

★ NECROLOGY



Verlin Robert Easterling
Executive Director Oklahoma Historical Society
Born, October 29, 1914 Died, January 22, 1974

He grew upon a farm in northwestern Oklahoma near Aline, attended the nearby Valley Green rural grade school, and a Free Methodist High School in McPherson, Kansas. Learning hard work on his father's farm in a portion of the Cherokee Outlet, Verlin Robert Easterling gained a love of horses which would follow him all his life. He participated in athletics and coached during his early teaching years, and later obtained a Ph.D. in history, became a college president and was commissioned a captain in the Naval Reserve. His impact upon Oklahoma may be measured in many ways, but perhaps the greatest contribution occurred during the last two years of his lifetime, when, almost as if racing against time, he achieved one accomplishment after another in the development of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The man was Verlin Robert Easterling. He was Dr. Easterling to some and Captain Easterling to others, but he never threw around the titles. He was consumed with a desire to accomplish things, and his record shows that he succeeded, again and again.

Upon graduating from Central Academy, then a high school, now a Free Methodist junior college, he entered Northwestern State College in Alva, Oklahoma, where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1935, as an honor graduate and class president.

Moving to Selman, Oklahoma, where for two years he served as a teacher, principal and athletic coach, he met a freshman coed who would later play the principal role in his life—Bonnie Mae Bennett. She had not yet graduated from high school when Bob moved to Turpin, Oklahoma, to become superintendent of schools, but after his move the two started corresponding and dating. She finished high school, completed a year of college and then they were married in 1940. The next step was to the University of Colorado where, in 1941, he obtained a Master's of Arts degree in history, political science and economics.

He wanted to continue his studies toward a Doctor of Philosophy degree, but World War II intervened and Bob Easterling volunteered for the Navy. Because of his athletic and coaching background, he was assigned to the navy's Gene Tunney Physical Fitness Program, and his early service career was centered around helping young men make the physical transition to the more strenuous navy life. He rose to become a chief petty officer before he entered the Navy's Officer Candidate School. After receiving his commission, he quickly volunteered for overseas duty and spent most of the remainder of the war in the Atlantic theatre.

After his discharge from active duty in early fall of 1945, he and Mrs. Easterling, driving through Junction City, Kansas, stopped at a filling station, where the attendant casually mentioned that the town was looking for teachers. Driving to the board of education, Bob Easterling applied

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

and began teaching history almost immediately. In 1946, the Easterlings moved to Manhattan, Kansas, where he taught history and political science at Kansas State University, while at the same time working on a doctorate from the University of Colorado. He received his Ph.D. in 1951.

Two years later, a big opportunity came. He was offered, and accepted, the presidency of Northern Oklahoma Junior College in Tonkawa. He was thirty-eight and the youngest president in the history of the college. While at Tonkawa, Dr. Easterling was responsible for extensive growth and development in all aspects of campus activities, and executed a four phase building program. After twelve years at Northern Oklahoma Junior College, during which time enrollment increased from 200 to 1,600 students, Dr. Easterling accepted the opportunity to move to a key post in a four-year university and became operations vice president of Wichita State University. He remained in this capacity two years and was responsible for all phases of college life except academics.

In 1965, he accepted the opportunity to organize and serve as president of the Associated Colleges of Central Kansas, with headquarters in McPherson, Kansas. Here he served six private colleges in the area, organizing centralized services, joint programs and combined efforts in the development of funding. His work took him often to all six campuses as well as to Washington, D.C. and other major cities.

In 1970, he moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where for two years he served as the Executive Director of the New Mexico Heart Association.

It was from this post that he was called to return to Oklahoma to become Executive Director of the Oklahoma Historical Society in December, 1971. He entered this work with as much enthusiasm as he had shown more than thirty-five years earlier when he first came to Selman, Oklahoma. Time was taking its toll, however, it did not affect his work. If anything, he pushed himself harder, perhaps with the subconscious feeling that there was so much to do and so little time to accomplish his goals.

He knew he was in trouble physically a year before his death, but even among his closest associates at the Oklahoma Historical Society few knew about it—and most who did learned by accident. He did not want people to know because he did not want to be catered to in any way that would hinder his work. There was too much to be done.

