

A faith born not of words ...



Wes Watkins at his home in Stillwater, Okla. (Photo by Kristin Owens)

A man of courage ... faith ... trust ... wisdom ... and respect.

These words tell the story of a great leader, who for the past 20 years has dedicated his life to serving Oklahoma, and now Wes Watkins is stepping down. The OSU alumnus retired Jan. 3, 2003, from the U. S. Congress. Today, Congress may have lost one of its leaders, but Oklahomans will always have a life-long friend.

The early years

Wes Watkins was born Dec. 15, 1938, in the small town of Dequeen, Ark. His family suffered poor economic conditions, which directly affected his life. Before Watkins was 9 years old, his family had moved between Arkansas and California three different times.

"Like a lot of people who had left the area in search of economic survival, I picked cotton, cut grapes and gathered potatoes and onions in the field," said Watkins.

Traveling back and forth took its toll on the Watkins family. Like many other families, the goal was to find work and make money, but sometimes all they found were hardships.

"My mother and father ended up in divorce,

and after settling in Bennington, Okla., my father left and went to California," said Watkins.

Watkins and his family – mother Mary Etta; older sister Althea; and older brother L.V.; decided to beat the odds. They wanted a new start, and they found it on a small farm in Bennington, Okla.

"It was probably one of the greatest things that happened to me," said Watkins. "My mother had very little formal education, but she had a world of wisdom. She knew that our future did not lie in the fast-paced big cities."

In Bennington, the Watkins family worked hard to make ends meet. Mary Watkins was determined to provide a future for her children.

"My mother did not want to go on welfare," said Watkins. "During that time, it was a stigma that she didn't want so she worked, and we worked, and we managed to stay off welfare."

Bennington was then, and is still today, a small town, and like many small towns in Oklahoma, it is home to a friendly community.

"You knew everyone, and everyone knew you," said Watkins. "It was a great place to grow up. Everyone looked after everyone, and basically, they were just good neighbors."

While attending school at Bennington, Watkins' first love was agriculture, but he also showed the signs of an aspiring young athlete.

"I was on the baseball and basketball teams," said Watkins. "I tell people that I started as point guard on the basketball team and second baseman on the baseball team, and it wasn't that I was that good, it was because they needed me. I guess that's how you know when you're in a small town."

When Watkins in the eighth grade, a program was added to Bennington's curriculum had a profound affect on his life.

"A fellow came to our community and started the vocational agriculture program and along with that, a little organization called the FFA," said Watkins. "My brother first enrolled in it, and I followed, and from there we began to pave the way."

Becoming involved in the FFA, and then realizing where it could take him, was just the first step in a long staircase of blue-and-gold history for Watkins.

It started with the first trip to Stillwater, Okla., to attend the State FFA Convention. Watkins was a naive 13-year-old boy when he

attended that first convention. Watching an organization come together under one roof was a marvelous sight for the young man. While sitting in the audience trying to take it all in, he came to the conclusion that from this organization leaders were born.

"I marveled at the leadership qualities of a young man who, at the time, was serving as the state FFA president. His name was Barton Ridling from Sentinel, Okla.," said Watkins.

Watkins was seated in the far northeast corner of Gallagher Hall, really by himself, because he didn't want anyone talking to him because of his speech problem.

Watkins was born with a speech problem that impaired his ability to sound out words. After leaving the convention, Watkins was overcome with a heart full of excitement and determination, but he wondered if his speech impediment would stand in the way of his dreams within the FFA.

"My vo-ag teacher drove the bus back from the convention, and I sat behind him telling him how I would like to be a state FFA president some day," said Watkins. "He didn't laugh or show too much emotion one way or the other, but he was probably thinking 'What kind of dream is that?'"

The following Monday Watkins' agriculture teacher helped him by placing an *Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman* magazine on his desk.

"He asked me to pick out an article and get up and talk about it," said Watkins. "He did that for several years and four years later, I became a state FFA officer."

