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Bob Burke
Bob Burke Law, bob@bobburkelaw.com

Steven W. Taylor

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HUMBLE BEGINNINGS: A HISTORY OF THE OU COLLEGE OF LAW

BOB BURKE* & JUSTICE STEVEN W. TAYLOR**

From the time of the founding of the University of Oklahoma (OU) in 1892, political leaders and prominent members of the bar and judiciary in Oklahoma and Indian territories recognized the need to establish a publicly supported law school. Many of the governors of Oklahoma Territory were lawyers themselves, but meager territorial budgets could not fund an institution devoted to legal education. Young Oklahomans were forced to go outside the territories to study law.

The first successful effort to bring legal education to Oklahoma Territory came from Charles B. Ames, a prominent leader of the Oklahoma City bar and the Methodist Church. Shortly after 1900, Ames and other Methodists founded Epworth University, a predecessor to Oklahoma City University, with law classes that began in 1907, the same year Oklahoma became the forty-sixth state of the Union. Ames was the first dean of the Epworth law school.

Two events in 1909 resulted in the birth of the University of Oklahoma School of Law (OU Law), later called the OU College of Law. Two factions

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* Bob Burke has written more historical nonfiction books (94) than anyone else in history. Most of his books are about Oklahoma and its people. Burke's books have won many awards, and three of his biographies were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. He is a graduate of the University of Oklahoma and the Oklahoma City University School of Law. He lives in Oklahoma City with his wife, Chimene, where he practices law and writes books. He is the father of Robert, Amy, and Cody, stepfather of Natalie, Lauren, and Calli, and grandfather of Nathan, Jon, Ridge, and Fallon. Burke is a member of the Oklahoma Hall of Fame and the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame.

** Oklahoma Supreme Court Justice Steven W. Taylor was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 2009. After his undergraduate education at Oklahoma State University and his legal education at the University of Oklahoma College of Law, he served in the United States Marine Corps. He then returned to his hometown of McAlester, Oklahoma, where he was elected its youngest mayor ever. In 1984, he was appointed as a judge of the district court. As a trial judge he presided over more than 500 jury trials, including the Terry Nichols Oklahoma City bombing case. Justice Taylor, appointed to the Supreme Court in 2004, has received the highest alumni awards from both OSU and OU. In 2007, he was named by *Oklahoma Today* as one of the "100 Who Shaped Us," a list of living and past Oklahomans who influenced the state's first 100 years.

of the Methodist Church split, signaling the demise of Epworth University. Observers believed Epworth would soon close its doors.

At the same time, Dean Ames participated in meetings in which lawyers and educators requested that the OU Board of Regents establish a state-supported law school. Lawyers appeared before the regents with a well-grounded argument that Oklahoma was growing and needed an institution at which to train future lawyers.

Epworth continued to offer law school classes, but it was a stopgap measure until the new State of Oklahoma could work out details for a law school under the auspices of OU. The regents were convinced of the need for a state-supported law school and authorized its establishment on April 3, 1909. A bar committee was appointed to hire a dean and faculty. Into the story came Julien Charles Monnet.

Monnet was a professor at the George Washington University Law School when a letter arrived in early August 1909 from Lee Cruce, an Ardmore, Oklahoma, banker and president of the OU Board of Regents. Cruce, later Oklahoma's second governor, offered Monnet the law school's dean position for the handsome sum of \$4000 annually, the same salary given to the governor and OU President Arthur Grant Evans.

Monnet agreed to travel by train to Oklahoma to meet with the regents and members of the Oklahoma Bar Association. He arrived a day early, intent upon checking out the Norman campus before his official interview. It was a terribly hot, dusty, and bone-dry August day. Years later, Monnet swore the temperature was 114 degrees.

He was discouraged when he learned that the OU administration building had burned and that the campus consisted of only two brick buildings and a few common wooden structures. Nevertheless, he had long thought about the importance of training future lawyers and felt the almost irresistible appeal of building a law school from the ground up. Oklahoma was one of the few places in the American frontier where that could be accomplished.

Before he met with the regents and bar committee, Monnet wrote his wife, "There is not enough money in the whole state to induce me to accept a position in Oklahoma!" Fortunately for thousands of future law students at OU, two things happened: the letter to Monnet's wife never arrived at his father-in-law's home in Missouri, and regents and leading lawyers convinced him in a meeting in an Oklahoma City law office that Oklahoma was ready to support a law school.

