

BY W.K. STRATTON

# Hail to the Chief

IT IS NOON ON A COOL FRIDAY IN MID-DECEMBER. THE sunlight, softened by a layer of high clouds, gives the North Oval of the University of Oklahoma campus a look inviting enough for a picture post card. Students saunter among buildings, one wearing a red Santa cap, on this last day of finals for the fall semester. The young man in the cap is staring down at the

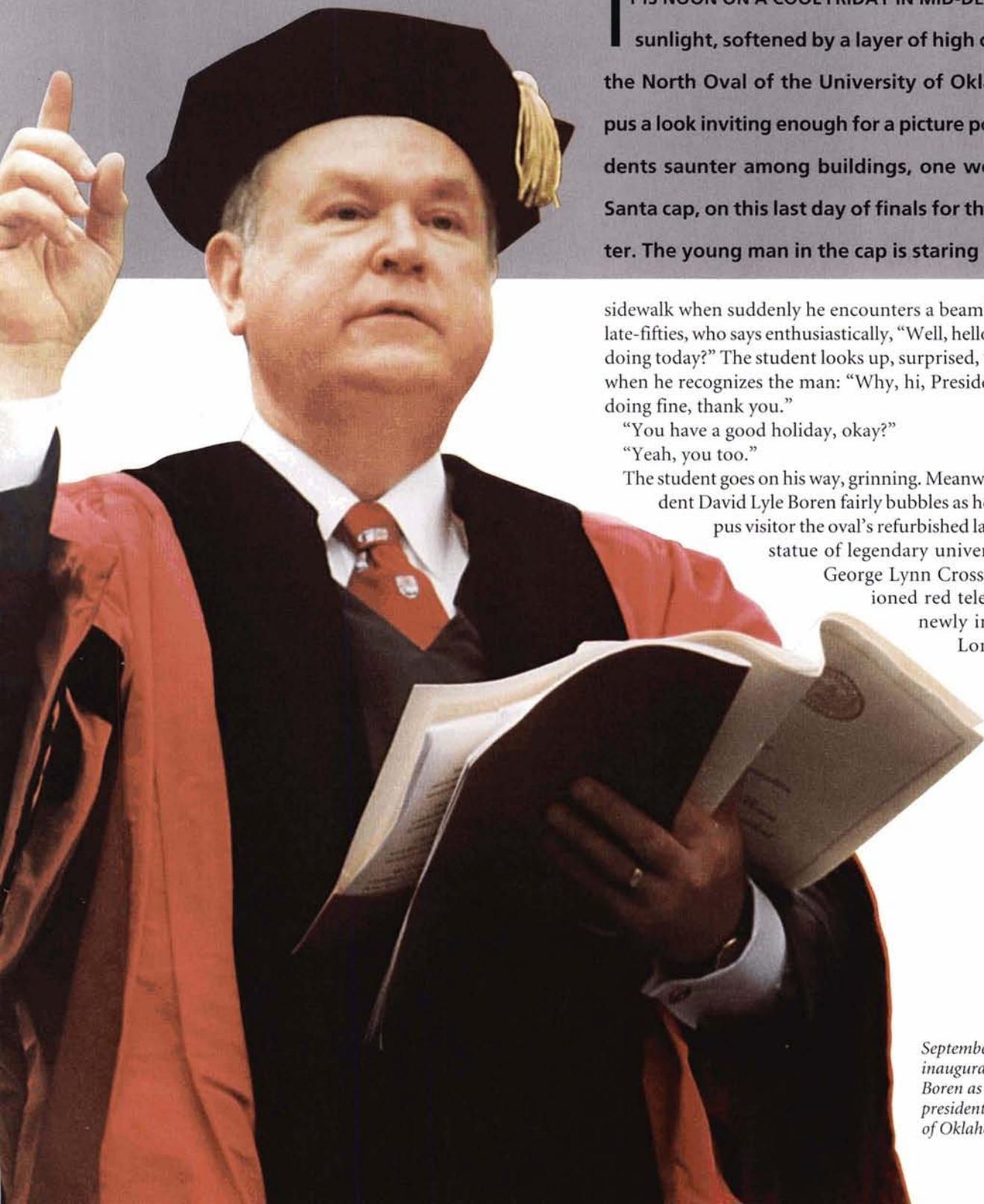
sidewalk when suddenly he encounters a beaming man in his late-fifties, who says enthusiastically, "Well, hello! How are you doing today?" The student looks up, surprised, then brightens when he recognizes the man: "Why, hi, President Boren. I'm doing fine, thank you."

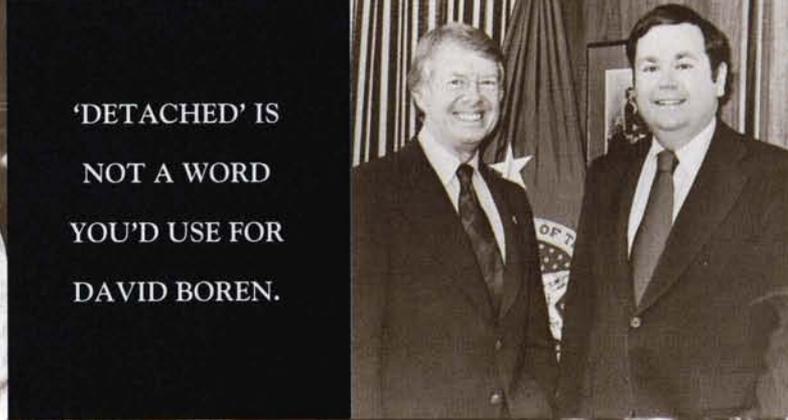
"You have a good holiday, okay?"

