

FROM THE ARCHIVES

As part of our 100th Anniversary Celebration, David Wilcox is contributing several articles on the deep history of AAHS. Here is his final contribution.

Judging Byron and Isabelle Cummings by the Content of Their Character

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Looking back today at the founder of the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society (AAHS), Byron Cummings, and his stalwart partner, Isabelle Cummings, on what basis should they be judged? While acknowledging that “the Dean” was a pioneer archaeologist/anthropologist, who, by the way, helped his generation of Arizonans begin to see Indian people as human beings, professional archaeologists today do feel constrained to criticize the crudeness of his field methods and the fact that he did not write detailed field reports on his excavations (Bostwick 2006; Haury 1985:389).

Fair enough, although it should also be acknowledged that the collections he acquired made the Arizona State Museum (ASM) a preeminent anthropology teaching institution in its region. There is no question that Dean Cummings was a remarkable educator and a civic leader (Anonymous 1920; Bostwick 2006; Wilcox 2005). For example, four of his students became presidents of the American Anthropological Association (Neil Merton Judd [1968], Emil Walter Haury, Gordon Randolph Willey [1988], and Edward Holland Spicer) (Darnell and Gleach 2002).



There is, however, another basis for judgment that should be emphasized, which goes far to explain why both the Dean and his wife were so beloved and respected by those who knew them.

In 1918 and 1919, a pandemic flu infection swept the world, causing many deaths (Berry 2005). At the University of Arizona (UA), students and faculty were not immune, and two people stepped up to the challenge more than any others. The student newspaper, the *Arizona Wildcat*, passionately reported as follows:

When the dreadful Spanish influenza broke out in the University in October, 1918, and people were running hither and thither in wild confusion, some leaving for distant homes, some for the mountains, some for the deserts, and some for other cities, Dean Cummings stepped up and took charge of an entire floor of the sick boy[s]. And when it is said he took charge it means all that the word implies. He nursed them, cheered them up, fed them and remained on the job until they were well. When he was doing this, excitement was at its highest. There had been one death on the campus, one in the business of the college, and many other deaths reported. There had been so many deaths in other places visited by the Influenza and so many boys were falling sick every day that most people thought that practically that everyone who had it would succumb [sic]. No one had any idea just how Arizona would fare. But Dean Cummings did not hesitate. From the goodness of his heart, with nothing to gain but a good case of influenza, Dean Cummings took his place by the side of those stricken down by the epidemic.

It takes courage to step forth and take a place where Cummings stood. It takes courage to face the unseen and to offer your services to your stricken fellow-man.

Dean Cummings showed the courage of the twentieth century. He showed the spirit of the American hero. When the Spanish Influenza broke out anew in January, 1919, Dean Cummings opened up the hospital and again took charge of the sick boys.

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Therefore into the Hall of Fame at the University of Arizona allow us to subscribe the name of Dean Cummings (Anonymous 1919).

When Isabelle Cummings died a decade later, a faculty committee went on record with a letter of appreciation that stated in part: "Particularly do we recall the service she rendered night and day to the students and in the homes of Faculty during the influenza epidemic of 1919" (Frazier et al. 1929).

Service like that is long remembered. When Miss Allegra Frazier, a UA English Professor (and AAHS member), was profiled by the *Arizona Wildcat* in 1936, she described for them the by-gone days in the late nineteen teens:

It was a small campus then, and a very pretty, informal one. It was so lovely that every Sunday afternoon the townspeople would come out to see it, riding out in old style, horse-drawn victorias which were driven by Mexicans.... In those days, ... the cactus gardens were in front of Old Main, extending from where the fountain is now, to beyond the flag pole.... Sometimes, Dean Cummings gave night lectures on Indian customs.... When we had that terrible epidemic of influenza, the entire campus was quarantined and cards were issued as passes to the professors who lived off campus. Dean Cummings established a hospital in Herring hall, our only gym, and cared for some of the patients himself (Anonymous 1936).

In 1950, Cummings' friend and fellow Dean, A. E. Douglass (an AAHS vice-president) in *For the Dean*, declared that, "I have always felt that his help day and night in the campus hospital at that time [during the influenza epidemic] when nurses were scarce and students were dying, saved the lives of many students" (Douglass 1950:1-2).

These testimonials suggest that modern AAHS members, if they judge the founder of their organization and his wife on the content of their character, they can be unabashedly proud (see also Bostwick 2006:291-292; Thompson 2005).

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