Monnet deferred his decision until he could meet with his wife and father-in-law, a prominent Missouri judge. On August 24, 1909, Monnet accepted the job and returned to Norman to prepare the opening of a brand new law

school in three weeks. He was forty years old and had been a lawyer for sixteen years.

The first decision Monnet had to make was where to hold classes. The lawyers who had interviewed him for the position thought that the law school should be located in Oklahoma City. There were rumors that the state capital would soon be moved from Guthrie to Oklahoma City. Members of the Oklahoma City bar argued that a state-supported law school should be close to the seat of state government and the appellate courts.

Monnet, however, had strong feelings that the law school should be part of the mainstream of the full university. He courageously ruled out any idea of placing the law school in Oklahoma City, twenty miles from the Norman campus.

A second alternative was to rent classroom and library space in downtown Norman. Local attorneys and businessmen showed him several locations. The district judge offered use of his courtroom when trials or hearings were not being conducted, but even the distance from the campus to downtown Norman was too far in Monnet's mind. He insisted that the law school be somewhere on OU's forty-acre campus.

Monnet's final option was a third-floor museum in the Science Building. Monnet made room for classes by crowding together dozens of tables and cases exhibiting rocks, minerals, and fossils. With the help of the school's janitor, he built wooden shelves to house the small law library. Monnet wedged his desk between two display cabinets and placed a pine table in a corner to be occupied by his associate who was yet to be hired.

There was much to be done. Monnet advertised for students, began selecting textbooks, and worked with the university administration for a smooth enrollment process. He earnestly sought an associate, but was turned down more than once. An Illinois professor rejected Monnet's offer with the sobering thought, "I am skeptical about Oklahoma. I feel that those wide-open spaces and naked prairies might prove unendurable." Another associate accepted the job, arrived in Norman, and then decided to return to Iowa.

Finally, an Alva, Oklahoma, lawyer and former county attorney, John Begg Cheadle, was hired as associate professor of law. It was a good hire—Cheadle was a member of the faculty for the next forty-two years.

Monnet met the almost impossible deadline of opening the law school on September 15, 1909. State newspapers and lawyers in major cities and towns publicized the opening of classes. By opening day, forty-five students had enrolled. Thirteen more were added for the second semester.

W. R. Wallace was the first student to enroll in the School of Law. Although he did not complete his law school education at OU, Wallace later

became a federal judge and general counsel for a major American oil company.

With a successful first year under his belt, Monnet pursued the construction of a separate building for the OU School of Law. He reported to university officials that the law students had organized an independent and enthusiastic movement to secure a separate building. Students described their predicament of trying to listen to a professor while music students practiced on pianos and violins.

Law students met on October 12, 1910, at the Norman YMCA with local citizens and legislators to organize an effort to promote a law school building. Paul Walker, William Randolph, Louis Ledbetter, Crawford Cameron, and Raymond Tolbert, future preeminent members of the bar, were elected officers of the committee to solicit the cooperation of the Board of Regents, state and county bar associations, and the university administration. Everyone was on board except for OU President Evans, whose agenda did not include a new law school building.

Evans resigned as president, however, and Dean Monnet became acting OU president. In addition, strong law school supporter Lee Cruce was elected governor of Oklahoma and took office in January 1911. OU Law students organized a public demonstration for the new building in Cruce's inaugural parade. The entire group of law students wore red and white streamers emblazoned with the words, "University of Oklahoma School of Law." Marching down the streets of Oklahoma City, the students waved pennants with the owl emblem.

The new building was ready for occupancy for the start of the school year in the fall of 1913. It was still undecided what the building would be called. Raymond A. Tolbert, secretary to Dean Monnet, was one of those suggesting to the committee in charge of the March 1914 official dedication that the structure should be named for Monnet. Tolbert was given the assignment of clearing the matter with OU President Stratton D. Brooks. Tolbert assumed there would be no problem.

Brooks, however, wrote Tolbert a letter firmly in opposition to naming the building for Monnet because Monnet was still alive. Brooks said he would not oppose attaching Monnet's name to the building after his death.

