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# AT THE END OF THE COTTON ROW — OBU

— by Ernestine Gravley



Dr. John Wesley Raley  
(1902-1988)

*(Managing Editor's Note: The subject of Mrs. Gravley's article, Dr. John Wesley Raley, lived a bit too far east to be considered a Western Oklahoman; however, his influence and appeal are universal. Raley and Gravley's professional association extends back to 1968 when Dr. Raley wrote the Foreword for the Memorial Edition of Mrs. Gravley's second published book, HANG ONTO THE WINDMILLS, a work about Dr. Haskell Newman of Shattuck. And now Gravley has written an article about this man, Raley, who really cannot be contained in a column of print. Mrs. Gravley is grateful to Mrs. Helen Thames Raley for her book AN UNCOMMON MAN and for her help in gathering materials for this article.)*



PROPERTY OF ERNESTINE GRAVLEY

PHOTO BY ED BLOCHOWIAK

Author Gravley at her desk, her favorite spot —

Oklahoma Baptist University stands on the “Kickapoo site,” sixty acres of high land in northwest Shawnee, Pottawatomie County, overlooking a plot known in earlier days as a bison wallow. Along Indian trails as early as 1832, Baptist education was brought into the wilderness of Oklahoma by Eastern and Northern missionaries. OBU was incorporated in the first capitol building at Guthrie in 1910.

Today, Oklahoma Baptist University, an accredited four-year college supported by the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, is the fulfilled dream of one man, John Wesley Raley. Alumni of OBU are proud of the name “Bison,” and Dr. Raley was the greatest Bison of them all. He was a short, stockily built redhead, a controversial giant of state education who, at 31, became the youngest college president in the nation. Son of a Texas cotton farmer, for Raley the university was his dream “at the end of the cotton row.”

Though Dr. Raley died in 1968, the name John Wesley Raley is synonymous with Oklahoma Baptist University and vice versa. He was born one of nine children on August 15, 1902 at Briary, Texas to Leonidas and Margaret Raley, devout Methodists.

“And that’s why I, a Baptist preacher, bear the greatest name in Methodism,” Raley often said.

The children went to the Baptist Sunday School available in their community and young Wesley knew from age nine that he wanted to be a preacher. He graduated from high school at Rosebud in 1918, a 16-year-old, five feet tall, and weighing 86 pounds.

That summer, he walked some 35 miles to Waco and Baylor University with \$14.67 in his pocket. “I’ll do any kind of work,” he told the president, Samuel Palmer Brooks. “But I’ve come to school and I’m determined to go.” Dr. Brooks gave him odd jobs, washing dishes in the cafeteria, mowing and weeding flower beds around Carroll Library, never dreaming that the boy, variously called “Red” and “Runt” would himself become a college presi-

dent in just fifteen years.

That term, he suffered pneumonia after upperclassmen threw him into an icy creek. He developed strong feelings against college hazing and later dealt strongly with offenders at OBU.

Wesley became half-time pastor at Briary. In the midst of a revival, the regular pastor fell ill and Raley finished it. On his nineteenth birthday, he baptized 19 people without either license or ordination. At one point, he had to drop out of school to help his brother, Leroy, get started at Baylor. Wesley was hired as principal of North Prairie school at Chilton, Texas but he managed to get back and graduate from Baylor in 1923 at the age of twenty.

He enrolled that fall at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary where he reported to the president, Dr. L. R. Scarbrough, in the way he had done earlier at Baylor. The two became fast friends. Raley was invited to be assistant to the pastor of one of the Fort Worth churches; and though he needed the money, he decided against being anybody’s assistant, a positive trait evident the rest of his life. Thirty years after asking Baylor’s president for a job, he returned there to accept an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. His address was titled “Moment of Destiny.” Red Raley kept remembering how he stretched his \$14.67 into the future — into his dream.