Coming to OSU

During the fall of 1956, Watkins embarked on a new chapter in his life. He set foot on the campus of Oklahoma State University as a college freshman and as the southeast district vice president for the Oklahoma FFA. He was excited about the chance to make agriculture a full-time career.

"Coming to OSU and literally stepping onto this campus, being accepted and helped by people who didn't even know me, and the students not judging me because I didn't have anything, truly opened up the world to me," said Watkins.

During that first year at OSU, Watkins set and accomplished many goals. One of them was fulfilling the dream of a boy who wanted to be a state FFA president. In April 1958, Watkins was elected as the Oklahoma FFA president.

For college freshmen today, living in the dorms is common, and on some campuses it is mandatory. For Watkins, however, it was a different story.

"The summer before I came to OSU, I took a job in California working on a poultry farm," said Watkins. "The drought had hit, and I had to sell my livestock because I needed the money."

Because of this experience, during his first semester at OSU, Fred LeCrone, assistant dean of resident instruction, sent him to work for Delbert Black on the school's poultry farm, and little did Watkins know this new job would also be his new home.

"We had moved the chickens out of one of the chicken houses, and I asked Mr. Black what he was going to do with the building," said Watkins. "He said they were going to tear it down, so I asked if I could move in."

Watkins cleaned and sanitized the house, and pretty soon he and his brother, who was a year ahead of him at OSU, moved in. They slept on GI bunk beds, used a hot plate for cooking and spent the early hours of the morning collecting eggs in exchange for rent. This once chicken-manure-and-dirt-filled house would be home for Watkins and his brother for the next two years.

As college progressed, so did Watkins. He left the poultry farm and began working for the OSU infirmary.



Wes Watkins enjoys spending time on his ranch. (Photo by Kristin Owens)

"I thought it was a great job," said Watkins. "I had all I wanted to eat, clean sheets and a clean place to live."

Not only did Watkins have a new address, but he also had new responsibilities. He was elected president of the Agricultural Student Council and president of Blue Key. And if this wasn't enough, he also decided to run for student senator.

"I wanted to run for student senator, but they didn't know where to put me," said Watkins. "I wasn't a Greek, I didn't live in town, and I wasn't in the dorm. It was amusing to me that they didn't know where I could run, but I was actually in the middle of campus, only I was living in the OSU infirmary."

Through all of the confusions, Watkins was able to run as town senator and won.

While in Kingfisher, Okla., as a student teacher, Watkins received an interesting phone call. A friend from OSU wanted him to run for office, but this time it was for student body president.

"It was my last semester, and it was quite a race," said Watkins. "I was running against a man named Dan Draper, who later became Speaker of the House in the Oklahoma Legislature. My campaign revolved around an idea called Wesley 'Statehood Days' Watkins, and the bottom of my business cards read 'I'm a poor boy; give this to a friend.'"

... but of deeds



Wes Watkins in 1946 while in Bennington (top), as Oklahoma FFA president in 1958 (center) and serving as Oklahoma Congressman in Washington, D.C. (Photos courtesy of Lou Watkins)

The election was the talk of the campus; in fact, it was the largest one the campus had ever held. There were twice as many votes cast than had ever been cast before. Watkins said on the night of the election, April 12, 1960, Bob Hope was on campus giving a big show, and during his show he made the announcement that Wes Watkins was the new student body president.

While serving as student body president, Watkins was asked by someone when he was going to run for political office.

"I had always thought of my involvement here on campus as just student leadership activities," said Watkins. "I didn't know it was really preparing me to go into political office. I reflected on what that person said to me and I thought, 'You know if I ever did run for political office, what would I really want to do?'"

Watkins meets his life partner

It was 1961, Watkins had just finished his bachelor of science degree in agricultural education and was working on his master's degree at OSU and needed a better paying job. While keeping his job at the infirmary, he also took the position of head doorman at the OSU Edmon Low library. Little did he know, but this job was going to change his life.

