

Claude Cunningham

1898-1959

Claude Carroll Cunningham was born on July 5, 1883, to John Sylvester and Genevieve Whitney Cunningham of Riley County, Kansas. He was one of seven children born to the family, who moved to Manhattan, Kansas in 1898.

Claude did not attend high school. He entered Kansas State Agricultural College directly from the local Riley county district school in 1898. Graduating in 1903 with a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture, he also lettered in both varsity football and baseball. He went on to do post-graduate study in agriculture at Kansas State in 1904 and at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York in 1906.

Cunningham married twice. In April of 1909, he married May Griffing, with whom he had one daughter, Carol May. His first wife died in 1912. In May of 1920, he remarried, to Myrtel Johnson of El Dorado, Kansas. Two sons were born to them, James S. and Robert Bruce.

In El Dorado, Myrtel Cunningham, herself a graduate of Kansas State Agricultural College, was active in Extension and 4-H work, and the International Farm Youth Exchange. She helped establish the Butler County Historical Museum and the El Dorado chapter of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). In 1947, she served as chosen delegate to the fifth triennial congress of the

Associated County Women of the World held at Amsterdam, Holland. Upon her return from this trip, she spoke to many area groups on the event. She kept quite a large herb garden, with about sixty varieties, as well as prize roses.

Sons James S. and his family lived on a farm near El Dorado. Robert Bruce and his family lived at Trinoka Farms, where he was associated with his father in the production of certified seed and hybrid seed corn.

Modest and self-effacing, Claude Cunningham personified the rare man who cared more for attainment of an objective and an ideal than for personal gain. But his achievements spoke for themselves, gaining an impressive stature in Kansas agricultural circles, though many of his neighbors in Butler County were perhaps unaware of his lofty standing and regard among the agricultural elect.

Both a student and a teacher, as a young man he headed the experiment station at Hays and later taught for nine years at Kansas State College.

Though his work at the college was of high order, he wanted to get into actual farming for himself, testing his theories in actual practice. So he voluntarily retired from teaching and entered upon the true mission of his life with a farm in Lincoln Township, on Rural Route Four, five miles north of El Dorado on Highway 77.

Upon his retirement from teaching, W. M. Jardine, at that time president of the college and later U. S. secretary of agriculture, said that Cunningham had “the rare combination of technical training and everyday judgment, and unusual ability to supply practical information based on scientific data. . . . His work has shown such aptitude and persistence that his knowledge of Kansas crops and the conditions influencing their production is unrivaled.”

A member of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture for eight years, Cunningham served as its president in 1941. He was member and chairman of the Kansas association of soil conservation districts, one of the organizers of the Butler county district, and its first president. For one term, he served as a member of the Kansas legislature, from 1933 to 1934. He was a member of the Elcoln school board for 18 years.

A member of First Methodist Church in El Dorado, he had also served as Sunday School superintendent at Hays, Manhattan and Elcoln. For eighteen years he was on the local school district board. Cunningham was a member of El Dorado Kiwanis club since 1922, serving as treasurer five years.

One of his most striking services was as a member Kansas Crop Improvement Association board of directors for 56 years, eight terms of which were as president. He was also director of the State Board of Agriculture council on Research and Education since 1951.

Having suffered a previous heart attack twenty years earlier, Cunningham died Feb. 12, 1959, at the age of 75. He was fatally stricken with a second heart attack while attending the National Farm Loan association district meeting, dying in the presence of his family and friends, and in the service of a group that was representative of the many farm organizations he had served so long and so well.

No man was more highly regarded for his personal attributes of character than Claude Cunningham, whose instant death dealt a shocking blow to his community.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Cunningham entered private farming with the purchase of 200 acres north of El Dorado, Kansas. Here he continued in the application of scientific methods and painstaking research, carrying on a series of experiments and research at his farm. His work done quietly, with little fanfare or public attention, but the sum total of it was tremendous.

He actively supported the Butler County extension service and the local 4-H Club, the latter for 15 years.

In his home community, he was a man of unyielding integrity, soft-spoken, tactful and tolerant in his judgments while ever ready to lend a helping hand to others.

