that he had bunked under the equipment where it stopped.

Those were long days, but in 1918 he was graduated with a BS in Civil Engineering. The first great war was under way then, and commissioned as an engineer officer, James was shipped to France. As a second lieutenant, he directed a crew in building railroads and repairing war-blasted roads.

Returning to the United States in June of 1919, he married Ethel Ernst, '16 ba, daughter of a farmer in Cherokee. They have two children, Richard Ernst, '42 eng, '48 m.eng, who has followed his father into engineering and now works with the Honolulu Oil Co. in Brownfield, Texas, and a daughter, Rhoda Jane, '48 bus, who married a geologist, Benjamin C. Singleton, Jr., of Wichita, Kansas.

And in 1920 he joined the faculty as an assistant professor. After a semester he was transferred to the Department of Mechanical Engineering, where, except for a few brief visits into other sections, he has spent the last 34 years.

Continuing his studies while teaching here, he received his masters degree in theoretical and applied mechanics in 1928 from the University of Illinois. In 1937 he was promoted to acting chairman of mechanics, the following year receiving his full professorship and the position as permanent chairman of the school.

Before and since James has not limited his devotion to departmental work. He was for 11 years in charge of enrollment procedures for the Engine School; during the second World War, he was co-ordinator of civilian flight training, supervising a ground school as well as flying instruction, producing more than 150 pilots of light aircraft. At the same time he managed a U.S. Office of Education program for the state which provided some 10 communities with engineering and scientific training.

If this were not enough, he had charge of co-ordinating V-12 and several other service education training sessions at the University. But perhaps the most notable service he has performed for the state was his 10-year tenure on the State Board of Registration for Professional Engineers, the licensing body for Oklahoma engineers. For two years he served as chairman of that group.

This pictures the past and the present. So where does the 61-year-old professor-engineer go from here? He goes to work.

Seeing retirement not too far from his doorstep, James in 1940 bought a farm, 160 acres. Since then he has built his holdings to include two houses on some 500 acres in the blackjack country east of Norman. James, who calls himself a modified windshield farmer, one who lives in town but operates farms, occasionally driving a tractor or truck, runs about 100 head of whiteface cattle on part of the land and raises alfalfa and corn on the rest.

And, although he talks little about it, his associates declare that it is a "most successful venture."

One man who knows James well—Dean W. H. Carson of the College of Engineering—said of him:

"He is as conscientious a person as I have ever seen as a teacher and administrator. "He is a patient, thorough teacher. He uses his rich experience in practice as a professor of engineering, and when I ask him to take on a difficult assignment, he will work nights and weekends until it is done—and it always is completed in a satisfactory manner."

Take on a job, do it well: portrait of an engineer.