It was Christmas break and the library was practically empty, except for one young lady.

"I had to make rounds checking on the library a couple of times during my shift," said Watkins. "Since it was Christmas break, I had let most of the employees go home except for a guy who wanted to stay. He made the rounds one evening and when he came back he said there was a cute-looking gal up on the second floor. I told him to man the door because I was going to go upstairs to see if his story was true, and that's where I met my life partner."

Sitting alone with his face buried in a book was Lou Rodgers. Rodgers grew up in Cushing, Okla., and attended college at Park College, Mo. She was home for Christmas and was studying at the OSU library.

"He waited until I had started to leave," said Lou. "He asked me if he could come to Cushing and take me

out for a soda and I said, 'No.'"

Watkins did not let this stop him. He knew her father was the minister at the Presbyterian Church in Cushing, so he did a little digging. Watkins found out where her house was, and the next Sunday afternoon he was at her house to try one more time.

"He showed up that Sunday," said Lou. "He had somehow gotten the information about my dad and was able to find my house. I think that there is probably a law against that today."

Watkins knew that he had met a very special lady.

"I was raised in a broken home, and I used to pray that I would meet a young lady like Lou," said Watkins.

In 1962, Rodgers was studying at the American University in Washington, D.C., on an honors political science semester, and Watkins was a student at the University of Maryland working on his doctorate in rural development. That Christmas the two became engaged, and in June 1963, the two were married in the Presbyterian Church in Cushing, Okla.

"A couple of days before we got married, I was in Whitehurst Hall and OSU President Oliver S. Willham asked me about coming back to OSU to assist in setting up a high school relations program," said Watkins.

After the Watkinses were married, they moved back to Washington, and in August Watkins received a call from Willham saying the job was available. The newlyweds packed their belongings and headed for Oklahoma in what Wes Watkins calls their "first home."

"Our first home was an eight foot wide by 22 foot long travel trailer," said Watkins. "On the way back the trailer hitch broke, and I had to chain and wire it back to the car. So the whole way back from Washington, I could only go 30 miles per hour. People were mad at us, even cussing us. I couldn't stand it. We stopped for lunch, and I grabbed some paper and crayons. I put a sign in the back of the trailer that read, 'Just married - Oklahoma or bust.' Even though we had been married for two months, the sign worked, and it changed the attitude of the trip."

While in Oklahoma, the two made the travel trailer their home for two years. For four years, Watkins visited

every high school in the state of Oklahoma. He was promoting OSU, and he was also inspiring young, eager minds.

"You don't preach the gospel of OSU with three to five speeches a day unless you mean it," said Watkins. "I would say to myself before I would go give that last speech, 'God, if I could just say one thing that would help at least one young person go on to college, it's worth it.' I would tell students, 'I don't care who you are. If you want to go to college at OSU, I'll get you there, and I'll get you a job.'"

Being with young people every day gave Watkins a glimpse of the pressures and problems some students face. Someone once asked Watkins what words of encouragement he shared with young people.

"There is one word that everyone should hold in their heart, and that is the word joy," said Watkins. "Put Jesus first, others second, and yourself last, and I assured them it would be rewarding. They could have a sense of peace, and take that with them in their lives."

Watkins enters politics

During that first year at OSU, Watkins not only was the director of high school relations, but he also did some important research. He wrote a paper titled "The Need of a Multi-county Organization for the Economic Growth of Southeast Oklahoma."

"In 1963 I presented this paper in Washington to the Commerce Department, and they used part of the paper when they enacted the Economic Development Administration Act of 1965," said Watkins. "There is a section about multi-county sub-state planning districts, or the economic growth of poverty areas."

Because of this paper, in 1966 Watkins left OSU and took his career in another direction. He began working for the first economic development district in southeast Oklahoma.

"I was able to write the overall economic development plan for southeast Oklahoma, which included seven counties," said Watkins.

