Dr. Robert Oran Fay:
Fifty years of geology with the Oklahoma Geological Survey,
The University of Oklahoma, and the State. More to come!

If you ask Dr. Robert Oran Fay how he became interested in geology, he will tell you that he had a course in historical geology at Lowell Grammar School in St. Louis in the late 1930’s. But those who know Dr. Fay might rather tell you that Bob loves to learn, loves knowledge, and knows at least something about everything. Geology caught his attention in school, but throughout his life his interests have ranged to a broad spectrum of subjects.

Dr. Fay’s mind collects, absorbs, and stores data with a speed and capacity equaled only when computers began to be used on a common basis. To say that he is thorough is perhaps falling short in describing his habit of exhausting every source he can find on a subject. His interests range through a myriad of topics that include geology, genealogy, history, antiques, politics, the old west, and wagon trains and their routes. He is a keen observer of people and a great teller of stories, weaving history into tales you won’t soon forget.

Under the watchful eye of grade school teacher Grace Gallagher, Bob learned the phyla of fossils and the system of rocks, often collecting fossils from the St. Louis Basin along the Mississippi River where the riprap along the banks provided a rich source of material for young rock hounds. After exhausting all the subjects offered by his grade school, and probably exhausting his teachers, Bob continued his study of geology, graduating from Beaumont High School in St. Louis in 1944. While there, he studied geology from Miss Alma Brown and Miss Mabel Wood, and made exhibits for the Junior Academy of Sciences.

From 1945 to 1946, Bob served at the 279th Station Hospital in Berlin, Germany, while attached to the 78th Lightning Division and the 101st Airborne. He was a medic and experienced firsthand the aftermath of World War II, lending help in the effort to rebuild Europe.

He returned to St. Louis where he enrolled in Washington University and received a degree in geology in 1949. After this, he made his way to the University of Kansas to continue his education.
Stover, was hired the same day and also held down two half-time positions. Stover and Fay each decided that they preferred one half of their jobs over the other in 1961, so they switched positions and Bob came full time to the Geological Survey while Ed was full time with the Department of Geology.

Since 1950, Bob has authored or been a co-author on at least 139 articles, books, maps, and other geological publications, most of which were published by the Oklahoma Geological Survey. While the main focus of his work remained with fossils in the early years, Bob spent a lot of time in the field in Oklahoma mapping and doing county studies. His extensive work in Blaine County resulted in a number of articles and publications, including many for the Survey's Oklahoma Geology Notes and other periodicals in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Among his writings are papers on conodonts, a sinkhole in Blaine County, the Pleistocene course of the South Canadian River, and a number of other topics.

Bob’s Ph.D. dissertation for the University of Kansas in 1961 was The Blaine and Related Formations of Northwestern Oklahoma and Southern Kansas. Along with other publications, Bob produced OGS Bulletin 89, Geology and Mineral Resources, Blaine County, Oklahoma, with W. E. Ham and Louise Jordan, in 1962; Bulletin 98, The Blaine and Related Formations of Northwestern Oklahoma and Southern Kansas, an outgrowth of his Ph.D., published in 1964; and then Bulletin 106, Geology and Mineral Resources of Woods County, Oklahoma, that was issued in 1965. His next Bulletin, number 114, Geology and Mineral Resources of Custer County, Oklahoma (Exclusive of Petroleum), was issued in 1979.

In the time frame from the mid-1960s to 1973, he released numerous paleontological manuscripts now and then. And if you ask Bob what he does, he sometimes gives you a wry smile and say “Oh, I tell lies!” Perhaps that grin is hiding his memories of having led lecture classes astray back in 1953 with a fantastic tale of a supersonic bird that flew so fast and had such poor vision that it was apt to slam into trees, leaving the bird’s beak fossilized for all eternity in the tree trunk where it broke off. The hapless students wrote furiously to take notes about a mathematical formula that would calculate the air speed of the bird using the depth to which the fossil bird beaks were embedded in the tree trunks. As of yet, a mathematical formula has not been invented to measure how NOT amused some school administrators were by the prank.

Bob is still at work for the Oklahoma Geological Survey in the new Oklahoma Petroleum Information Center (OPIC), where he currently is compiling a bibliography of the Gulf–Ouachita Precambrian Astrobleme basin. He is available to answer questions for patrons and to help them find the publications and maps they need. He has achieved something no other Survey employee has had or could ever hope for: He has his own designated parking space.

He became the State of Oklahoma’s longest-tenured employee in the spring of 2006, and also is the person with the longest continuing employment at the University of Oklahoma.

During Bob’s 50 years of service, extensive field work has taken him to every part of Oklahoma. He has spent good amounts of time in some of the most rural and poverty stricken areas of the state and has come to know and appreciate the people there. He has true stories of life and hardship in remote areas that he can tell along with stories of great luck and success in the oil fields. He will tell you that riches are found in both places. Oklahoma is fortunate that he has shared his vast knowledge of this state’s geology, but also is fortunate that he has shared his heart as well.