"Yeah, you too."

The student goes on his way, grinning. Meanwhile, OU President David Lyle Boren fairly bubbles as he shows a campus visitor the oval's refurbished landscaping, the statue of legendary university president George Lynn Cross, the old-fashioned red telephone booths newly imported from London, and the

*September 15, 1995: the inauguration of David L. Boren as thirteenth president of the University of Oklahoma*





'DETACHED' IS  
NOT A WORD  
YOU'D USE FOR  
DAVID BOREN.



*Clockwise from top left, Boren with President Ronald Reagan, campaigning U.S. Congressman Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lyle Boren, Governor Boren with President Jimmy Carter, swearing in ceremony of Senator Boren with wife Molly Shi Boren and Vice President George Bush, and Boren with President Gerald Ford*

memorial benches honoring Boren's first grade teacher and his high school debate instructor.

Boren has spent the morning describing the dervish of change that has swirled across the Norman campus since he was inaugurated as OU's thirteenth president four years ago: impressive gains in National Merit finalists among the student body, the addition of well-credentialed faculty lured from Ivy League schools and other outstanding universities, increasing numbers of international students, widespread campus construction projects, and, perhaps most eye-widening, the growth of the university's financial endowment.

Yet as excited as he gets describing these accomplishments, you don't have to spend much time with him before you conclude that instilling a sense of family on the campus is his overriding goal. It's the theme he keeps returning to. One of the most distressing changes he's seen in higher education since his own college days has been the evolution of university presidents into detached administrators.

"Detached" is not a word you'd use for Boren.

He and his wife, Molly Shi Boren, have moved into the renovated Boyd House (once slated to be razed for a parking lot), the traditional on-campus dwelling of the OU president, and have immersed themselves in campus life. He walks to work, just as his role model, Dr. Cross, did during Boren's law school days in Norman. "Dr. Cross used to stop by the Union for coffee every day at the same time," he remembers. "So if you wanted to talk to him, you knew where you could find him." Boren has broken out his saxophone and played with the Pride of Oklahoma on game days. He teaches a section of freshman-level introduction to American government each semester.

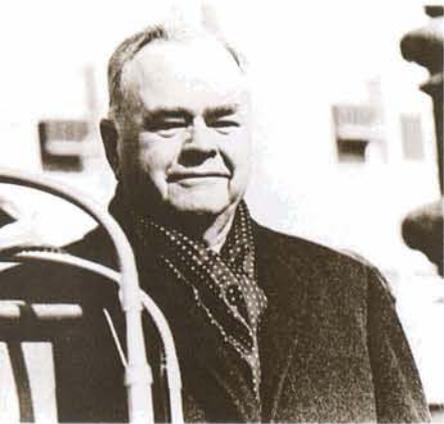
"I'm old-fashioned," Boren says, walking past the old science hall. "In some respects, the university president and first lady should be kind of like Mom and Dad. You know, I actually know the families of a lot of the students here. I know their parents—or maybe their grandparents. I've had the occasion

to tell a student, 'I knew your grandfather, and I wonder what he'd think of what you've done.'"

As he nears the intersection of University and Boyd at the north end of the oval, he breaks off his conversation to greet two more students on the sidewalk, asking about their holiday plans—Dad chatting with the kids.

No doubt about it, Seminole's David Boren—congressman's son, Skull & Bones at Yale, Rhodes scholar, former governor, former United States senator—is having the time of his life at the crimson and cream helm.

AND WHAT A LIFE. I'M THINKING BACK TO MY OWN college days. Late 1974, maybe early 1975, and I was holed up with a passel of other fresh-faced politician wannabes in a below-ground office in the state capitol, carrying out the busy work required for January's inauguration activities. Most viv-



didn't look like he was going to pull it off. He defeated the sitting governor, David Hall (who faced federal indictment) in the 1974 Democratic primary. Next he downed a living political legend, U.S. Representative Clem McSpadden, in the Democratic runoff. Then he swamped Jim Inhofe in the general election to become the nation's youngest governor at the time. He was thirty-three.

Supporting him along the way was the Boren Broom Brigade, a largely youthful corps (many of them students of his at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee where he taught political science) who showed up at rallies thrusting brooms like spears in time to his jaunty campaign song, which was written by his aunt and recorded by the Wilburn Brothers. The candidate himself looked scarcely older than his OBU students, with a young wife and children in tow. When he was inaugurated in January 1975, he invited his singer-songwriter cousin Hoyt Axton—famed for tunes like “Greenback Dollar,” “Joy to the World,” “I Never Been to Spain,” and many others—to perform at the ball. (Hoyt's mother, Mae



*Clockwise from top left, Lyle Boren at his son's gubernatorial inauguration, President and Mrs. Boren with international students at Homecoming '95, Boren with former OU President and mentor George Cross attending an OU basketball game, and Senator Boren with Nelson Mandela*



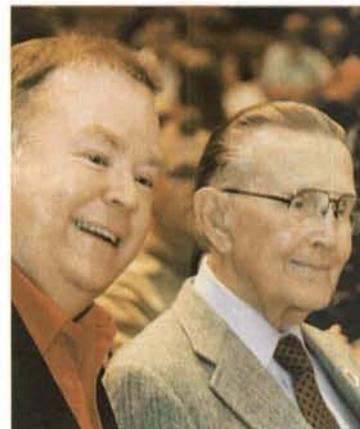
Boren Axton, was, in Boren's words, the Auntie Mame of his family. Also noted for writing “Heartbreak Hotel” for Elvis Presley and instrumental in building the career of Willie Nelson, she was the same aunt who wrote Boren's campaign song.) Hoyt brought along his buddy, Arlo Guthrie, the son of Okemah's Woody Guthrie. Because one of Hoyt's songs had ended up on the soundtrack of *Easy Rider* and Arlo was, well, Arlo, the two were Baby Boomer icons of a sort. With them on-stage, Boren became the first Oklahoma governor to reach out, at least symbolically, to the Woodstock generation.

