

Insights into Tom Dunigan's character, dedication to education

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | January 16, 2007

Over the last two weeks we have focused on Tom Dunigan, Oak Ridge High School principal from 1954 to 1971. His speech "Time Marches On!" was chosen because of the insights Tom Dunigan had into the character and thinking of high school students, and because many of his points are still relevant today.

Next I would like to give you some keen insights into Tom Dunigan himself, through the eyes of his son Tom and his daughter Pat Postma.

First, Tom Dunigan's son, also named Tom, tells of a phone call he recently received from a former Oak Ridge High School student.

"As best as I can recall, this fellow graduated from Oak Ridge High School in 1956. He was back in Oak Ridge this past fall and wanted to look up my dad who had been principal of the high school when this fellow was a student," said Tom.

"He was told at the high school that my father had passed away and they gave him my phone number. He called to relate how grateful he was to my father. Apparently, he had written a book report about aviation while at Oak Ridge High School. As a young boy, he was passionate about airplanes and flying."

"The English teacher thought the subject inappropriate and things escalated to a session with the principal. I think the boy's parents were not thrilled with his aviation obsession at the time, but my father counseled the young man to pursue whatever he desired as long as he gave it his best."

"The young man later became a professional pilot and did pursue his love of aviation, and was grateful for the encouragement he received from a high school principal."

I am convinced this phone call to Tom Dunigan's son could have been repeated by any number of former high school students who were encouraged by Tom Dunigan. At a recent Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club meeting Ken Brady paid happy dollars to note how much he appreciated the positive impact Tom Dunigan had had on his life while he was an Oak Ridge High School student and Tom Dunigan was the principal.

Now, Tom's daughter, Pat Postma relates her perception of her father.

"He was born in 1910 in Jackson County, a poor, very rural area of eastern Kentucky. His parents lived on their farm and my dad's father was also a teacher in a one room school. (Later, he also ran a small general store.) Education was important in the family. My dad and his brother and sister all attended a mission boarding school nearby (the Anville Institute)," said Pat.

"That mission school was established and operated by the Dutch Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., and the teachers' cottages and the Dutch Reformed Church next to the school were the only village-like settlement for miles around. My dad and his sister attended the University of Kentucky and both became teachers.



Pat Postma and her father, Tom Dunigan, in 1977

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“My dad's first teaching position was in a little school in his home county in Kentucky but at a remarkably young age — maybe just a year or two out of UK — he became the principal of the institute he had attended as a student.

“My mother was born and reared in Grand Rapids, Mich. It was her family church that supported the school in Kentucky. Though she wanted to attend college in Grand Rapids, college education for a girl was not part of her family's plans. Consequently, after high school, she accepted a job as the secretary at the mission school in Kentucky.

“She had never traveled before and this must have been quite a departure for her. Clearly my mother was an adventurous young woman. She was a beauty and intelligent as well. It is easy to see why my dad would be taken by her. When they made the decision to be married, my mother traveled back home to tell her parents.

“Recently when I was going through things in my mother's house, I came across a wonderful letter my mother had saved. My dad, conscious that a native of rural Kentucky might not strike her big-city parents as promising marriage material, wrote a gracious letter to her parents introducing himself and assuring them that he would take very good care of their daughter. He needn't have worried. My mother always said that her mother liked Tom (my dad) better than anyone else in the family.

“Living in rural Kentucky during the depression was not easy and when my parents had two daughters within 18 months, my dad decided he needed to find a job that would provide a higher income. They moved to Lexington, Ky. My dad was teaching in the Army Signal Corps although he was not a member of the military.”

“It was there that recruiters for the Clinton Engineer Works came to Lexington. The promised pay was good and my mother has said that, like many other people, they assumed this would be a job for a year and then they would go somewhere else. My dad was an electronics foreman at one of the Calutron buildings at Y-12. He was among the large wave of layoffs immediately after the end of the war.

“By that time they apparently decided they liked Oak Ridge. My dad was hired to teach at the old ORHS, algebra and physics if memory serves me.

“Teacher standards were high in Oak Ridge. The Manhattan Project recruited teachers with graduate degrees, so my dad attended classes at the University of Tennessee for several summers. I got a lasting impression of how exacting the master's thesis process was by watching my mother labor away with layers of paper and carbons in the old typewriter.

“From teaching at the high school he became principal at Pine Valley. If you consider that he was laid off after the war, (early 1946) and by 1951 he became vice-principal of the high school, he made this progression in very short order.

“One of my impressions still strong in my memory is of the time when Oak Ridge High School became an integrated school. Since we were a federal reservation we integrated immediately in 1956 (my senior year in high school) and were the first high school in Tennessee (and, no doubt, the South) to do so. Though the decision was a court-ordered one, my dad made it clear to us that it was done not because we were forced to do it, but because it was the right thing to do.

“As we moved toward that there were the occasional threatening phone calls, and I remember seeing a cross burning in our front yard. People would ask my dad if he was fearful about the integration. One of

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his hallmarks was a great evenness and calmness. And so he was about this. He always replied that he was sure things would go very smoothly and there was nothing to worry about. I have a sense that this calmness and message helped make it so.

“I think everyone who worked with him would agree that he had a sense of proportion and treated every student and every teacher fairly. At my recent high school reunion, a classmate told me a story from his days as an elementary student during my dad's days at Pine Valley Elementary.

“He said he and a friend decided to be creative with their restroom activities and climbed on top of the stall walls for their experiment. At that moment a teacher discovered them and chewed them out, promising that they would be punished by the principal and sent home from school. The young man was sure his life was at an end. The principal would take his vengeance and then he would be sent home in disgrace to be further punished by angry parents. Instead, he said, my dad, with a small smile on his face, suggested that in the future they stand closer to their target and sent them back to the classroom.

“He was happily devoted to his job as principal of the high school. Back in the days before we had computers, I remember him spending his summer days at a card table in the corner of the living room with punch cards for each of the high school's hundreds of students. Meticulously, one by one, he scheduled all those students into all the classes they had requested.

“Over his years as principal he was encouraged to apply for the job of school superintendent on more than one occasion. He said, 'This is the job I want. I don't need to be superintendent.'”

Now, you have a proper perspective on one of Oak Ridge's most prominent educators, who obviously influenced a great number of students. I thank Tom and Pat for allowing me to impose on them to write the above tribute to their dad. It is without a doubt the kind of historical information that should be cherished by the community and remembered by all who would attempt to educate high school students while making a home and raising a family.

Tom Dunigan was a local educator worthy of admiration, respect and the high honor in which he is held by those who knew him, and also by those of us who only know him through his noteworthy “Time Marches On!” speech and the memories shared by Tom and Pat.