Jack Reese, an Oklahoma newsman and editor, said: “Dr. Raley was a kind, stubborn, quick-tempered, thoughtful, sometimes smart-alecky, tolerant, impatient, soft-hearted, hard as nails, frustrating, delightful man of small stature and gigantic purpose.” His biographer said he never made the mistake of trying to please everybody. “Pragmatic in many aspects of his life, he yet had an almost childlike faith in his fellow man. He saw his life as one great partnership with many people. Not surprisingly, he made enemies as well as friends. He had victories but he had bitter defeats. Through it all, there was his unconquerable spirit.”

While pastor of First Baptist Church at Smithville, Texas, Wesley met Helen Thames, whose father was chairman of the Board of Deacons. Later, Helen remarked that the short red-haired preacher came to their quiet little town and changed things. Including her life, for they were married.

In 1930, in a little Chevy coupe with his wife, Raley drove to Philadelphia and Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary. When he announced to the graduate committee that he intended to finish his residency requirement for his Th.D. degree in just one year, the professors were stunned by the audacity of this brash young man who said he "just had to get back to Texas!" These were world-renowned theologians, specialists in their fields of exegesis. No student had ever presumed to set both course of study and timetable before this august body. They told him it would require three years.

But they didn't know Wesley Raley.

He and Helen set up a rigid, one-year schedule for themselves. She completed work for a music degree. He read and outlined 146 volumes of higher criticism. His thesis was on the theme that "proof shall be presented toward the conclusion that the Epistles are genuine letters of the Apostle Paul to the persons addressed and that they are now extant in their original form."

Home to the South they went where the Depression touched even preachers needing a job. He was called to the pastorate at Bartlesville, Oklahoma in August, 1931. The following month, the faculty of Eastern Seminary voted that Raley's further graduate work would be done in absentia, but he would have to receive the degree in person. A baby was expected any day and Wesley had to make a choice to go to Philadelphia or stay at home. He stayed in Bartlesville with Helen. The newspaper read: "John Wesley Raley, Jr. is an Irish baby with a Jewish next-door godmother, born in a room furnished by the Catholics, son of a Baptist preacher with a Methodist name."

Dr. Raley's Doctor of Theology degree was awarded in May, 1933, and Wesley was there.

He was inaugurated president of OBU in 1934. Raley could never resist a challenge. For the next 30 years, Oklahomans and Baptists watched the little red-haired Irishman charge through every obstacle. Deeply in debt, having run through eight presidents in twenty years, Oklahoma Baptist University did not have a bright future, except in the eyes and the heart of John Wesley Raley. Despite depression, debt, war, and apathy, this spirited dynamo built a great school — debt-free, accredited, worth many millions.

In the beginning there were only four buildings, one not yet completed. OBU would be another Baylor, the youthful president declared as he went about raising money, selling bonds, recruiting students. He coped with the inevitable denominational politics. He and Helen kept alive a few elms struggling in summer drought around the Oval. They did it by bucket brigade. OBU was "standing in the need of prayer and endowment."

Raley dreamed. He drew blueprints. One day, there would be many buildings and a great chapel with a twenty-story-high spire and chimes.

A Shawnee banker, Frank Buck, told of Raley's approaching him for an OBU loan. The banker called him an upstart and a young fool. Raley replied: "I'm young and inexperienced. I may even be a fool, but I've come here to take charge of this school. Furthermore, you are going to help me build a university." He left with a check for \$25,000, a sizable amount in that day. The first bill he paid was OBU's overdue water bill, \$797.95. Mr. Buck helped him build his university.

The SHAWNEE NEWS-STAR kept a close watch on Raley. One day, Jack Spencer, dynamic editorialist, rose from his typewriter. From his six-foot-four height, he looked all the way down on short Mr. President and said he felt sorry for such a little guy with such a big job.

Of the almost 400, only 38 students had been able to pay their bills. Raley asked the hundreds of others to strive to pay \$5 a month for the next year. He knew everyone by name. He sent notes to prospects saying "We might assure you board and room if you can get enough money for tuition and fees. Could your church help you?"