To someone like me, who had rushed into politics two years earlier, inspired by George McGovern's message of reform and fired up by Hunter S. Thompson's campaign dispatches in *Rolling Stone* magazine, Boren's victory was as impressive as all get out.

What I didn't know then was that Boren had not come out of nowhere. In fact, he had an unparalleled political pedigree. Moreover, once in the Governor's Mansion, he proved himself to be no left-leaning activist, but instead something of a political independent.

If he favored such 1970s liberal positions as legislation for open public records and meetings, he also embraced many key agenda items from the right, such as decentralized government and fiscal conservatism. When Boren's political identity became clear after his first year or so in the mansion, he lost some of his progressive support, and he frustrated a large segment of the regular Democratic Party with its predilection toward good-old-boy politics. But he also rallied many of the state's most powerful business leaders to his camp, plus he established a wide base of popularity with the electorate. As time would prove, no political challenger in the next two decades came remotely close to knocking him off his pedestal.

DAVID BOREN, LIKE MOST POLITICIANS, IS FOND OF photographs. At his OU office in Evans Hall, a large wall bears what might be dozens of pictures from Boren's long career in public office. There is a cover of the *Orbit Magazine*, the old weekly supplement of the *Sunday Oklahoman*, showing newly elected Governor Boren holding a broom while standing near the state seal embedded in the first floor of the capitol ro-



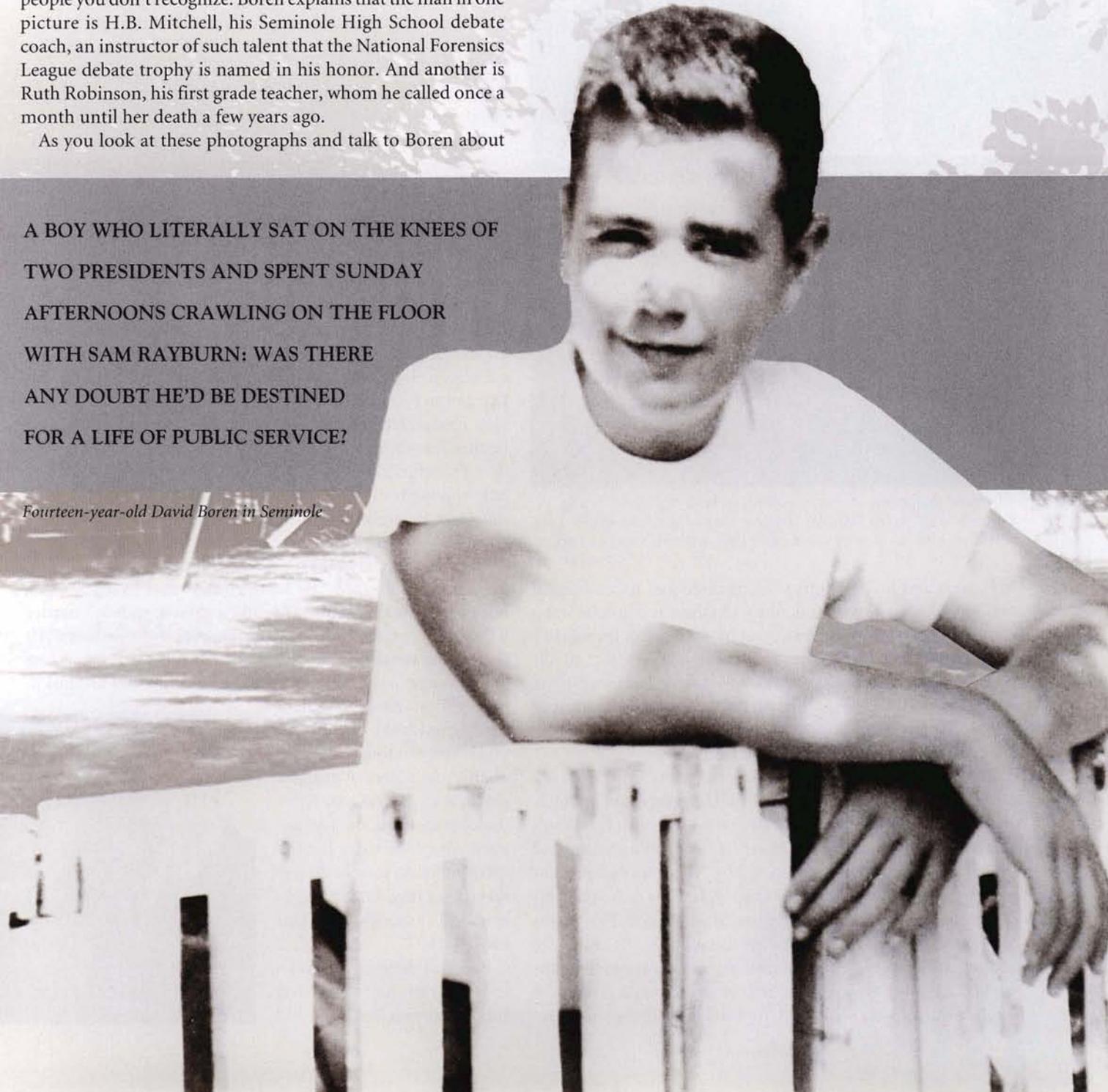
tunda. Down the way is U.S. Senator Boren with martyred Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat. Nearby he is pictured with Nelson Mandela. There are photos of him with Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Bill Clinton, and nearly every politician of national prominence from the past twenty-five years.