Lou Watkins said her husband is so motivated to help people that he has made it his life's passion.

"The one constant focus I have seen in Wes is job development," said Lou.

"In fact, he is absolutely obsessed with helping people find jobs. I think that it goes clear back to his mother, because she always told him, 'Where there's a will, there's a way.'"

Wes Watkins worked for two years in economic development when he decided to go into the private business of home building and land development.

Watkins remained in the home building business for a number of years, and in that time he and his wife were blessed with three children, Martha, Sally and Wade.

In 1974, state Sen. George Miller retired during the middle of his term. Earlier, when Watkins had considered politics, he was more interested in Congress, so when this seat came open he was skeptical.

"The odds were probably against us, but we decided to run," said Watkins.

Even though Watkins and his family had only been living in Ada, Okla., for two years he had made a difference, and because of that, he was elected as a state senator.

"I went into the state Senate and stayed there two years on the unexpired term," said Watkins. "However, my business began to suffer because the state Senate didn't pay very much. As a result, I felt like I needed to leave, mainly because I couldn't make a living there."

After this decision by Watkins, something out of the ordinary occurred. On June 5, 1976, Speaker of the House for the U.S. Congress, Carl Albert, announced he was not going to seek re-election. This left an open congressional seat in Oklahoma's third district.

"Without hesitation and without looking back, my wife and I said 'Yes, we are going to run,'" said Watkins.

In his heart, Watkins knew this was what he was meant to do. The opportunity arose, and he grabbed it.

"We weren't the chosen ones, we didn't have the political bosses and we didn't have the political parties, but we had the people with us," said Watkins.

"We asked the people to open their hearts and their pocketbooks and give. We didn't have a paid employee, but we had the people with us, and we were very grateful."

Coming out of the primary, Watkins had a 10,000 vote lead over Charlie Ward, Speaker Albert's administrative assistant.

"I'll never forget coming out of that primary," said Watkins. "That's when the people realized I could win.

The momentum was so strong that I could not have turned the election back even if I had to."

Watkins won the Democratic primary with 63 percent of the vote. He went on to win the general election with more than a 100,000-vote margin. He became the U. S. Representative for the third district of Oklahoma.

"It was a great election, one that I will never forget," said Watkins.

While in Congress, Watkins served on the Bank and Finance Committee and the Science and Technology Committee. He also became the whip of the freshman class, where he was responsible for getting votes for legislation. Through these committees, Watkins established Rural Enterprises Inc., which directly affected southeastern Oklahoma.

"Rural Enterprises is an ongoing, day-to-day group that helps with finance, innovation, housing and a number of different things," said Watkins. "Rural Enterprises was set up to take care of the third district of Oklahoma, and it has become the envy of most places throughout the country."

Watkins had only been in Congress for two years, but he had made a difference. In 1978 he ran unopposed.

"I said I was elected to serve all of the people, and the people responded by not giving me an opponent," he said.

Watkins said he knew he could do more for Oklahoma if he could serve on the appropriate committees.

"I wanted to be on the Appropriations Committee," said Watkins. "So, I got on the Steering and Policy Committee, which allowed me to help make appointments to committees. I then got on the Appropriations Committee and

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Wes Watkins

served on the Agricultural and Rural Development Subcommittee and the Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development. I served 10 years on appropriations."

Through these committees, Watkins concentrated on the economic infrastructure project in southeastern Oklahoma by assisting with industrial parks, roads, water and sewer systems, water quality, money for vocational schools and for economic and job development.

"It was a network of infrastructure that would allow us to do more," said Watkins. "We were able to turn the tide in some areas from welfare to providing private sector jobs."

During this time Watkins came up with the idea to construct a building of international trade. The concept to build the Center for International Trade and Development on the OSU campus in Stillwater, Okla., arose in 1981. Construction began in the late 1980s. The CITD building became the Wes Watkins CITD building during the mid-1980s because of the influence of a past college classmate, roommate and friend. Robert Robbins, who was serving on the board of regents, was the deciding factor behind the change.