To those who could pay but neglected to do so, he wrote, "It seems absurd for me to go around the state begging for money while you go into debt and go off and laugh about it." Occasionally, he filed suit. Students pled for work at ten cents an hour. Most letters said, "My father is out of work." Important posts were filled on campus for \$5 a week. Faculty applicants with Ph.D.'s were available at \$225 a month, part to be taken in script, or in board and room. Raley worried about ministerial students with families. He solicited food boxes from the churches and rationed to students as needed.

Dr. Raley knew how to raise funds. His friend, Marvin Cole, went along and people never forgot him. Dr. Raley would make a scholarly speech and close with a denominational challenge. Marvin then put on what he called "rousements," glorifying OBU, creating zeal in the congregation, finally raising his arms in "something like a pontifical blessing." At this point, he reverted to his Eastern Oklahoma hill country grammar. "Everybody, everybody now must have a part in this campaign. Get your checks wrote, boys. Get your checks wrote!" Dr. Raley told this warm story many times.

Pennies were important and Raley often corresponded with penny postcards. Sugar bowl savings by Oklahoma Baptist women built Memorial Hall. Dr. George W. Truett came from Dallas to exhort state Baptists to rally and build their school. The first "large" gift of \$1,000 came in and the building program never stopped. It was said that during Dr. Raley's administration, the sound of the hammer was always heard on campus.

Dr. Adams, his major professor at Eastern, wrote: "Raley, my heart is filled to overflowing. You have ever been determined to go as fast as could be done in your work. I congratulate you and the people of Oklahoma." Austen K. DeBlois, president of Eastern, said: "No alumni in the history of Eastern has more strongly impressed this faculty."

The second child, Helen Thames Raley, was born in 1936. Her father was a warm family man. Mrs. Raley tells how he hardly slept the three weeks while their small son had typhoid fever, the only case reported in Oklahoma and Texas. "Just a sip of water for Daddy, John-Boy — a spoonful of tomato juice. It will make you feel better." He nursed little Helen through illness and during the war, he managed extra rationed red meat for her, often giving her his portion. She said, "I get cold in the night and scared, and I run to Daddy. He makes me warm."

He 'fathered' students as well, telling graduates: "You will be better off if you use your sheepskin to mop perspiration rather than use it for a cushion."

The Oval was paved. The stolid little Bison statue stood in the center, representing the school spirit.

With his staunch friend, Dr. Andrew Potter, the crusade was always going on. They went before the legislature and stumped the state for building funds for OBU. Raley was a "politician of the first order and Oklahoma gave him room." He once told an AP reporter: "I travel more miles than a salesman, deliver more addresses than a candidate for office, conduct more church services than a local pastor, write as many articles as a magazine writer, handle more money than a merchant, make more decisions than a court justice. And besides, I attend more luncheons than many society matrons."

"I like my job," he added puckishly.

No worthwhile person can long avoid libelous criticism. Conservatives looked him over. Were his views too liberal? Oklahoma Baptists had just come through a modernist fight. One crank letter was directed against the "young,

## LANDMARKS

smart-aleck promoter who is not only a heretic and an agent of the devil, but also an embezzler, a subversive dictator and a perpetrator of tyrannical schemes."

Dr. Raley flicked off such criticism as he would an insect. He never forgot how his Texas farmer father said, "Son, when you start to town, pay no attention to every barking dog."

He hated pacificism and he joined the National Guard, Thunderbird 45th Division. When Pearl Harbor came, he reported for duty but was sent back to his essential post at OBU. He went to Washington and got a contract with the Air Force Flying Training Command for a pre-aviation school. He spoke at patriotic rallies and became known for the line: "This country was built by pioneers who had a Bible, axe, and a gun."

The war finally ended. The building continued.