As you move down the wall, you detect something of a theme here. The photographs closest to the door opening into Boren's private office are of his personal heroes. Some are recognizable public figures: his father, the late Lyle H. Boren, who served for a decade as Oklahoma's Fourth District U.S. Representative; former U.S. House Speaker Carl Albert, the so-called Little Giant from Little Dixie; and Dr. Cross. Then there are the people you don't recognize. Boren explains that the man in one picture is H.B. Mitchell, his Seminole High School debate coach, an instructor of such talent that the National Forensics League debate trophy is named in his honor. And another is Ruth Robinson, his first grade teacher, whom he called once a month until her death a few years ago.

As you look at these photographs and talk to Boren about

**A BOY WHO LITERALLY SAT ON THE KNEES OF  
TWO PRESIDENTS AND SPENT SUNDAY  
AFTERNOONS CRAWLING ON THE FLOOR  
WITH SAM RAYBURN: WAS THERE  
ANY DOUBT HE'D BE DESTINED  
FOR A LIFE OF PUBLIC SERVICE?**

*Fourteen-year-old David Boren in Seminole*





SEMINOLE'S DAVID  
BOREN IS HAVING  
THE TIME OF HIS  
LIFE AT THE  
CRIMSON AND  
CREAM HELM.



*Clockwise from above, Boren as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, young Boren in Washington D.C., his family at his inauguration as OU president, and Boren with Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu*

his family and his early life, you conclude that his childhood was not without its contradictions. On the one hand, he was a congressman's son who literally sat on the knee of the world's most powerful men. On the other hand, he was a shy, small-town boy—he still considers Seminole the greatest place in the world to grow up—who relied on the teaching and support of people like Ruth Robinson and H.B. Mitchell to overcome his bashfulness and begin a life of public service.

The Borens were a family of note long before Lyle Boren decided to seek the Fourth District seat. His great-great grandfather, Michael Boren, came to Texas as one of Stephen F. Austin's Old 300 settlers, starting the state's first subscription school and giving roots to a family dominated by "teachers and preachers" spreading throughout Texas and Oklahoma during the following generations. His grandfather, Mark Latimer Boren, was a great romantic who, among other things, opened the first ice cream parlor in Texas. Like many dreamers, however, his plans for success often ended in the red. In 1917, after a river levee engineering project went bust, he loaded his family in a cov-

ered wagon and crossed the Red River into Oklahoma, where they earned money working as tenant farmers.

Young Lyle Boren proved to be an ambitious student, achieving his undergraduate degree from what is now East Central Oklahoma State University in Ada at age nineteen and later receiving a master's degree from Oklahoma State University. He became a high school history teacher and later married Christine McKown, also a teacher. It is little wonder that their son would always rate education among the highest of priorities.

But politics also grew to a place of importance in the family.

At some point, Lyle's grandparents posed for a photo with Texas Congressman, House Speaker, and Vice President John Nance "Cactus Jack" Garner—it is among the pictures on the wall in Boren's OU office—but David Boren says his father was the first Boren to become actively involved in politics. "He always wanted to hold office."

In 1936, at the height of the Great Depression, Oklahoma voters elected Lyle Boren as their representative to the United States Congress. He was only twenty-six years old, the youngest person elected to Congress since Henry Clay. A Democrat, Lyle Boren proved himself to be anything but a standard-issue New Dealer. He was fiercely conservative on many issues and became known for his "hell, no" votes on key elements of President Franklin Roosevelt's programs. But neither was he a knee-jerk opponent of the left-leaning president. For some of the most controversial aspects of his program, Roosevelt found a strong ally in Lyle Boren.

"He was definitely a maverick," his son says, the word bringing a smile to his face. "He was a conservative in many ways, but he was also a populist, socially speaking. It didn't matter who you were to him. He valued your opinion." Lyle Boren felt there was something to be learned from everybody. When David Boren was a small boy, his father took him around to meet various people. It might be the president of a bank in a plush office; it might be a mechanic on a greasy creeper under an automobile. After the conversation, the two got back into Lyle's car for the drive home. As soon as the trip was under way, father said to son, "All right, what did you learn today?"

Political differences aside, Lyle Boren had a strong friendship with Roosevelt and



the other political giants of that time. David Boren says that when he was a toddler, he sat on the knee of the president his father considered the greatest of all American leaders, with the possible exception of Thomas Jefferson—Harry S Truman. Lyle Boren and “Give ‘em Hell” Harry were poker-playing buddies, a friendship that went back to 1937 when they were freshmen congressmen from neighboring states. After David was born, the future president became enthralled with the boy, lifting him to his knee, then shooing him to bed before the cards were broken out. Lyle also befriended Winston Churchill (they bought cigars together) and Joseph Kennedy (who predicted to him that the oldest of his sons, Joe Jr., would someday become president as “Jack lacked Joe’s personality”).

But the closest of all to the Boren family was the legendary Sam Rayburn, whose Texas congressional district butted against the Red River. A true titan in American political history, “Mister Sam” was widely considered the greatest of all House majority leaders and later, the greatest of all House Speakers. With his familiar bald pate, he was the very emblem of power in the well of the House or at the podium of a half dozen Democratic National Conventions. He was a man who never personally profited a nickel through his decades of public service, leaving behind at the time of his death only a modest frame house in Texas and an even more modest bank account.