At the March dedication, Robert H. Wilson, state school superintendent and chairman of the State Board of Education, surprised all present when he handed the keys to the building to President Brooks and officially named the building Monnet Hall. Brooks "never batted an eye and expressed no surprise or resentment."

There was a healthy, but sometimes unruly, competition between law students and engineering students at OU. Future engineers called the law

building “the law barn,” “incubator of lawyers,” or “nursery for barristers.” Law students adopted “law barn.” Engineering students used a Civil War cannon to blow out windows of Monnet Hall until university officials discovered the cannon’s hiding place and relegated the relic to a museum.

Engineering students also targeted the owls decorating the end of Monnet Hall. The building had not been occupied long before the owls were painted emerald green. Even though the law students were greatly outnumbered by the engineering students, future lawyers were innovative in their counterattacks. During the dark night before one St. Patrick’s Day, law students painted a portion of the law barn green, but placed drops of green paint on a trail that led campus police to bushes behind the engineering building where they found the empty paint can. As engineering students got in trouble, law students, in their silence, reveled in the outcome.

Dean Monnet referred to his graduates as “his boys.” In the first few decades of the law school, Monnet’s former students were elected to the state legislature, sat on the highest courts of the state, and filled many county judicial and prosecutorial posts. In private life, hundreds more enjoyed success and occupied executive suites as general counsel to large corporations.

By 1941, Dean Monnet was seventy-two years old and had served as dean for thirty-two years, the longest continuous service of any law school dean in the nation. In June 1941, Monnet appeared before a meeting of the OU Board of Regents and announced his retirement. The regents approved his request to remain as dean emeritus and take a year’s leave of absence. After commencement, the Dean’s retirement was announced. The *Oklahoma City Times* said, “Thus, there passes from the active scene an organizer of the first order, a noble character and an inspiring leader of men.”

For basically one-third of a century, OU Law had but one dean—Julien C. Monnet. Upon his retirement, the Board of Regents appointed John Gaines Hervey as dean. Hervey, one of the “Dean’s boys,” was a 1925 graduate of OU Law. He worked his way through OU Law as a drugstore clerk and library assistant. In the July 1941 issue of the *Oklahoma Law Journal*, editors devoted five pages to the outgoing dean and only a single page to Hervey. The new dean wanted it that way, however. He said, “Don’t say much about me, but a lot about Dean Monnet for he is the one who made the law school a great institution.”

OU celebrated its first Law Day observance on April 29, 1949. Its purpose was to allow members of the judiciary and the Oklahoma bar to meet with law school faculty and students to talk about legal problems. Tours of the law barn were conducted, and Judge Charles Clark of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit led a session on lawsuit discovery.

The first Law Day activities concluded with a dinner and law school men's smoker in the Main Ballroom of the Oklahoma Memorial Union. Leading members of the bench and bar made short speeches and announced student awards.

Law Day won acclaim from many quarters. In the next few years, OU Law graduate Hicks Epton took up the cause and promoted an annual nationwide Law Day. In 1958, President Dwight Eisenhower signed a proclamation making Law Day an official national day of observing contributions of lawyers to American society.

Enrollment in law school was an informal process in the 1940s. Rudolph Hargrave, later a longtime Justice of the Oklahoma Supreme Court, arrived in Norman while Professor Maurice Merrill was acting dean. When Hargrave tried to enroll in law school, he was informed that he needed to talk to the dean. He showed his transcript to Merrill, who said, "This is a good looking transcript. I am going to approve it. You're now in law school."

As did future students, Hargrave learned quickly that law school administrators expected more than half of first-year students to fail to finish their law degrees. Hargrave remembers a meeting of freshmen students in which Dean Page Keeton admonished them to get to know the students sitting beside them, "because most of them won't be back next semester."

Hargrave began law school at a time when Dean Keeton initiated a legal writing course. Professor Reed, who had a Ph.D. in English, taught legal writing. Hargrave's first writing efforts were returned with "red marks from the top to the bottom." Reed reintroduced grammar and writing concepts such as dangling participles and split infinitives. There was a new emphasis on future OU Law graduates leaving school with an ability to correctly put their thoughts and opinions on paper.