The city of Shawnee gave a new gymnasium to OBU. Now he could ask Baptist men to build a new dormitory for boys. He could concentrate on the library and the Arts center. Under his administration, new buildings came to the campus: Brittain Library, Ford Hall, Brotherhood Hall, Watts Hall, Short Hall, Kerr Dorm, Clark Craig Fieldhouse, Thurmond Hall, Raley Chapel. Only once did he not ask the cost of a building — when the Baptist General Convention made a gift of the president's official mansion. Back of this residence, OBU - owned pasture land stretched to meet the fence which marked the margin of extensive land owned by St. Gregory's College. Both had grazing cattle and horses. Sometimes, Dr. Raley and the Catholic college president met and "rode the range together."

He was content. He had been offered, in 1948, the presidency of his alma mater, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. The Northern Baptist Convention needed a strong voice. It would have meant an enormous salary at a heavily endowed school, a luxurious home, private schools for the children. Everything that Oklahoma was not at that time. But OBU was here and he never once considered leaving.

Raley worked many years on the coordinating board for the Regents of Higher Education in Oklahoma. He was sent to the Baptist World Alliance in Copenhagen. He observed a session of Parliament in London, visited the House of Lords, and was a guest of Prime Minister MacMillan. In Hong Kong, he took the OBU message to Dr. Lam Chi Fung, president of the Foreign Missions Board and Hong Kong Baptist College. He often represented the university to heads of state.

He knew how to handle people. At one point, the almost-new mansion was vandalized by egg-throwing boys. Dozens of eggs spattered the entrance, the walls and windows, the stately columns. He called in no suspects but spoke in chapel and watched faces. Several sons of prominent citizens rang the doorbell that night and confessed to the destructive prank. Helen served refreshments. The secret was never told. Some of these students are among the best-known religious leaders of the state today.

Dr. Raley was adamant about creating the best impression for visitors. He fought for proper street markers and adequate fire protection and insisted on everyone's picking up trash, turning off lights, keeping uniform the level of venetian blinds in the classrooms for a more attractive appearance.

The Chapel was his dream for many years, and he lived to see it a reality. He delivered his annual address, "The Projection of Our Faith," at the Oklahoma Baptist General Convention in November, 1956 in which he challenged the Baptists of Oklahoma to build The Spire of Faith. By convention action, he was instructed to proceed to prepare blueprints and raise funds.

Raley Chapel is 248 by 188 feet — 4,000 feet larger than a football playing field. Groundbreaking was done on February 20, 1959. The chapel seats 2,000, has a choir and stage arrangement to accommodate 300, a recital hall for 250, a rehearsal hall, twenty teaching studios, offices, lounges, memorial windows and a spire reaching twenty stories high with a four-sided clock and chimes. It can be seen from many miles around.

Mrs. Raley found where he had underlined a sentence in FLIGHT TO ARRAS by Antoine de Saint-Exupery: "He who bears in his heart a cathedral to be built is already victorious."

In her fine book AN UNCOMMON MAN, Helen Raley asked, did he imagine himself another Thomas Jefferson, who supervised the building of the University of Virginia from the top of Monticello with his telescope? Wesley stood in the window of his Thurmond Hall office and landscaped a mall toward the west, toward the spire. He planned the "Flying Bison Trails" — sidewalks to arch out in every direction toward other buildings.

The John Wesley Raley Chapel was "on the horizon" when Governor Raymond Gary and the convention and university directors announced the plans. It was dedicated in February, 1962.

Dr. Raley chuckled about what people would say a century from now — "a Baptist chapel with a Methodist name!"

The children, John and Helen, who were educated "where they used to park their tricycles," spoke at the chapel dedication. Small grandchildren were about. Dr. Raley, who had at last resigned the presidency because of ill health, was now chancellor. He was hoisted by crane to the top of the spire where he saw, literally, his life's work spread below. He had set out to build OBU from a debt-ridden little church college of four buildings to a university of note and distinction. No Oklahoma prexy had held a like post over a quarter century as did "the little giant of Bison Hill." It was a long way from the end of the cotton row.