He was a powerful man. And he was a lonely man. Mister Sam never married—some might say politics was his bride—and he adopted the families of his friends as substitutes. The wife and children of the young, ambitious congressman from the Texas Hill Country, Lyndon Baines Johnson, formed one such surrogate family. The family of Lyle Boren formed another.

David Boren remembers Mister Sam with great fondness. On Sunday afternoons in Washington, this icon of power in America helped young David fashion tents in the Boren living room using chairs from the dining room table and sheets from the linen closet. They played together for hours.

Here we have it: a boy who literally sat on the knees of two presidents, a boy who gave his first campaign speech on the radio at age five in his father’s losing effort for reelection in 1946, a boy whose congressman father palled around with the likes of Winston Churchill and Joe Kennedy, a boy who spent Sunday afternoons crawling around on the floor with Sam Rayburn.

Was there any doubt he’d be destined for a life of public service?

**I**F LYLE BOREN HAD ONE DREAM,” WRITES THE *DAILY Oklahoman’s* Jim Standard, “it was that he would live to see David elected president of the United States.” Certainly David Boren did everything he could as a youth and as a young man to position himself for such an achievement. At age eleven, he served as a page for Oklahoma’s U.S. Senator Robert S. Kerr—known in Washington as the “king” of the U.S. Senate in those years—at the Democratic National Convention. It was an exciting time, for Kerr ran a favorite-son candidacy for president that year. The young Boren also was close to Oklahoma’s junior U.S. senator, Mike Monroney.

Boren majored in American history at Yale University, and

on weekends, he took every chance he got to drop down to Washington to visit Carl Albert, who was in the habit of working Saturdays and Sundays. Albert quickly became another role model.

The Little Giant had worked his way from the backwoods burg of Bugtussle (in the remote coal mining country of Pittsburg County) all the way to the portals of the Capitol in Washington, where he quickly was recognized for his intelligence and political skills. In many ways, Albert was the last of a breed. His Third Congressional District took in the bulk of Little Dixie, probably the least urbanized area of Oklahoma, and to succeed there, you had to follow the old political rules. Slick TV campaigns were a long time coming to Little Dixie.

In Albert’s time, you won by knocking on doors, by wooing the county courthouse politicians, by glad-handing at county fairs and livestock shows, by giving the best speeches at fried chicken suppers and watermelon feeds. You had to feel comfortable rubbing elbows with the common folks, and Albert was great at it. He was especially good at delivering the “stem-



*David Boren and President George Bush after OU commencement speeches in 1997*



Oxford after his years at Yale.

His Yale education also gave him one more experience that proved to be a benefit throughout the rest of his professional life. Boren became a member of Skull & Bones, a secret society of students, many of whom have gone on to become highly influential in politics and business. (In fact, conspiracy nuts on the Internet would have you believe that Skull & Bones members secretly rule the world.) Through Skull & Bones, Boren met and became friends with George Bush. The two were particularly close during Bush's four years in the White House, a time when Boren headed up the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee. Politics aside, Boren was glad he was able to function in that capacity for the president. "When you're in that office," Boren says, "you need somebody who'll just be your friend."

By 1968, Boren, at age twenty-seven, was ready to begin his own public career. He'd graduated from Yale, completed his Rhodes scholarship, and graduated from the OU College of Law. But moreover, he'd had his high school debate instruction under H.B. Mitchell, which enabled him to overcome his innate shyness and speak in public. His early exposure to the rough-and-tumble of Little Dixie politics as practiced in Seminole County had taught him to develop a thick skin.

And so he set out one day to begin his first quest for public office. He parked his car near a house on the highway north of Wewoka. Nervously, he spent fifteen minutes in the car, rehearsing what he'd say, trying to anticipate the reactions he might get. Finally, he screwed up his courage and climbed out of the car. He walked up to the house, still reciting his lines in his head.

He knocked on the door, and a woman answered.

"Hi, I'm David Boren," he announced, "and I'm running for—"

"Oh, sure," the woman said, smiling. "I've known your mother for years. I'm baking cookies. Why don't you come on back and have one?"

He followed the woman to her kitchen, where she served him cookies fresh from the oven. The formal spiel he'd rehearsed gave way to relaxed kitchen table conversation, and he won a supporter. He left her house and walked down the highway to the next one. Another friendly reception. Then another. Still another. "I must have gone to five or six houses before I ran



winder," a wondrously impassioned speech that could match the best effort of a spirit-filled evangelist. Stem-winders were full of sound and fury and signified everything as far as a politician's success with the voters was concerned.

In years to come, Albert asked Boren to be his campaign manager, and undoubtedly Boren learned a lot about successful grassroots campaigning in small towns and rural areas from the experience.

