

The Story of Dr. Wilburt C. Davison

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is an abbreviated version of an article titled "Duke's Mixture - Davison's Saga" written by Dr. Jay M. Arena, professor of pediatrics and community health sciences. It was originally published in the April, 1968, issue of Clinical Pediatrics and is reprinted with permission of the J.B. Lippincott Co. of Philadelphia.

By Dr. Jay M. Arena

Dr. Wilburt C. Davison, first Dean and Pediatric Chairman of the Duke University School of Medicine, was once described by Sir William Osler as "a new American colt who is wrecking a medical school tradition." Since that memorable day at Oxford University in 1913 and until his retirement in 1960, Dean Davison continued to wreck traditions.

Dr. Davison came to Duke in 1927 when both the Hospital and Medical School were still only in the idea stage. He shouldered the responsibility of planning, organizing, and directing the Medical School and Hospital literally from the ground up. As construction progressed he was never without his tape measure or yardstick and on occasion would don his overalls and join the labor crew to give a hand as well as direct.

Dean Davison realized from the outset that an efficient faculty would have to be more than a collection of brilliant individuals who might or might not cooperate. So he began by selecting the professor of medicine; then he and the professor jointly selected the professor of surgery. The three of them then chose the next professor and so on down the line, thus assuring them of a cooperative staff. Each department chairman was encouraged to help in planning for the total development of the school, so that in effect, as one faculty member put it, there were nine deans with Dr. Davison as their Chairman, all but one with reputations still to be established, and under 35 years of age. There were disagreements about policies being formulated in such a democratic way, and not infrequently the majority of the department heads would insist on some policy which Dr. Davison did not particularly favor. Nevertheless, he had an extraordinary quality of being objective about each problem as it arose, and seldom held grudges against the chairmen who opposed him.

"Dave," as he is known to his friends and colleagues, was in his prime a bluff, hearty 200 pounder, well over six feet tall and always appearing in a hurry. He spoke in a deep, resonant voice and would slip from one idea to another, frequently leaving an unwary listener several sequences behind. He had an elephantine memory, aided and abetted by a little black notebook carried in his hip pocket.

The secret of his greatness and his success was that he was



Dr. W. C. Davison
c. 1927

many things to many men. Never pretentious, he could and did reach people at any level, whether they were kings or serfs, millionaires or paupers, . . . adults or children, renowned professors or lowly interns. As a matter of record, he was probably more attached to Carl Rogers, a colored orderly who he referred to as the "Assistant Dean," than anyone else in the entire Medical Complex.

With his nimble wit and broad sense of humor, he could take a joke as well as tell one. He once was moving down a corridor at a fast clip in a new section of Duke Hospital. Right on his heels were Ross Porter, former superintendent of the hospital, and another dignified looking gentleman. The trio reached the end of the corridor and looked into a room. They turned around quickly, in great confusion, and headed toward another room, still moving along at a fast clip. The doctor poked his head into the second room and whirled around to start off in another direction. Before he could make up his mind where to go next, a nurse stopped and asked, "Doctor, can I show you anything on the new ward?" "Yes," replied Dr. Davison, "the men's room."

Formality he detested. He liked to work in a rumpled and inexpensive suit . . . tieless with collar open, or in his shirt-sleeves and suspenders, with odd neckties handy for an emergency. His office was on one of the busiest corridors in the medical school, with the door open always to students, house officers, personnel and faculty alike.

A man of tremendous energy and talents, Dean Davison held a host of public service jobs, among them the vice-chairmanship of the National Research Council's Division of Medical Sciences, and membership on the National Health Council.

Abhorrence of idle moments was so ingrained, that he filled in otherwise unoccupied time attending portions of movies. He

(continued on page three)



'DAVE' WITH 'ASSISTANT DEAN' CARL ROGERS

"The secret of his greatness and his success was that he was many things to many men."