The large law school classes immediately after World War II presented many problems—most notably, the issue of where to put students and faculty. There were only three large classrooms, so classes had to be held year-round.

The story of how Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher became a student at OU Law is both a significant part of the history of the law school and a crucial episode in the nation's civil rights movement. Fondly called "Ada Lois," Fisher grew up in Chickasha, Oklahoma, where her father was a prominent minister. She dreamed of becoming a lawyer long before she graduated with honors from Langston University in 1945. She wanted to go to the law school at OU, but state law prohibited African Americans from attending all-white state universities.

At the urging of Roscoe Dunjee, editor of the state's leading black newspaper, *The Black Dispatch* in Oklahoma City, Fisher agreed to seek admission to the OU law school in order to challenge Oklahoma's segregation

laws. On January 14, 1946, Fisher met with OU President Dr. George L. Cross. She was accompanied by Dunjee and Dr. W.A.J. Bullock of Chickasha.

After reviewing Fisher's transcript, President Cross said that there was no academic reason to reject her application. Nevertheless, he cited state statutes that made it a misdemeanor to instruct or attend classes of mixed races. The OU president and each of the white students could be fined up to \$20 per day. Shortly thereafter, Fisher received official notification that her application to OU Law was rejected solely on the basis of race. Cross later wrote that he wanted to admit Fisher but was directed by the Board of Regents to reject her application. Dr. Cross was gracious.

With support of civic leaders from across the state, Fisher became the plaintiff in the landmark case that ultimately gained her admission to the law school. She was represented by attorney Amos Hall of Tulsa and young NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall, later the first African American appointed to the United States Supreme Court.

To pay for legal fees, Dunjee used *The Black Dispatch* to solicit contributions. He and Fisher appeared at churches and civic clubs. There were no large corporate sponsors, just pennies and dollars from Oklahomans, both black and white. The community of Bristow sent \$2.15. Other citizens sent as little as 50¢. A \$10 contribution came from an inmate at the state penitentiary.

Fisher lost her case in Cleveland County District Court. The Oklahoma Supreme Court affirmed the decision, ruling that the state's policy of segregating whites and blacks in education did not violate the Federal Constitution. An appeal was filed with the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled on January 12, 1948, that Oklahoma must provide Fisher with the same opportunity to gain a legal education as other citizens of the state.

Tragically, the Oklahoma Legislature tried to subvert the desegregation intent of the High Court ruling. Rather than admit Fisher to OU Law, the legislature established a separate law school for African Americans. The Langston University School of Law was created in five days and was housed in empty rooms at the State Capitol.

Fisher refused to attend the separate law school and went back to court. One of the witnesses for Fisher was OU Law Professor Henry Foster, Jr. Foster lost his temper while on the stand and charged that the creation of a separate law school for Fisher was "cheap, political chicanery." Foster later apologized for losing his temper, but did not apologize for opining that the makeshift Langston law school was a sham.

The Cleveland County District Court again ruled against Fisher, finding that OU Law and the new law school in the Capitol were "equal." Fisher appealed the decision, but before the appeal could be resolved, President Cross directed

that she be admitted to OU Law. She enrolled on June 18, 1949, more than three years after the denial of her initial application.

White classmates generally welcomed Fisher, but she was forced to sit in the back of the room behind a row of empty seats and a wooden railing. A sign designated the area “colored.” Shortly after Fisher’s admission, however, a series of Supreme Court decisions, including the landmark case of OU graduate student George W. McLaurin, declared that such treatment of black students impaired and inhibited their ability to study and learn. Thus, all segregation of OU students, including roped-off stadium seats at football games, ended by 1950.

Fisher graduated from OU Law in August 1952. After practicing law in Chickasha for a short time, she joined the faculty of Langston University. She earned a master’s degree in history from OU and served as the chair of the Langston Department of Social Sciences. She retired in 1987 after being promoted to the office of assistant vice president for academic affairs.

In April 1992, Governor David Walters appointed Fisher to the OU Board of Regents, symbolically righting the wrongs of the past. During the ceremony announcing the appointment, Walters said it was a “completed cycle.” The lady who once was rejected by the university was now a member of its governing board.

