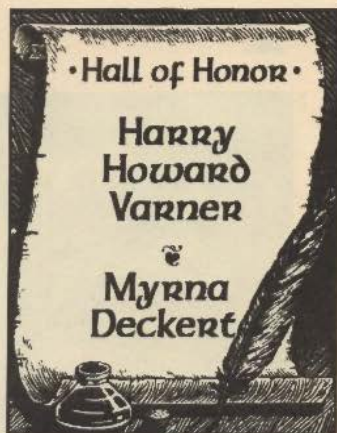


• Hall of Honor •
1995

Tribute to Harry Howard Varner

By Jack C. Vowell



Tonight, the El Paso County Historical Society inducts Harry Howard Varner into its Hall of Honor.

Harry Varner was born in Farquier County, Virginia on December 18, 1885, the son of a farmer. Harry's family emigrated from Germany in the eighteenth century. The family name had originally been Werner, but like many other families who left their European homes, the spelling of the name changed over time and became Americanized.

After spending his early life on the farm, Harry Varner attended the Bethel Military Academy. Two years later, in 1904, he enrolled in the Virginia Polytechnical Institute, or VPI. VPI is now known as Virginia Tech, and in the days when Harry Varner was a student there, it was organized along military lines. Cadet Varner was an outstanding student and made his mark as an athlete. The first year he played on the football team it compiled a winning record which was not bested until 1971, sixty-six years later. In 1907, Harry received a degree in civil engineering.

For the next three years, he worked as athletic manager at VPI and as a school teacher. During this same period, Harry and a group of his friends took a cattle boat to England, where they attended a portion of 1908 Olympic Games. The next year Harry Varner entered the medical school of the University of Virginia.

From 1910 until 1915, Harry studied medicine and continued to exhibit his athletic prowess, both as a player and a coach. Dr. Harry Varner completed his medical education in June, 1914; but he remained one more year as alumni football coach.



Harry Howard Varner
1885 - 1970

*"...and so when the alumni meet
To talk and smoke and dream
In future days they'll sing the praise
of Harry Varner's team."*

so wrote a student poet in 1915 and so they sang for many years thereafter; Harry Varner's Virginia team was "the first to beat ole Yale."

Leaving the university setting, Harry Varner went to New York City where he served his internship and met a nurse, Susan Peacock from New Brunswick, Canada. Then in September, 1917, Dr. Harry Varner entered the United States Army in preparation for his embarkation to Europe as part of the World War I American Expeditionary Force. On December 26, just before his leaving the United States, he and Susan Peacock were married.

From 1917 until the spring of 1919 Dr. Varner served in Europe. During the hostilities he treated the casualties of war in field hospitals. The experience of these years marked him deeply as it did many thousands who witnessed the bloody travails of this "war to end all wars."

Once the war was over, Captain Harry Varner was able to begin his active medical practice. He was 34 years old when he and his bride moved to El Paso. The following spring his first daughter, Mary, was born. On January 12, 1923 a son, John David, entered the world. Nine months later, Susan Peacock Varner passed away with pneumonia.

Facing single parenthood, and the starting of a medical practice, were difficult challenges, but with the help of friends and neighbors Harry Varner persevered. During this time he met, at the Westminster Presbyterian Church, a young lady by the name of Mary Hardie. In April 1925 they were married. In August 1926, a son, Harry Varner Jr. was born, and in October, 1927 a daughter, Margaret, entered this world. The Varner family was now complete, and for the next 43 years Harry Varner's influence upon El Paso was significant and incalculable.

Harry Varner's contributions were varied. His love of sports was a major factor in the development of many young people in our community. He was always involved in helping and developing their abilities.

He worked to organize the El Paso Kids Rodeo and coached many of its participants in developing riding skills. He organized

the El Paso Junior Rifle Association, so that children would learn how to use firearms safely. To that end he installed a rifle range in the basement of his own home and conducted marksmanship classes at Austin and El Paso High Schools. These classes were open to any interested students.

During the 1930's and 1940's Harry Varner was extremely active in the El Paso Tennis Club and worked closely with young people in developing their sports potential. He served on the Men's Ranking Committee of the National Tennis Association. His efforts bore fruit as young El Pasoans achieved national championship status – and in the case of his daughter, Margaret, a badminton world championship.

Like his father, Harry Jr. was an avid football player and served as a member of the University of Arizona's football team during his college years.

A remarkable thing about Harry Varner's efforts with youth was his ability to instill self-discipline and achievement without being intrusive. Children learned by his example and because of his support. Instead of a taskmaster, he served as a role model and an advisor. Many El Pasoans who worked with Dr. Varner during his formative years have commented upon his unusual capacity to inspire without making demands.

In addition to his work with youth, Harry Varner was extremely active in community affairs. He was a member of the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club of El Paso, and he was a scoutmaster. For over fifty years he was active in his Masonic Lodge and was recognized for his service to the Scottish Rite Body. Harry Varner was one of the original organizers and supporters of the Sun Carnival. Both he and his wife, Mary, were active members of the El Paso County Historical Society.

As a physician, Harry Varner inspired his colleagues, not only by his skills as a practitioner of the healing arts, but by the high professional standards which he exhibited. He served more than 25 years as a physician for the Southern Pacific Railroad and touched the lives of hundreds of El Pasoans in that capacity. He had a large private practice, which he served with devotion and understanding. For 25 years, Dr. Varner served as a volunteer for the Selective Service System.

To his colleagues in the medical profession, Harry was a friend, a mentor and an exemplar, and I am sure that his abilities served as a motivation for his son John to enter the medical

profession. He served the El Paso County Medical Society as treasurer, secretary and president. He won national recognition for his skills as a physician and was honored posthumously by the El Paso County Medical Society with its S. J. Turner Award in recognition of his service to the medical community.

In talking to Harry Varner's patients, the most common expression of their feelings for him was deep affection and trust. As one of his former patients, I can tell you that I always felt he was concerned about my needs as a person, not just as a patient.

In one of my conversations with Dr. Varner, he told me: "Your brain is like a muscle; if you don't use it, it will wither." His advice to me on that occasion was to choose a subject or activity in which I was interested and to pursue it for three or four years until I had learned something about the subject. "Then," he said, "go on to something new and stimulating."

For many years I watched Dr. Varner follow his own advice as he engaged in numerous "hobbies." The interesting thing was that he changed his activities after about three or four years and went on to something else. He thus maintained control and never became a slave to them as so many of us do. Harry once told me that "ruts are very comfortable, but they get very deep and limiting."

I suppose the salient fact is that Harry had a great faith in the capabilities of his own family and in all people. For this reason, he encouraged those with whom he came in contact to build upon the strengths with which they were endowed.

Harry Howard Varner grew from the soil of rural Virginia and carried with him the virtues and attributes of his heritage. His love of sports, his innate capacity to inspire and train others to realize their full potential, and a deeply rooted faith were exemplified in his life. As a young person, Harry Varner was influenced by the ideals and values which characterized one of his idols - Robert E. Lee. Like Lee, he let his actions speak for themselves. His high character, his moral courage, his quiet nature and the mastery of his profession made Harry Varner a notable figure in our community. He died on November 3, 1970. His daughter, Mary V. Meryweather, once wrote that Harry Varner truly believed in the precept: Christian, rise and act thy creed; let thy prayer be in thy deed; seek the right, perform the true.