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Benny Hill

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J. R. Pratt

PATRIOT DREAMER TEACHER

by Dr. Benny Hill



J. R. Pratt

Would you believe that a faculty member would have the commitment to contribute part of his meager salary to keep the college operating? How many college professors were predicting in 1937 that men would one day go to the moon? Are you aware of the contributions which were made by early pioneers in higher education to the development of Oklahoma? Mr. J. R. Pratt, a former teacher of physics and mathematics at Southwestern in Weatherford, was one of those pioneers. He was a man of strong convictions who made many contributions to many Oklahomans.

Jesse Richard Pratt was born on March 22, 1896 at Westville, Oklahoma and was reared in rural Arkansas. He completed high school at the Baptist Academy in Maynard, Arkansas in 1916. After serving his country in the military during the World War I period, Mr. Pratt entered college study at Texas A&M and finished a Bachelor of Science degree at Central State Teachers College in Edmond, Oklahoma in 1924. He then took a Master of Arts degree in mathematics at the University of Missouri. In subsequent years Pratt studied physics and mathematics at Indiana University and the University of Chicago. During the periods 1913-1919 and 1925-1927 Mr. Pratt was a public school teacher. He gained teaching experience in the small rural elementary and secondary schools of those days.

With this experience and education J. R. Pratt joined the faculty of Southwestern State Teachers College in 1927 as acting chairman of the Mathematics Department while Clarence McCormick was on leave to complete his doctorate at Columbia University in New York. Mr. Pratt soon moved over to head the Physics Department. In fact, until 1955 he was the Physics Department. From the beginning Pratt added his character and principles to the faculty of Southwestern and became a legend on campus and in

Weatherford and surrounding communities. And this legend developed for thirty-seven years at Southwestern.

What kind of man was this J. R. Pratt? He was a devoted husband to his wife Phayetta, father to his two daughters, and grandfather. He was a religious man and a patriot whose faith in the United States of America was unwavering. He loved fishing, hunting, and gardening. He was futuristic, a dreamer and young at heart. He was comfortable with the great and the not so great. But most significantly he was one who molded lives, who stimulated young men and women to be their best.

There are almost as many "Mr. Pratt" stories as there were students between 1927 and 1964, as well as other acquaintances — like the "F Club" with a full slate of officers which Mr. Pratt formed in his classes when some students were sloppy in their studies. He would scold students who came to class with a pencil behind the ear while informing each that he was supporting a weak spot. Mr. Pratt also had appropriate nicknames for students such as "Falstaff" for the one he caught drinking beer. He also checked the pool halls regularly. Some of his stories may have been a little tall like the one about the dust devil turning his car around on a country road. However, one group of fellow Kiwanians learned the hard way to believe some of Mr. Pratt's stories. He called them from Arkansas to report that he had caught an 80-pound catfish and had it tied to a tree with a plowline. When they called him the biggest liar in Arkansas, he iced the 80 pounder down and shipped it C.O.D. to them in Weatherford. Ever after he was known as "Catfish" Pratt.

In a more serious vein, Mr. Jesse R. Pratt made tremendous contribution to his beloved Southwestern, which is now Southwestern Oklahoma State University. He had a particularly strong influence on

the intellectual skills and values of those who pursued a major in physics under him. He was rather like the schoolmaster of old whom many fully appreciated only in later years. Beginning in 1929, Mr. Pratt became the faculty Critic of The Senate, a student organization to give training in parliamentary procedure. The Senate thrived under his sponsorship until 1954. In hard financial times of the early forties, he was among those faculty members who contributed money to keep the doors of Southwestern open. During World War II, Mr. Pratt was instrumental in developing several programs for assisting the War Department in training U.S. Army Air Corps personnel at Southwestern. He was always respectful of the war veterans of our country. After overseeing the progress of the Physics Department and its baccalaureate degree in education for some twenty years, Mr. Pratt saw the establishment of a Bachelor of Science degree in 1948. Neither a serious automobile accident in 1933 nor a severe heart attack was sufficient to dampen the spirit of this outstanding Oklahoma educator.

The Bachelor of Science in Physics prospered with some one hundred graduates before Mr. J. R. Pratt's retirement in 1964. About thirty of these Oklahomans had roles in the early developments of the NASA space program in Huntsville, Alabama and Houston, Texas. Two had positions at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. A half dozen went to work for aircraft companies, one of whom is now a senior engineer for North American Aircraft on the Space Shuttle Project.

One is now among the top management of SW Bell Telephone in Oklahoma. Several are in lead positions with the oil and gas industry, including the Vice-President for Research with Haliburton Services in Duncan, Oklahoma. One is a senior engineer with the State Department of Transportation. At least six are now university professors. Some are employed in the high-technology electronics industry. And others are in management or research and development with some of the nation's major companies. Still others became successful teachers and businessmen. Quite a legacy, and that legacy continues to this day with now over three hundred alumni of the Department of Physics at Southwestern Oklahoma State University.

Mr. J. R. Pratt built well. His high ideals live on in the lives of many of us. You see, this author was one who had the privilege of knowing and studying physics under this great man. It is a high honor to be in a long line of people who were his students. Oklahoma and Southwestern in particular have been blessed to have some fine scholars and educators, and Jesse Richard Pratt was one of them. Upon his retirement one of the gifts from his friends and colleagues was a nice hunting jacket. On November 18, 1970 Mr. Pratt and his annual hunting buddy, E. E. Sherman from Florida, went out to find the ducks and when they started to return E. E. looked back for J. R. He was sitting down and had gone to meet his maker. He would have chosen this simple setting to end the trail from his beginning at Westville.

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