Fisher died on October 18, 1995. In her honor, OU dedicated the Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher Garden. On the bronze plaque commemorating Fisher’s contribution is inscribed, “In Psalm 118, the psalmist speaks of how the stone that the builders once rejected becomes the cornerstone.”

Judge Robert Henry, in the foreword to Fisher’s autobiography, *A Matter of Black and White*, wrote about *Sipuel v. Board of Regents*:

Sipuel and Ada Lois herself have added meaning for the State of

Oklahoma. This young woman, described by . . . President Cross as “chic, charming and well poised,” had courage that will long serve as an example for Oklahomans. In a time where heroines—or as one of my judicial friends says, *sheroes*—are greatly needed, the courage of this precocious woman with a gentle heart and a fighting spirit is truly exemplary. *Sipuel* was an important milestone on the road to *Brown v. Board of Education*.¹

1. *Editors’ Note*: For a more in-depth discussion of the story of Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher and the impact of the *Sipuel* case, see Cheryl Brown Wattlely, *Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher: How a “Skinny Little Girl” Took on the University of Oklahoma and Helped Pave the Road to Brown v. Board of Education*, 62 OKLA. L. REV. 449 (2010).

More than 500 law graduates and other lawyers and judges attended the seventh annual Law Day at OU in 1955. The moot court competition finals featured stellar names—William G. “Willie” Paul of Pauls Valley, Lee R. West of Antlers, and Richard L. Fowler and Lewis G. Mosburg of Tulsa. The students argued their cases to Justices of the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

The law school classes in the mid-1950s produced governors, U.S. senators, Oklahoma attorneys general, influential leaders of the state legislature, outstanding state and federal judges, and two presidents of the American Bar Association. Bill Paul, who led the American Bar Association in 1999, had great praise for his 1956 class of only sixty-six students: “If we had a 500-person class such as Harvard, we would be running the world.” Paul paid tribute to the guidance of professors and Dean Earl Sneed.

John Green, the first African American male graduate of OU Law, sought good advice before he entered law school in 1954. Green grew up in McCurtain County, Oklahoma, and earned his bachelor’s degree at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. When he was preparing to enroll at OU, he visited Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher. She told him, “Make good use of your time, stay in the library, and work hard.”

The first student Green met when he walked up the steps of Monnet Hall was Fred Harris, president of the Student Bar Association, and later a U.S. senator from Oklahoma and candidate for President of the United States. Harris looked Green in the eye and said, “Welcome to the law school.” Times had changed in a few short years. Whereas Fisher’s law school education had begun behind a wooden railing, Green was accepted by fellow students and made lifelong friends. If classmates such as Lee West, Hardy Summers, and Willie Paul were eating in the student union, they always made a place at their table for Green. Only once did a fellow student use a racial epithet in Green’s presence in describing how dark a person looked in a photograph. Later, the student, with tears in his eyes, apologized for the use of the slang term.

The Class of 1957 was star studded. DeVier Pierson, whose father had also graduated from OU Law, joined with Jerry Dickman and Patrick Williams to win the national moot court championship in December 1956. After winning first in advocacy and brief writing at the regional tournament in New Orleans, the team competed against students from ninety other law schools in New York City before an eminent bench featuring U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter.

One of the highlights of OU’s recognition of the moot court team victory was an appearance by legendary OU football coach Bud Wilkinson. At an event honoring the moot court victors, Wilkinson told the audience that winning the moot court national championship was as important as his Sooners’ winning the national college football championship.

In October 1959, the College of Law celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The celebration featured class reunions and seminars on appellate advocacy and trial techniques. Oklahoma Governor J. Howard Edmondson, Class of 1948, headlined an impressive list of state officials, federal judges, county judges, district judges, county attorneys, and members of the OU Board of Regents who attended the event. More than 700 attorneys, their spouses, and other guests were present for the golden anniversary celebration.

Marking the culmination of more than a decade of effort, the OU Law Center—a new law complex just south of OU’s main campus—was dedicated during ceremonies on July 9 and 10, 1976. At the dedication dinner, retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Tom C. Clark paid tribute to the late Judge Alfred P. Murrah, the first chairman of the Law Center Commission:

Al Murrah is not here in the flesh today, but as I walked around the Law Center, I saw his works. His presence is not only all around the place but is also in the hearts of all the people who work or come there . . . His spirit shall always continue to live where good people gather together to improve the administration of justice, for he is the guiding light of that endeavor. He continues to be our great and faithful leader and so shall it always be.