"Some people ask why international trade, and I say for every \$1 billion worth of exports we sell from Oklahoma, it will create 15,000 to 20,000 jobs," said Watkins.

For the next 10 years, Watkins continued to serve as congressman for the third district of Oklahoma.

"I took politics as not the end in itself, but rather as a vehicle," said Watkins. "I felt like the mission I was trying to do was build a future for the people of Oklahoma."

Watkins wanted to use his passion to make an impact in the lives of Oklahomans.

"There's so much that can and needs to be done in Oklahoma, and I felt like I could do more," said Watkins. "I believed that if I could become the governor of Oklahoma, I could use my commitment and vision and accomplish more."

In 1990 Watkins left Congress in search of the governor's seat of Oklahoma. James White, associate professor of agricultural education, at OSU remembers the race quite well.

"I was on his campaign field staff," said White. "It was definitely a high point in my life, and even though we didn't win, it had a dramatic impact on many lives."

Watkins lost to David Walters.

"I didn't cry over spilled milk," said Watkins. "I just thought there was a reason that this wasn't meant to be."

In 1994, Watkins decided he would again run for governor of Oklahoma, only with a different approach.

"I thought I could reach out and bring Democrats and Republicans together, so I became an Independent and ran for governor," said Watkins. "I knew it was going to be an uphill battle because this had never occurred in Oklahoma."

That year Watkins received more votes than any other person in the United States who was running as an Independent. However, it was not enough.

"I didn't make it, but I had become an Independent,

and I liked it," said Watkins. "Even though we didn't win, I still felt good about what we had achieved."

A window of opportunity

Bill Brewster had become Watkins' successor in Congress and on Dec. 17, 1995, he gave Watkins an important phone call.

"I really hadn't thought about running for office again, but when the phone rang, and it was Bill Brewster telling me that he was not going to seek re-election, I began to consider it," said Watkins.

Because the U. S. House of Representatives had been taken over by the Republicans, Brewster said as a conservative Democrat, he was a minority in the minority. He was stepping down, which gave Watkins the chance to run for Congress again.

"I felt like I still had a lot of energy, the right vision and the commitment, but if I wanted to be effective, I couldn't go back as an Independent or as a Democrat," said Watkins.

Watkins assessed the odds and went with his instincts.

"My motives were right, and the agenda that I was trying to do for the people was right," said Watkins. "I put my faith and trust in the people, and I changed my party and became a Republican."

Watkins ran against Darryl Roberts, the majority leader of the state Senate.

"We had a tough race, but the people were good to us," said Watkins. "We literally put our trust and faith in the people, and they voted for 'WES' as a Republican."

He won by earning 51.8 percent of the votes.

During this term, Watkins served on the Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction over all taxation. His dream was to make a difference in Oklahoma, and that dream came true when he wrote a bill that qualified a portion of the state for accelerated depreciation on former Indian lands. This new tax law would affect 64 counties in Oklahoma.

"I look at this as the No. 1 thing I was able to achieve to help with economic and job growth for Oklahoma," said Watkins. "That one provision on former Indian lands provides more incentives for businesses and industries to locate here than all the state incentives combined."

Watkins was passionate about economic development, and during his involvement in politics he made that passion a career.

"It's been 20 years, and as I look back I realize that I've been in the arena," said Watkins. "I've hit a few home runs, but I have also struck out. I feel like I have stayed true to trying to help build the economy and build opportunities for Oklahomans." ♦ *By Kristin Owens, Fort Supply, Okla.*

When I left my interview with Wes Watkins, I anticipated a friendly handshake, but instead of extending a hand, Watkins extended a hug. I thought to myself, "He truly does care about the people, and we, as Oklahomans, are all the better for having known Wes Watkins ... the Congressman."