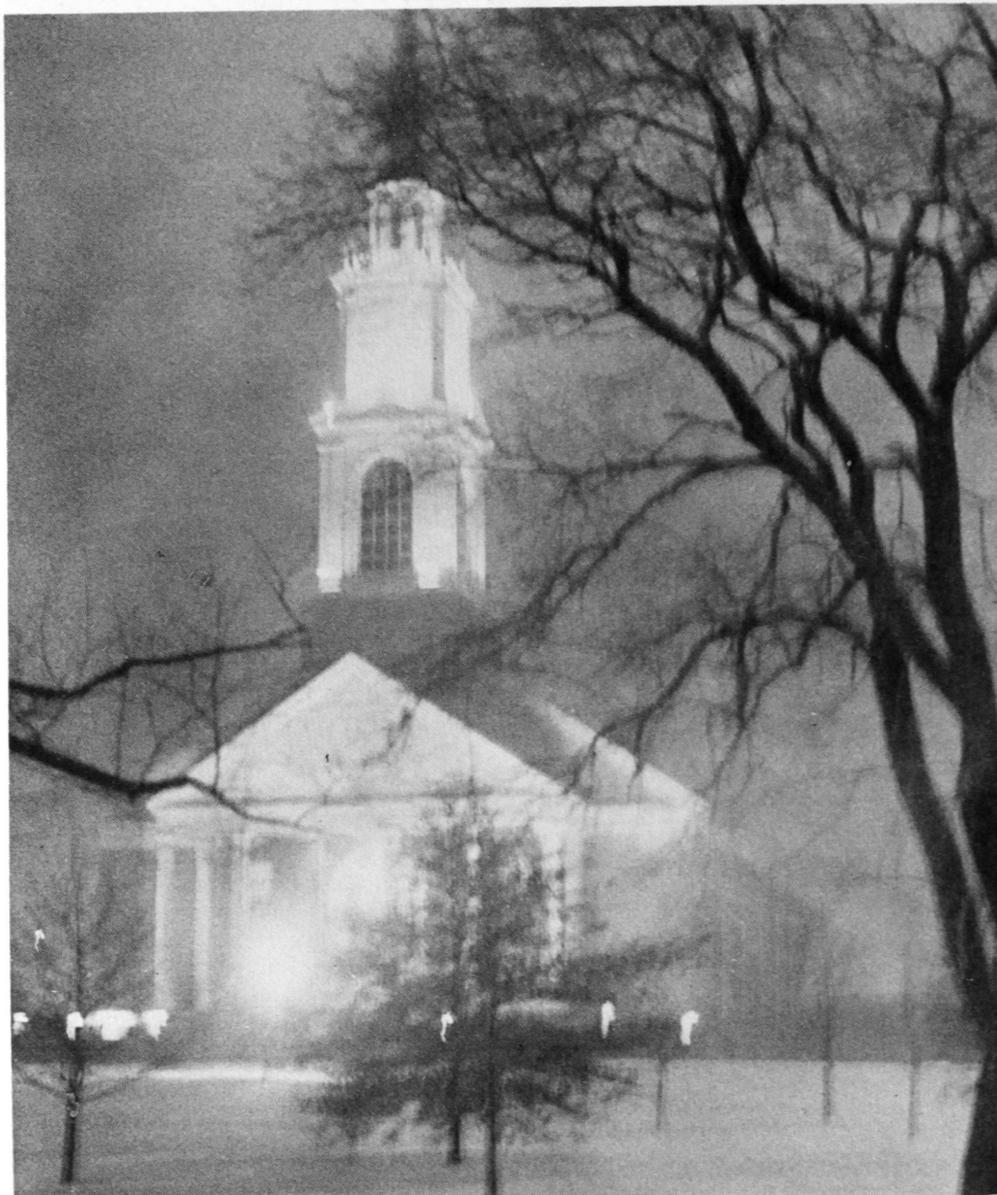
Sen. Robert S. Kerr provided a home on campus for the Raleys when they left the official residence. OBU had never had a chancellor, and there were no precedents. The transition seemed perfectly natural.

