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loyal servant to five generations



Dr. & Mrs. Cunningham with Mr. & Mrs. Clifford Haggart.

Dr. Cunningham Retires With Honors

By Margaret Wilson Friedrich

Dr. Cunningham is one man who has found honor in his own country and in his own house. At the end of 1987, Dr. Curtis B. Cunningham retired in Clinton after 51 years in medical practice. He was almost 83 years old and had never had a permanent address outside Custer County.

"Of all the honors that have come to you, what are some of the most memorable?" He thought a moment.

"I was the first graduate of the Oklahoma University School of Medicine to be elected by his peers to receive the Outstanding Alumnus Award." Near that honor stands his election to Life Membership in the American Medical Association and the Oklahoma Medical Association and especially membership in the Oklahoma Chapter of the American Academy of Family Physicians. He has been on the Board of Clinton Regional Hospital for 51 years and six months.

He stated, "I would not ever ask people for their confidence; I would not ask people to vote for me." But perhaps closest of all to his heart is the loving appreciation of those families he has

treated for 50 years, sometimes through the fourth and fifth generations. He brought out a letter recently received from one of those patients, now living in Mississippi.

She wrote, "I was not the first of those 5,500 babies you delivered, but I must have been among the early ones. You were called away from your wife's birthday dinner to bring me into the world. Afterward, it seems I always had my accidents and illnesses on a holiday or family gathering — Easter, Fourth of July." She expressed her love and appreciation for all those times. Dr. Cunningham was obviously pleased. One of his most rewarding honors must be the genuine love and confidence of his people.

Dr. Cunningham seemed a bit surprised when asked if the underlying support of his family gave stability to his career. Apparently no doubt of that support had ever crossed his mind. "Of course." Bess Webb and Curtis B. Cunningham were married on December 19, 1930. He told how his wife had given him support during the early days in Medical School. Those were

also the days of the Great Depression. Just out of college at Oklahoma City University, Bess took a teaching position in 1931 at \$50 per month. She gave him \$10; it took a \$2.50 discount to cash her check. That left her \$37.50 to maintain herself, but she had to save enough to live through the summer. He finished Medical School and a year of internship in 1935. The new Dr. Cunningham began practice in Custer City in 1936. Never again was it necessary to offer financial assistance. But with understanding, flexibility, and devotion Bess has been supporting her doctor husband for 57 years.

As the years went by, Dr. Cunningham acquired his father's homestead and that of his grandfather, as well as the homesteads of three other early-day relatives. Oil production on those farms made him wealthy, but that was not the chief reason for his pleasure in ownership. He loved the land and the pioneer ancestors who tamed it from the prairie. "When I am gone, our children will inherit five homesteads. I am holding the land in trust for them."

Future plans include some travel and some work — "work for my church and for anything to benefit my community." Among those benefits is the proposed Heart and Cancer Clinic in Clinton. As vice-president of the Western Oklahoma Health Care Foundation, Dr. Cunningham plans to be an active promoter of the project.

Will this remarkable couple move to a warmer climate? "No!" They both answered together. She continued, "This is our home; this is where our friends are. This is where our children grew up. We'll stay here."

The doctor added, "The best people in the world live in Western Oklahoma. When I am gone, she will stay here."

Both Dr. and Mrs. Cunningham have lived every day of their lives by the Golden Rule. With the qualities of character they both display, it is not surprising that, at 83, Dr. Cunningham can retire with honor among the people who know him best. That is success in the truest sense of the word. ■

MARGARET WILSON FRIEDRICH, in addition to WESTVIEW, contributes to several periodicals, including HOME LIFE and the OKLAHOMA ENGLISH JOURNAL. Her second book, THROUGH TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS, was published in 1987.