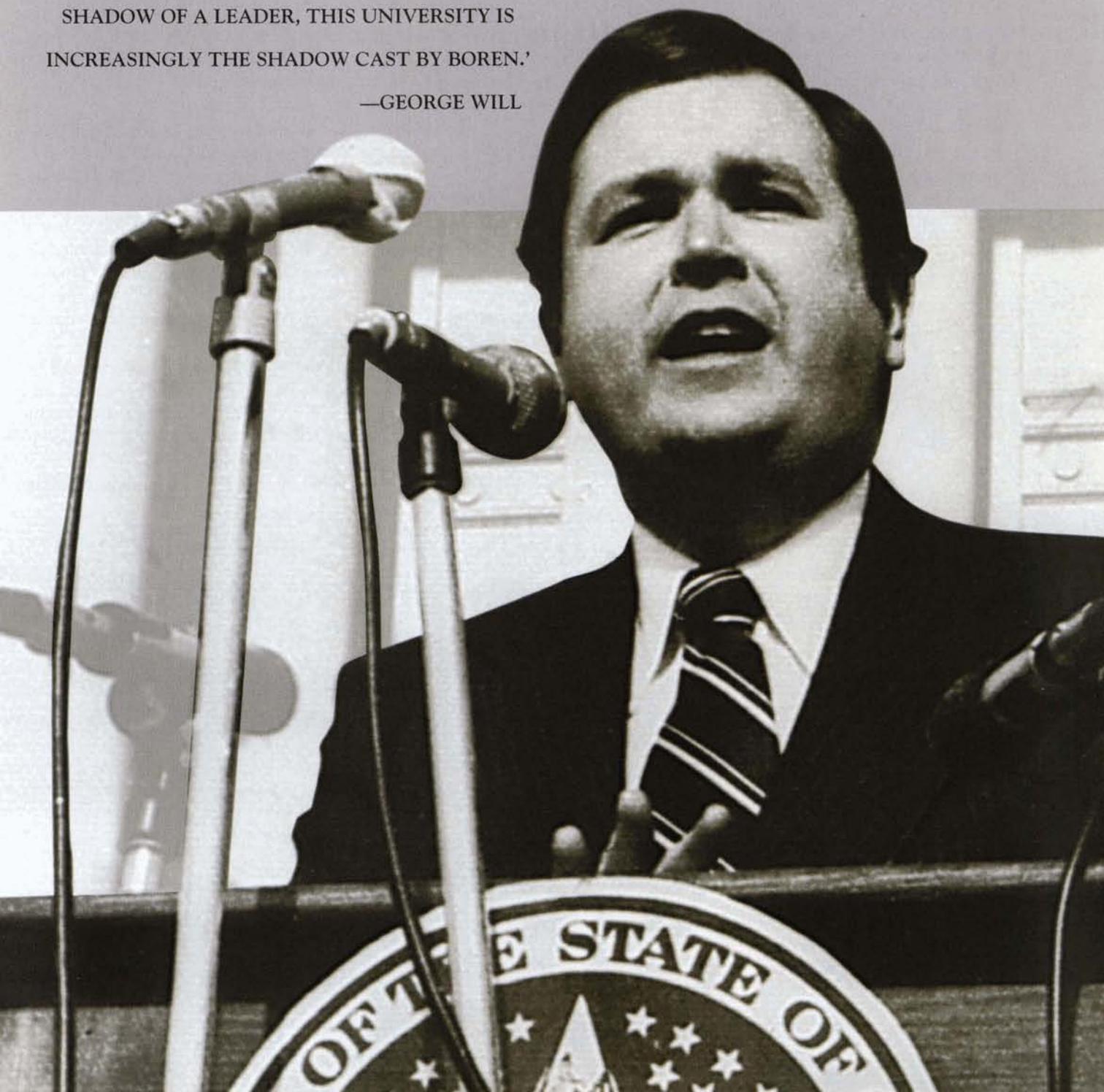
It was Albert who encouraged Boren to apply for a Rhodes scholarship. Albert himself had received the coveted award following his graduation from OU. Boren followed Albert's lead and was successful in receiving the invitation to study at

*This page, clockwise from right, Molly, Carrie, David, and Dan Boren in front of the Capitol in the late 1970s, Senator Boren confers with Vice President Al Gore, and Carrie Boren campaigning for her dad's gubernatorial race; opposite page, Governor Boren giving his 1975 inaugural address*



'IF AN INSTITUTION IS THE LENGTHENING  
SHADOW OF A LEADER, THIS UNIVERSITY IS  
INCREASINGLY THE SHADOW CAST BY BOREN.'

—GEORGE WILL



into the first person who said he absolutely would not vote for me,” Boren remembers.

Boren went on to win that election. In fact, he never lost an election.

Nine years later, after being sworn in as governor, Boren was riding in the governor’s Lincoln Continental when he passed that same house north of Wewoka. He told the driver to pull over, got out, and knocked on the door. The same woman answered. Boren explained he’d just stopped by to thank her for helping him get started in his political career. The woman invited him to the kitchen for oven-fresh cookies.

She just happened to be baking again.

**S**EMINOLE WAS THE KIND OF TOWN THAT TOOK POLITICS seriously as a spectator sport, Boren remembers. It was a place where anonymous flyers containing the most scurrilous accusations had a way of turning up on election day, too late for defamed candidates to do much about them. It was a hard place to win office and hold on to it. As governor, Boren came to appreciate the toughening up he got in Seminole County.



With his reform agenda, he quickly ran afoul of many legislative leaders. It was a time of hardball politics as practiced by a tough breed, most of whom emerged from the dog-eat-dog of county political warfare. No small number of the men who dominated the legislature in the mid 1970s were the sort who would look askance at a Yale graduate and a Rhodes scholar as being elitist, if not out and out effete.

I know. I was there.

I worked for the state senate during the latter part of Boren’s gubernatorial term, and I heard many of Boren’s fellow Democrats scornfully deride him as a closet Republican. They delighted every time they thwarted one of his efforts at, say, prison reform or refused to confirm a reform-minded gubernatorial appointment. Remember, this was the era in Oklahoma politics when a representative from Muskogee gained national attention for his remark on the floor of the state house that the first thing the Communists do when they take over a country is outlaw cockfighting.