Justice Clark then challenged future leaders of the Law Center: “Yours is a great opportunity. You can fashion this Center so that it will be a model for all the world to emulate, proclaiming education as the guiding genius of democracy, and legal education as its lodestar.”

At the official dedication, Governor David Boren, Class of 1968, remarked, “Let us not quit short of the challenge of excellence.” Harvard Law Dean Ervin Griswold, an original member of the Law Center Commission, delivered the dedication address, urging the Law Center to focus on giving its students the tools of learning that would serve them well in whatever capacities they eventually practiced law. Griswold stated, “Students must learn and be convinced that decisions of a legal nature must not be based on authority alone, but on argument of facts which seeks to find the truth.”

In 1991, the national news spotlight was aimed at Norman, not because of the football team, but because an OU Law professor became an instant American celebrity. Professor Anita Hill testified at the 1991 Senate confirmation hearing for the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court. Hill, a member of the OU Law faculty since 1986, had worked with Thomas at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In sworn testimony, she told senators that Thomas had made provocative and harassing sexual statements to her.

The impact of Hill's testimony was startling. A commentary in *The Daily Oklahoman* read,

She could have been from anywhere. People kept saying she came out of nowhere. But Oklahomans were conscious of where Anita Hill was from, as they watched her testify on television, as they watched her become a national symbol of the issue of sexual harassment, as they saw her return from the surreal circus in Washington to the comforting familiarity of Norman.

Hill's being thrust into the national spotlight brought great pressure on OU Law. When Dean David Swank appeared at a news conference with her, he was criticized by two Republican state lawmakers for allowing Hill to use OU as a backdrop for the allegations against Thomas. The legislators were critical of the use of law school facilities for news conferences and Swank's allowing dozens of national and local media to "hang out at the law school." OU President Richard van Horn backed Dean Swank, saying that OU was a public institution and its facilities were available to a wide range of people.

In the media frenzy, other OU faculty members were also drawn into the spotlight. Professor Robert Richardson received a Sunday morning telephone call from a reporter for the *New York Times*. Richardson told the reporter that he found Hill to be honorable and ethical and that, "If Anita says it happened, I am convinced it happened."

Dean Swank was forced to enact strict guidelines for media access to the Law Center. He expressed his rules as a gentlemen's agreement: "If you won't try to get in the lecture room and won't bother our students, we'll let you come in the building. If you don't abide by the rules, I'll boot you out, lock the doors, and not let you in." Only once did a cameraman try to sneak into the classroom where Hill was teaching; however, Dean Swank's secretary slammed the door on the \$45,000 camera, and the cameraman retreated.

Because Hill served under his watch, Swank supported her efforts to tell her story. "I believed in her strongly; I don't think she had a dishonest bone in her body," Swank later recalled. "She made a great contribution to the OU Law faculty, but ultimately decided the political atmosphere was so vitriolic, she moved on." After the OU regents granted Hill a leave in which she toured the country and was a guest on the nation's major news programs, including "60 Minutes" and "Face the Nation," Hill returned to the classroom for a short time before resigning in 1996 to join the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley.

OU Law graduate Frank Keating, Class of 1969, was elected governor of Oklahoma in November 1994. He was the fifth former student or alumnus of OU Law to serve in the state's highest elective position. He followed Leon

“Red” Phillips, J. Howard Edmondson, David Boren, and George Nigh. Nigh began law school at OU, but decided he did not want to be a lawyer and completed his history degree at East Central State College. Also in 1994, David Boren resigned as a U.S. senator to become president of OU.

By the spring of 1996, President Boren had settled on Andrew Coats as his choice for dean to bring back the greatness of the law school. Boren said, “I could think of no one else who could tackle the problems of the law school.” Coats was one of Oklahoma’s best-known public servants, having served as district attorney of Oklahoma County and mayor of Oklahoma City, and was a veteran of a statewide race for the U.S. Senate. He had a lucrative private practice as a principal at Crowe & Dunlevy in Oklahoma City, however. Boren turned to his power of persuasion.

