

Obituary: Dr. Robert J. Reeves

... In Appreciation



The portrait of Dr. Robert J. Reeves hangs in the Robert J. Reeves Radiological Library, which was established in his honor...And "now let us praise another famous man".

Dr. Robert J. Reeves, one of the original members of the Duke University medical faculty and the first Chairman of Duke's Department of Radiology from 1930 to 1965, died February 24, 1968, at the age of 69, here at Duke Hospital. He was called "one of the pioneers in academic radiology" by Dr. William G. Anlyan, Dean of Medicine. Dr. Reeves stepped down as Chairman of Radiology in 1965 to devote his time to teaching and research.

Dr. Richard G. Lester, who succeeded him as Chairman, noted that when Dr. Reeves came to Duke, "Radiology was a new field, just beginning to realize its potential in the diagnosis and treatment of human illnesses. In a very real way, Dr. Reeves guided and, indeed, created knowledge and understanding throughout the South and the country in the use of the X-ray and other ionizing radiations. He built the Department of Radiology at Duke, which has grown under his guidance to its present national status."

A native of Matador, Texas, Dr. Reeves earned his bachelor's degree at Baylor University in 1920 and his M.D. from Baylor in 1924. Prior to coming to Duke as Professor and Chairman of Radiology, he served as Assistant Radiologist at the Columbia Medical Center in New York from 1927 to 1930. Dr. Reeves had served as consultant to the Atomic Energy Commission, the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, and the Veterans Administration, Watts and Lincoln Hospitals.

Dr. Reeves was married in 1936 to the former Gipsy Proctor of Durham. In addition to Mrs. Reeves, survivors include two daughters, Mrs. Roger W. Leverton Jr. of Chester, Va., and Miss Judith Bryant Reeves, a student at Texas Technological in Lubbock, Texas; one grandchild; two sisters, Mrs. R.C. Shilling of Dallas, Texas, and Miss Verlin Reeves of Matador, Texas; and two brothers, Roy Reeves of Dallas and Elbert Reeves of Matador.

In the late 1920s, a young physician came down to Durham from New York City "on a foggy, rainy afternoon in January or February" for his first look at what was to become the Duke University Medical Center. The man was Dr. Robert J. Reeves, who was to become Duke's first Chairman of Radiology--a specialty whose potential was then far from fully recognized. On that first visit he saw little to foretell Duke's future rise to prominence among medical centers worldwide. "The walls weren't completed and the campus had no sidewalks; we had boards to walk on to avoid the red mud which I had not seen much of in my part of the country."

But the young Texas-born physician thought he saw here a future for himself and for Duke, and he accepted the offer of Dr. W.C. Davison, Dean of Medicine, to become Chairman of Radiology, then called Roentgenology. Dr. Reeves, therefore, joined what came to be known as "the old guard," the group of doctors who were Duke's first medical department heads, whose work and influence in the years that followed contributed so greatly to Duke's standing in the world of medical science. Dr. Reeves has just died at the age of 69, three years after giving up the chairmanship he had held since 1930. Since passing the chairmanship to Dr. Richard G. Lester, he had continued as a research professor at Duke until illness kept him from his work.

Shortly after he stepped down as department head, Dr. Reeves was the subject of a video-tape interview, one of a series being obtained with original faculty and staff members for Duke's medical archives. In that interview, Dr. Reeves recalled that A.C. Lee, who was Vice President and Chief Engineer for Duke Construction Co., which built the medical school and other buildings on West Campus, "insisted on being Duke's first X-ray patient." Radiology in those days, he said "was considered a laboratory and usually was found in the basement of most hospitals. My desire was to build this up as another department on the level of surgery, pediatrics and medicine, which in those days were considered the chief departments". "After seeing Columbia Medical Center being built and grow up," he said, "I thought it would be quite interesting to try to build up a similar department in the South, and train radiologists to go out as teachers and instructors in other departments and community hospitals." Dr. Reeves saw his ambitions fulfilled. "We did succeed in producing a number of very brilliant young men who went out and made names for themselves," he said.

While he was a member of nearly two dozen professional societies and served in numerous advisory capacities, including the Advisory Board of the Atomic Energy Commission, Dr. Reeves took greatest pride in his honorary membership in the British Radiological Society and establishment of the Robert J. Reeves Society. The society was founded by former residents in radiology at Duke in honor of their chief, and their contributions over the years have included funds for establishment of a departmental library. Dr. Reeves talked of research and noted that "in the last few years, fortunately, certain money became available in large amounts so that a research staff was built up jointly with teaching." But he left no doubt in his interview for Duke's medical archives where he believed emphasis should lie. "We have research, patient care and teaching going on now," Dr. Reeves said, "and we still think patient care and teaching are No. 1 and No. 2."...So the old guard passes, one by one. Their bodies are buried in peace; and their names live for ever more.