If that environment wasn’t bad enough, Boren had his resolve tested when his personal life hit rocky times. His first wife, Janna Lou Little, came from the somewhat politically prominent Little family, and when she and the governor decided to divorce, tongues wagged. (His ex-wife died in 1998.)

The invective was at its ugliest in 1978 when Boren faced the



‘OKLAHOMA HAS GIVEN ME EVERYTHING.  
YOU HAVE SEASONS IN YOUR LIFE. I’M AT  
THE POINT IN MY LIFE WHEN I CAN START  
GIVING BACK TO OKLAHOMA.’

*Above, Boren with his wife; opposite page, two-year-old David Boren in front of the nation’s Capitol, and playing with the Pride of Oklahoma*

decision of whether to run for reelection or to seek another office. Boren had gone on record that, while interested in the U.S. Senate, he would not challenge an incumbent. Republican Senator Dewey Bartlett's seat was up for election that year. "One day," Boren recalls, "Senator Bartlett called me and asked me what my plans were. I told him I was going to run for reelection as governor. He said that he thought I should know he'd been diagnosed with a malignancy and might not be able to run for his seat again."

Things hung in that state for weeks, with the deadline for filing for office growing closer. Boren had to start preparing for an election—he just didn't know which election to prepare for. "It got to the point where I was printing bumper stickers for governor and bumper stickers for U.S. Senate." Finally, Bartlett telephoned Boren and told him that his cancer, which would shortly claim his life, had worsened to the point of prohibiting him from seeking reelection. Boren filed for the U.S. Senate post. And one of the ugliest primary races in Oklahoma history ensued.

Two Democratic warhorses, former Congressman Ed Edmondson and state Senator Gene Stipe, also filed for the party nomination—hoping, perhaps, to capitalize on a resentment vote from alienated Democratic regulars. Boren, Edmondson, and Stipe fought it out in the Democratic primary election (which included four other candidates). Despite the mudslinging of his opponents, Boren refused to lower himself to gutter politics. He maintained the high road, focusing on issues, a classy move that endeared him to scores of Oklahomans. He went on to beat Edmondson by a two-to-one margin in the runoff to claim the party nomination and then defeated Republican Robert Kamm, the popular former Oklahoma State University president, in the general election. (In reelection bids in 1984 and 1990, Boren won in landslides of historic proportion, 77 percent of the popular vote in '84, 84 percent in '90—victory margins likely to never occur in Oklahoma Senate races again.)

He went to Washington at a time when the political winds were shifting—and not shifting in ways entirely to Boren's liking.

**D**AVID BOREN AND I ARE in his office on the OU

campus, discussing politics. He is talking about the friends he's made in politics over the past thirty years and more, friends from both sides of the aisle, Democrats and Republicans. He tells me one of the proudest accomplishments of his Senate years is that he continually ranked in the middle on those liberal/conservative vote thermometers. He likes ranking fifty out of a hundred on the measure of most conservative, fifty out of a hundred on the measure of most liberal. He is, he says, a moderate, maybe a slightly conservative



moderate, but a moderate nonetheless. He is concerned about the middle and the divisiveness that currently afflicts the two major political parties. He makes a gesture down the middle of his desk with his hands and says, "A third party is going to come in and claim the middle if one of the other two doesn't do it."

Then he recalls the last speech he made on the Senate floor. In it, he said that if he could, he would have moved his desk into the center aisle.

The Senate years raised Boren to a position of high national prominence. He served as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee at a time when the intelligence community was front and center in the nation's foreign policy. Early on in his tenure, his committee had oversight of such hot topics as America's covert involvement with forces in opposition to the Sandinistas in revolutionary Nicaragua. Boren's name frequently popped up on news broadcasts.

It was a time of frustration as well. Year after year, he took to the floor of the Senate to plead for campaign finance reform, to no avail. He saw the growing fractiousness between Democrats and Republicans and wondered whatever happened to the days when you could disagree politically with your colleagues but still remain friends.

For Boren, the mark of a good public servant is someone who always does what he or she thinks is the right thing to do and gives the job his or her best effort. He gives high grades to such people, regardless of where they fall on the political spectrum. Boren puts Henry Bellmon, Dewey Bartlett, and Don Nickles in





Left, David Boren as a freshman at Yale; above, President Boren teaching a freshman class at OU



this category, Republicans whose views often were and are more conservative than his own. But he also enthusiastically supported former state Senator and Corporation Commissioner Bill Dawson and former state Representative and state Senator Jeff Johnston, Democrats with views mostly to the left of Boren's. (Sadly, both died

early, in the prime of their political careers.)

Boren likes the politics of consensus. He was disappointed when President Clinton failed to try to build a consensus on health care reform during his first term. "To say that the administration now wants to force through a health care bill on a virtual party-line vote with the vice president breaking a tie is a tragic mistake," Boren told the *Oklahoman* in 1994. "The country is crying out for bipartisanship. ... Without it, we are going to constantly see reversals of policy with every passing election."

This was Boren's state of mind when the possibility of his becoming president of the University of Oklahoma arose. He turned to an old colleague and friend, Terry Sanford. The North Carolina Democrat was the one person Boren knew who had been a governor and a U.S. senator and the president of a major institution of higher learning, Duke University. Boren got in touch with Sanford just before Sanford was to begin a speech.

"I need to ask you a question," Boren said.

Sanford, on a pay phone, responded, "Is it a question that needs a five-minute answer? Or does it need a longer answer? If it needs a longer answer, I'll have to get back with you later."

"Here it is," Boren said. "I've been offered the presidency of the University of Oklahoma, and I'm trying to decide if I should leave the Senate to take it."