After dinner at Boyd House, Boren took Coats for a walk and ended up on the steps of Monnet Hall. The idea for a nostalgic walk came from First Lady Molly Boren. She and Linda Coats accompanied their husbands on the moonlit walk around the North Oval.

Taking Coats aside, President Boren was direct: “Andy, how do you want to be remembered, as a lawyer who made a lot of money, or the man who saved our law school?” Boren remembers, “After I gave him my tombstone speech, we talked about memories of law school and what serious trouble the law school was in.” Boren promised Coats that if he took the dean’s job, they would form a winning team to raise money for a new law center.

President Boren put on a “full-court press” to attract Coats to the deanship. Boren asked many mutual friends to call or visit Coats to persuade him to take the helm of the law school. L.K. Smith, Judge Robert Henry, Oklahoma Supreme Court Justice Alma Wilson, OU General Counsel Fred Gipson, and others encouraged Coats to make the move. Shortly thereafter, Coats agreed that his name could be submitted to the dean selection committee.

L.K. Smith called Boren and said, “I have talked to Andy and he is willing to give up his law practice and take this significant financial hit to go down to OU as dean.” When Boren said that he, too, had talked to Coats, Smith asked, “Well, what is this search committee going to do?” Boren replied, “It will search for Andy!”

In April 1996, the OU regents accepted the selection committee’s recommendation and appointed Coats as the eleventh dean of OU Law. As he made arrangements for the transition, Coats began spending much of each day considering solutions to OU Law’s problems. “When I became dean,” he said, “the College of Law was in very poor condition. Only minor improvements and very little maintenance had been done to the Law Center since its construction 20 years before. It was a mess.” Coats found that the law school

had too little support from the state, the university, and alumni. He remembers, "It was a dismal time with a grim future outlook."

When Coats appeared at the Dean's Office for his first day on the job, he was surprised that no one called him to offer congratulations or well wishes in the new position. Finally, at about 5:00 p.m., Fred Gipson, one of Coats's closest friends for many years, called and said, "Hello Andy. Welcome to the University of Oklahoma. From here on, it's every man for himself." Gipson, a lifelong friend and counselor to President Boren, had one more piece of advice for the new law school dean: "Always remember that David Boren is a one-man band!"

While architects and engineers, under the close supervision of Dean Coats and Associate Dean Robert Smith, began putting the dreams of new law school facilities on paper, OU Law celebrated four significant anniversaries in 1998 and 1999. The *Oklahoma Law Review* turned fifty years old and celebrated with a banquet in the Main Ballroom of the Oklahoma Memorial Union. OU President Boren was the guest speaker for many past members and editors who attended the event.

The *American Indian Law Review* marked its twenty-fifth anniversary by hosting a symposium on American Indian law and policy. Robert A. Fairbanks, founding editor-in-chief of the *American Indian Law Review*, participated in the symposium with a distinguished group of scholars, tribal leaders, and government officials.

To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the admission of Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher to the law school, OU Law hosted a panel discussion on the legal significance of her admission and the role of Justice Thurgood Marshall in constitutional change. The panel discussion was chaired by OU alumnus Melvin Hall, chairman of the OU Board of Regents and former student of Fisher at Langston University.

The final celebration was for the ninetieth anniversary of the law school. In addition to looking at the past, the celebration in October 1999 marked the beginning a new era. As part of the weekend's activities, ground was broken for the new \$17 million Law Center addition. Student leaders, faculty, and distinguished alumni, including President Boren, Governor Keating, and Oklahoma Supreme Court Chief Justice Hardy Summers, joined State Regents for Higher Education Chairman Bill Burgess and Dr. Donald Halverstadt, chairman of the OU Board of Regents, at the historic event.

By 2000, a few short years of incredible progress at OU Law was paying off. The law school was named one of the top fifteen law schools in the nation by the Thomas M. Cooley Program Achievement Rating study. The study compared each school's entering class profile with its tuition costs and bar

results instead of using the age-old method of ranking law schools according to reputation.

