

DR. AND MRS. JAMES WELLINGS STURGIS

*Ruby Sullivant and Foy Rungan*

Dr. James Wellings Sturgis was born December 12, 1870, in Bridgeville, Michigan. He was the son of S. and Mary Elizabeth Wellings Sturgis.

Mrs. Sturgis was born in Ithaca, Michigan. Her parents were Dean and Harriet Johnson Parker.

The following is a taped interview given by Mrs. Sturgis to Miss Ruby Sullivant. The interview was at Mrs. Sturgis' home at 1609 South Oklahoma Avenue, June 24 or 25, 1969, after her 90th birthday on June 23rd.

Mr. Sturgis and I grew up together in Ithaca, Michigan, and attended the public schools of Ithaca. Soon after Mr. Sturgis finished the public schools the Sturgis family moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he graduated from Michigan University in 1900. I attended college near Ann Arbor and we met there again and became engaged. He came back to Ithaca in 1903 and we were married there August 12, 1903, and came immediately to Norman, Oklahoma, where he was teaching in the University of Oklahoma. We were the parents of three children: a boy and two girls - Wellings, Margaret and Ruth. Mr. Sturgis died in Norman, March 22, 1948.

Immediately after coming to Norman, we built a home at the corner of Asp Avenue and Boyd Street. It was just across from the University. I didn't like the awful dust storms and I was very much afraid of the Indians who came in from across the Canadian River. Usually, on their way home, they would stop on my corner and drink their liquor and keep on shooting. I hid in the closet as I had no neighbors and nowhere to go. Now the storms also frightened me and this was shortly after the destructive Snyder cyclone. I can tell you that our honeymoon was often interrupted to make trips to a nearby storm cellar. There were no sidewalks and, of course, no pavement in Norman and the dust and mud was terribly deep. My dresses all had trains and so it was necessary to carry the trains on my arm to keep them out of the dust and mud. This house of ours was later moved a few blocks east on Boyd Street and our first location soon became "Campus Corner."

At this time, the faculty consisted of six men professors, namely, Gould, Gittinger, Hadsell, Buchanan, Paxton and Sturgis. There were no summer school sessions then and the University closed for vacation. On account of the dry, hot summers, we all left, but we were always glad to get back in the fall when our social life began anew.

Mr. Sturgis had become the head of the Latin Department where he taught for many, many years. He was always in love with the University and very proud of it. The school had a complete curriculum for those days and the faculty members were well prepared in their fields. Everyone was friendly and we had close relationships.

Here among ourselves was our social life and we thought it was pretty gay. The entire faculty and the wives could be entertained at one dinner table and I gave a dinner for all of them when we moved into our new home.

But the favorite form of entertainment we called "a faculty reception" and it was always very "dress-up". No dancing, but cards were played and the favorite game was whist. However, after Mr. Sturgis became an elder in the Presbyterian Church, whist was taboo so the "Saints" played Flinch and the rest of the group played whist. These receptions were always held in Dr. Boyd's home. During World War I no receptions were held and the first reception after the Armistice only Mrs. House had a new dress. The rest of us had packed ours away during the war and they were often in need of repair. While the ladies were primping upstairs, Mrs. House in her lovely new dress happened to have a needle and thread and was repairing some of the ladies' dresses including my "lavender and old lace." In her absorption with her task, Mrs. House forgot to take off her spats before going downstairs.

My brother, Deke Parker, who later became head of the Scripps-Howard Newspapers, came down the second year we were here to go to school. He and another student, Walter Ferguson, son of Governor Ferguson founded the Kappa Alpha fraternity--the first fraternity on the Oklahoma University campus. In 1906 when one of the buildings of the University burned, the students were fighting the fire on the first floor, they looked up just in time to see the dome fall in. What a miracle that not one of them was hurt.

When SATC was established during World War I, before the barracks were built, the students were housed in homes around the campus. We had several in our home when the flu epidemic broke out. The epidemic was so bad that the students would simply faint and fall out of line. We nursed those in our home that were ill and also went out into the poorer homes in Norman and to the places where those from the country were brought in for care and nursed and cared for them. None of the Sturgis family took the flu and we were certainly and constantly exposed. I remember one particular family where the husband died and the wife and all the children were sick. We took blankets and soup to many. Mr. Sturgis always did as much as I did. Burial became a problem for the roads to the cemetery were unpaved and the mud was so bad it was difficult to get to and from for all the necessary burials.

I was the second woman in Norman to drive a car--the first was Mrs. I. M. Jackson, wife of the funeral director. Mrs. Jackson and I had to help make the caskets--line them--especially for the children, because of so many deaths so close together.

I was one of the early welfare workers in the county. I worked with Mrs. Hogan with the United Charities, then with the Red Cross with the first Mrs. Cheadle. In horse and buggy days during a typhoid epidemic I went with her when she went out and nursed the sick.

During the depression a soup kitchen was established in the Holiness Pentecostal Church on Symmes Street. One of the merchants, I think it might have been S. K. McCall, gave us a big stove and installed it in the church. The pastor, Mr. Wylie Griffith, lived in the church and he would take a wheelbarrow and go to the grocery stores, who saved their waste (instead of putting it in garbage cans), take it home and sort it out and make soup which fed many people. Those who had a place to live brought buckets and carried the soup home - others ate at the church. This man literally gave

his life for these people, for he took pneumonia and died during the unusually cold winter of 1930.

The two centers of poverty were 804 E. Symmes and the Water Tower district. The people built their homes out of old boxes, tins, etc. They all had dirt floors. Often there was no coal for heat and I would drive Mr. Sturgis to the coal yard and with a shovel and big buckets we would get coal for the families who were without. It seemed that on Sundays when there was no one at the yard we got most of our emergency calls, so Mr. Sturgis would climb the fence and get coal for those who had none. There was a flu epidemic that winter during the depression, which entailed a lot of nursing care.

I have very high praise for the Pentecostal women who worked in the Soup Kitchen. Everybody was peaceful, depended greatly on God, and went through the depression with a fine attitude, depending on the Lord always. Dr. Gertrude Nielsen was very active in this work also. She worked both at the Water Tower and at the Soup Kitchen. I helped her deliver all the babies in the Water Tower district.

When the SATC barracks were built Dr. Sturgis was put in charge of them and he then started building houses for the poor. A carpenter would build the house putting his labor into his own house--a plumber would do the plumbing in the same way--a painter the painting, etc. The houses were sold, most of them without a down payment and paid out by the month.

Dr. Sturgis did much social work during the depression, and was voted most useful citizen. I have a framed certificate I just looked at. It hangs on our wall and I will copy it. The Transcript gave us a big surprise dinner and presented it at the table.

"In recognition of outstanding unselfish service to their community in 1931, Dr. and Mrs. Sturgis are selected most useful citizens for 1931.

Their efforts for supplying food, clothing, employment and financial assistance, also moral and spiritual help, to the unfortunate and destitute of the community entitle them to this recognition. This selection was made from a list of twenty nominations in a contest sponsored by The Transcript."