"That'll just require a ten-second answer," Sanford said. "Take it. Nothing I've done has given me as great a sense of reward as being president of a university. If you really love a

place, the best thing you can do is invest yourself into the fabric of the next generation."

Sanford hung up and left to deliver his speech.

Boren took the job.

**N**EARLY FIFTY YEARS AGO, FRUSTRATED WITH A LEGISLATIVE committee wrestling over budgetary matters, Dr. George Cross exclaimed that he was only trying to build a university the football team could be proud of. I mention this famous quote to Boren as we stroll through the campus. He smiles. "Well, I think the football team could stand a little remedial work itself for the next couple of years," he quips.

The fact is, just as Bud Wilkinson's Sooners of the late 1940s and 1950s and Barry Switzer's Sooners of the 1970s and early '80s epitomized excellence in college football, David Boren's vision of what OU should become over the next decade epitomizes everything that is excellent in higher education.

He sees building a great university as a way of building a great state. He frequently quotes OU's sixth president, Joseph Brandt, who said, "I know of no state in the union to which we can honestly apply the term 'great' that does not have a great university." Boren views his work at OU now as payback to his home state.

The overriding achievements necessary for greatness are acquiring topnotch faculty, recruiting outstanding students, and engaging in world-class research. It takes money to accomplish these things, and at raising money, Boren has outdone himself. The "Reach for Excellence" drive has netted more than \$250 million for the school, with Boren's dream goal of hitting \$300 million by the beginning of the next millennium quite possible. The school has also doubled its endowed chairs to 219 since Boren's arrival.

Boren uses a four-legged stool as an analogy for his vision of the university.

The first leg is internationalizing the school. "U.S. education is far too parochial," Boren says. To combat this, OU established the International Programs Center. Boren recruited Edward J. Perkins, former American ambassador to the United Nations and head of the American Foreign Service, to direct

the center. OU currently has the most internationalized student body of any Big Twelve school.

To help international students feel more at home at OU and to help them learn about Oklahoma culture, Boren instituted the OU Cousins, in which American students volunteer to become "cousins" for international students. It all started when a Malaysian student working at Boyd House told Boren he regretted not getting to see Oklahoma farms and ranches and real cowboys firsthand during his stay at Norman. Boren decided to remedy that situation: a mainstay of the Cousins program is an annual visit to a horse farm not far from the university. About 150 students volunteered for Cousins in its first year; this year, 1,100 signed up, so many that some international students have two or three American "cousins."

The second leg is to create a unique sense of community at the university. This involves everything from giving OU a traditional collegiate look and feel (removing the chintzy 1970s plastic furniture from the Oklahoma Memorial Union and replacing it with stuffed wing chairs, for instance) to restoring historic buildings such as the Bizzell Memorial Library to their original architectural integrity. Boren is also committed to giving students and faculty reminders of the OU "family history," using a plethora of photos and historical plaques, and integrating faculty into the day-to-day lives of students by creating faculty apartments in campus residence halls. To boot, the university is building a wing onto the union in which all student organizations can be officed in close proximity to each other, allowing student leaders to get to know each other.

Boren believes one of a great university's responsibilities is to train good citizens. "A danger to our country is that there is too much fragmentation—along economic lines, along racial lines, along geographic lines. This is the last chance we have to give young people a real sense of community, of family," he says.

The third leg is academic excellence and intensity. Boren considers the university's Honors College to be one of the nation's finest for undergraduates. Class sizes are restricted to twenty-two students or fewer and are taught by distinguished faculty members. The college is headed by Dean Steven Gillon, the official historian of the History Channel who formerly held a chair at Oxford. "We've also raided talent

from Princeton, Yale, and Brown," Boren adds. In 1998, *U.S. News & World Report* ranked the school first per capita of all public universities in number of National Merit Scholars and National Scholars.

Other impressive university hires include W. Arthur "Skip" Porter, an international authority on technology commercialization; Peter H. Hassrick, who will hold the first Charles M. Russell Memorial Chair in the Art of the American West;

Thomas S. Ray, one of the nation's top authorities on artificial intelligence (so says Microsoft's director of research); and Eric Lee, the executive associate director of the Fred Jones, Jr., Museum of Art.

The fourth leg is to use the intellectual resources of the university to spur growth for the state. Research is the key here, with good academic minds working to develop products that in turn create jobs. The school is a leading research center for meteorology. It's also a leader in genome research and DNA sequencing, which could contribute to prevention of some genetic diseases. Boren says OU is currently number one in the Big Twelve for research growth, spending \$131 million this year.

Add to all of this \$200 million worth of construction projects, including the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, which will be the world's largest natural history museum associated with a university. Various campus programs have attracted luminaries ranging from former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to Ted Turner and Jane Fonda.

It is quite a four-legged stool.



Left, President Boren with the Pride of Oklahoma; above, Boren at an OU Cousins barbecue

NATIONALLY SYNDICATED COLUMNIST GEORGE WILL has written: "If an institution is the lengthening shadow of a leader, this university is increasingly the shadow cast by Boren. He is implementing scads of micro and macro measures for turning a sprawling campus into a community, and pushing the institution into the top tier of research universities."

The OU president explains it this way: "Oklahoma has given me everything. You have seasons in your life. I'm at a point in my life when I can start giving back to Oklahoma. A lot of people think public service is about power, but public service is about service."

David Boren leaves me at the corner of University and Boyd to head into Boyd House for a fund-raising lunch with a donor. As he disappears through the door, I can't help but agree with a columnist who observed that OU under Boren puts a whole new spin on that old bumper sticker that read, "It's hard to be humble when you're a Sooner." 