It was a day of great celebration on April 30, 2002, when the renovated OU Law Center was dedicated. At an afternoon outdoor ceremony attended by law faculty, staff, alumni, and students, the state-of-the-art facility was dedicated to training future generations of lawyers at OU. The renovated Law Center included the 350,000-volume Donald E. Pray Law Library, the largest public law library in Oklahoma; the Dick Bell Courtroom, containing seating for 240 and allowing students the opportunity to view live trials and appellate arguments; and extensively upgraded classroom, office, and study space. With the additional space, the College of Law doubled in size to approximately 170,000 square feet.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor joined Governor Keating, President Boren, and Dean Coats at the dedication. That evening, Boren announced that the OU regents had unanimously voted to name the law building Andrew M. Coats Hall, in honor of Dean Coats's "tireless oversight" of the building project. Boren said that the announcement was special for two reasons: it was only the second time a building had been named for a current dean (Monnet Hall was named for Dean Monnet), and it was the only occasion on which Boren had ever seen Andy Coats speechless.

For the first time in the history of OU Law, female students outnumbered male students in the entering class in 2002, making up 56% of the 177 new students. With a total of 515 students, the student-faculty ratio was reduced to 14:1 from 15:1 the previous year. A report from the dean showed that 95% of OU Law students graduated within three years, 95% passed the bar examination on their first attempt, and 96% found a job within six months of graduation, with an average starting salary of \$58,600.

In 2003, Dean Coats reported the largest number of applications in the ninety-four-year history of the law school. More than 1200 applicants competed for the 179 positions in the entering class. In a report on his first seven years as dean, Coats cited statistics showing that test scores on the LSAT for entering students at OU were in the top 25% nationally. Other trends included a steady increase in female and minority students.

Significantly, the number of scholarships rose by 1000% in Coats's first seven years. In 1995, only 5% of OU Law students received merit-based awards. In 2003, 58% of students received scholarship assistance. A major source of new scholarships was the \$7 million gift of Bill Comfort, Class of 1961, and Jim Comfort, Class of 1957. Funds from that contribution provide scholarships to the incoming students with the best undergraduate GPAs and LSAT scores. Coats said, "Because of the Comfort gifts, we have been able to attract many of the best Oklahoma students each year."

Minority enrollment at OU Law hit an all-time high of 28% with the incoming class in 2004. Assistant Dean for Students Stanley L. Evans gave credit to President Boren and Dean Coats for providing resources to make the law student body more representative of the population of Oklahoma. In response to the progress, Oklahoma City attorney Robert H. Alexander, Jr., established a \$100,000 endowment for minority scholarships at OU Law, the largest single donation of its kind. On a related note, Dean Coats announced that every OU Law minority student who took the Oklahoma bar examination in 2004 passed on the first try.

Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry, the sixth former OU Law student or alumnus to reach the state's highest elective office, appointed two OU Law alumni to vacant seats on the Oklahoma Supreme Court in 2004. Pittsburg County District Judge Steven W. Taylor, Class of 1974, had been thrust into the state and national limelight earlier when he was chosen to preside over the state-court trial of Terry Nichols, one of the co-conspirators in the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. In May 2007, Taylor was the OU Law commencement speaker at the Civic Center Music Hall in Oklahoma City.

The second new Supreme Court Justice was Tom Colbert, formerly the chief judge of the Oklahoma Court of Civil Appeals. Colbert, Class of 1982, was the first African American appointed to the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

As OU Law prepared to celebrate its centennial in 2009, many evaluated its performance. Professor Drew Kershen, an observer for thirty-seven years, said, "The greatest change I have seen is the rise in national reputation as OU produces quality, well-trained students who have left Norman and made a difference in private and government life across the nation."

Kershen also cited OU Law's incredible influence on higher education in Oklahoma. In 2009, in addition to many OU Law graduates serving on boards of regents for Oklahoma colleges and universities, Glen Johnson, Jr., was chancellor of higher education, David Boren was president of OU, Burns Hargis was president of Oklahoma State University, Tom McDaniel was president of Oklahoma City University, W. Roger Webb was president of the University of Central Oklahoma, Brandon Webb was president of Carl Albert State College, and Andy Coats was dean of OU Law.

The story of OU Law is not about buildings and events—it is about the people who have made the only state-supported law school in Oklahoma history a shining example of how to properly train lawyers, public servants, and citizens who have made a huge difference in the success of Oklahoma and the nation. Faculty and students at OU Law have led Oklahoma through its first century to a place of greatness.