By New Year's day of 1974, the word was out. Dr. Robert Easterling was to have three arterial surgeries. On the morning he was to enter the hospital—January 9, 1974—he invited the staff of the Oklahoma Historical Society for coffee and doughnuts, but, regardless of the seriousness of his personal life, he kept the meeting light and jovial. He left them laughing, just as he

wished it, and entered the hospital that afternoon. His friends never saw him again.

He leaves his wife, Bonnie, and two daughters, Connie and Verla, both students and living at home. He also leaves two older sons, each following in their father's footsteps. Robert is a teacher, living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Lael is a naval officer, stationed in Charleston, South Carolina. Dr. Easterling is also survived by three brothers and three sisters.

Pendleton Woods

BOB EASTERLING: A TRIBUTE

Delivered by George H. Shirk at the V. R. Easterling Memorial Service
January 25, 1974

A long time ago, a very renowned teacher—we refer to him as Ecclesiastes—among other things, said "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." Using those same words, not perhaps exactly as the teacher meant them, but in a manner very applicable and very appropriate, there was indeed a season and a purpose for Dr. Easterling coming to the Oklahoma Historical Society as he did at the close of 1973. And if there ever was a season—a bright season—for the Oklahoma Historical Society, and its work in Oklahoma, it has been those two years since then.

Bob had the uncanny distinction of recognizing the difference between history and heritage; and indeed there is a difference. History is somewhat like the multiplication table—there it is, with its numbers and facts and sums and so on; and its integrity is not something that is subject to change through the years. On the other hand, heritage is really the flesh and the smile, the personality and color, and all the rest, of everything that you and I treasure. Even not withstanding that our state is still in its first hundred years of its existence, Bob was able to recognize and distinguish both the necessity and requirements of history and the value and importance of heritage.

Our directors are not unmindful of what he has accomplished within just two years by his dedication to our heritage and his knowledge of our history. It would take a long list to read them off and I certainly know that you don't expect me to do that. But just a few: and as you drive around over our state, even right here in Oklahoma City, in fact within a block of where we now are, you may see the lasting monuments to Bob's last service to us all.

The Overholser Mansion was acquired while Bob was our director and through arrangements he had made. I am sure one of the things of which

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

he was most proud is the Frank Phillips Home in Bartlesville. He worked long and hard on that and I have heard him recount some of the nip and tuck problems he had in concluding all the details. The monthly art shows at the Historical Building; putting Fort Towson into its present orderly condition and really something of worth as part of our heritage; the new construction at Fort Washita; and the development of the statewide historic preservation plan are others.

The heritage of our state is so much the better, is much more lasting, is much more meaningful and it certainly carries a deeper and more profound message for all the two and a half million people in Oklahoma because of Bob.

Two incidents to point up a final thought. At our last Board meeting Bob was with us—happy and bouncy, eager to tell us things he was doing, asking for our cooperation to see that more and more things could be done. We now appreciate how productive were those seventeen-hour days of his. They will be hard to keep up with, and at our next Board meeting he will not be there. At the last meeting of the Indian Territory Posse of Oklahoma Westerners, which was just within the month, Bob put on the program. It was one of the best programs we ever had. It was about Western music and Western song. As I now look back, favorites such as "Home on the Range" will never again sound any better than the way it was presented that night. At our next meeting, a week from this Friday he will not be there, yet to us he indeed will be there.

Awhile back a man named Robert Ingersoll, upon the death of his younger brother, an unexpected loss, and while standing by the open grave, tried to reconcile to himself a reason such as I'm trying to right now. Why Dr. Easterling would be at our last Board meeting but not at the next one, or be at the Westerners last time, but not the next time. Ingersoll finally put it this way, saying, "And after all it may be best, just in the happiest, sunniest hour of all the voyage, while eager winds are kissing every sail, to dash against the unseen rock, and in an instant hear the billows roar above a sunken ship."

I feel certain those are somehow our thoughts today, the thoughts of the Board, of the devoted staff of the Historical Society and his friends here today in their regard for and their love for Bob. My sister and I were the only guests of the staff at their Christmas party. It was a thrill—and I know Bonnie shared it with us—to see their regard and their feeling for their boss. So after all, it may be best for all of us to be able to say that in the happiest, sunniest hour of all of Bob's contribution to the heritage of our state, he laid down his tools as a master craftsman.