Dr. Raley suffered a heart attack in 1965. "Something was happening at OBU, too, and we were out of it," Mrs. Raley said. Candidates for an office of chaplain were being examined. An added inducement was the chancellor's home and his office in the great chapel. Dr. Raley was notified that the chancellorship was being abolished and he would become President Emeritus.

Except to clean out his desk, his files and memorabilia, Wesley Raley never again set foot in the chapel of his dreams. Even the memorial bricks from their ancestral homes in Texas were removed from the chapel lectern. Years later, Helen Raley said in a book about his life, "I daresay less than 25 people have ever known the whole story."

Dr. Raley survived this blow. He had a home office with his treasured things. His philosophy continued in magazine articles and lectures. He wrote weekly Sunday School lessons for 13 newspapers in the Southwest. He continued his love for building as chairman of the Shawnee Hospital Authority which built a multi-million dollar facility just a stone's throw from the campus. He had coffee with "the boys" in the construction trailer office and was given an "Honorary Superintendent" hardhat in green and gold OBU colors.

When the city of Shawnee had years earlier voted down his plans for a Baptist hospital here, Oklahoma Baptists built their gigantic hospital complex in Oklahoma City. He gave up his dream of an OBU School of Nursing and



PROPERTY OF SHAWNEE NEWS-STAR

PHOTO BY TRACY FARLEY

Dr. Raley's dream fulfilled — Raley Chapel during a 1983 snowfall —

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Hospital Administration. Now he was dreaming again. Maybe he could teach a chaplain's program. The meditation-conference room would be called the Little Chapel. Memorial gifts would go into this haven, just as he had placed them in the great chapel across the highway.

There wasn't time enough to complete his plans.

He wrote, read, and preached. He worried about the "new breed" of student — the irresponsibility, the far-out philosophies, the permissive relaxation of social behavior, campus revolution, and insubordination.

He recalled writing his heart out on the memorial tribute he gave for his friend Sen. Kerr in Oklahoma City while young John F. Kennedy, not so tall as he had pictured the president to be, sat straight, motionless, his eyes meeting Dr. Raley's over the great mound of red roses. He taped sermons for television and was for four years a TV panelist with Rabbi Joseph Levenson of B'nai Israel and Father Richard Sneed, president of St. Gregory's College.

Raley's keen interest in and curiosity about people kept him alert. On a train from Detroit to Akron, he struck up a conversation with a black man whose uniform identified him as "Porter Instructor" for the Pullman company. What stories he could tell! He had been personal porter on the presidential trains for Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower. He was on President Truman's funeral train and

accompanied Nixon on campaigns. After Dr. Raley's death, his widow found a note in the pocket of the suit he wore that day on the train. It was a reminder to himself to "send chapel brochure and postcards" to his new friend, the porter, whose address he had scribbled.

His last days and hours were spent in Room 210 of the hospital he had so proudly seen erected. He could no longer stand at the window and see their house and watch Dixie, his riding horse, nibble grass near the fence dividing this pasture and the hospital grounds. Across the highway, the majestic Raley Chapel rose above the freshly greening trees. Helen placed a bright red rose on the pillow beside his head. The Paul Scarlets he had set along their white fence were just beginning to bloom. He died a few hours later.

He was taken back to the John Wesley Raley Chapel. Dean Warren Angell's Bison Glee Club sang the dean's happy song: "My Lord, What a Morning!" Once, Wesley Raley had told the freshman voice student, Jo Ann Shelton: "Joe Ann, I'm going to erect a building big enough for your voice."

And he did. She sang for him that morning and her rich voice filled the vast chapel and floated across the campus he loved. ▲