COMING TO / LEAVING THE AREA

Moving to Butler County in 1920, Cunningham entered private farming in the Lincoln Township area. He endeared himself to town and countryside by his upright bearing and personable character.

ACHIEVEMENTS

For over half a century, Claude C. Cunningham dedicated his life to the advancement of agriculture in his native state. It was a career he loved, fortified by exact knowledge, technical skill and high intelligence. He made a number of distinct contributions to the first half of the twentieth century's sweeping improvements in the quality of farm crops.

Following college, his professional association with the Kansas State Agricultural College (later to become Kansas State University) began when he joined the Fort Hays Branch Station staff in 1909 as an agronomist.

In 1911, Cunningham moved to the college's Department of Agronomy in Manhattan, where he served until taking an early retirement in 1920. During his time at the college, he had been the head of co-operative experiments and assistant professor of crops, later becoming an associate professor.

Retiring early to attain his boyhood ambition to operate a farm of his own, he continued working out his theories so that his accomplishments in plant breeding and selection formed an unbroken string through his college and private endeavors.

In the 1940s, approximately 50,000 acres of corn was planted in Butler County annually, at a seed cost of about \$60,000 based on that day's hybrid seed prices. Most of this seed corn was imported from outside the state. If this seed could be produced locally, naturally that annual seed cost could be retained as general community wealth and resource.

Cunningham's work included the selection pink kafir, once important in Kansas; selections that led to Pride of Saline corn, a leader before hybrids; selection to improve Trinoka sweet corn; selection of Cunningham Sunrise Kafir and of Cunningham Midland Yellow Dent Corn; selection of Cunningham Atlas, noted for uniformly high quality, early maturity, and short, sweet stalks; and breeding of Trinoka No. 27, a hybrid field corn adapted to and widely grown in the counties around El Dorado until 1954 when drought ended corn production in the area.

C. C. Cunningham and sons at their Trinoka farms clearly proved by the success of their breeding projects that hybrid seed corn could be successfully produced in Butler County. The elder Cunningham worked to develop a hybrid corn especially suited and adapted to South-Central Kansas.

The mid-season yellow hybrid, Trinoka No. 27, stood up against all comers, averaging 65.8 bushels per acre. This topped thirteen other varieties in competition. In further three-year testing, it averaged 58 bushels per acre in yields, again topping a field of six. It proved to be drought resistant and adapted to the local climate, holding its ears better than many hybrids and producing a good quality corn.

As a certified seed grower, Cunningham supplied much of the seed used in raising outstanding Butler County crops. Farmer friends placed orders early each year to assure having a supply of the valuable hybrid seed corn and certified kafir and sorgho which he produced.

He followed a definite system of crop rotation which called for maintaining between 25 and 30 per cent of the ground in legumes and alternating crops of small grains, corn or sorgho. He employed lime, phosphate, legumes and nitrogen for soil-building practices and also practiced contour plowing where required.

Cunningham served as judge at the Kansas State Fair for 44 years, at the Kansas Free Fair for 38 years, and the Oklahoma State Fair for 22 years. He judged at the International Hay and Grain Association for six years, and also the International Livestock Exposition at Chicago. He appeared on the Skelly Radio Hour on local radio in the days before television.

In 1947, he was elected to the board of directors of the Kansas Hybrids Association.

Also involved in the raising of sheep, in 1947 Cunningham had 50 ewes that lacked only nine pounds of averaging 14 pounds per fleece. He would tell how they never let the ewes get hungry or go off feed, and advised the use of good high-protein alfalfa hay. The Cunninghams kept an average of 61 ewes and 70 lambs, as well as between 10 and 12 head of cattle on the place. In 1947, they had a white colt of Palamino stock that was a rare and fascinating animal to behold.

The August 1950 issue of McCall's magazine featured an illustrated article about the Trinoka Farms and Claude and Myrtel Cunningham. This piece was written by Myra Lockwood Brown, another Butler County resident.

AWARDS, RECOGNITION

Cunningham held several premier seed grower awards. He was named Premier Seed Grower for 1930, the first year that such awards were made for exceptional farming success and seed production.

In 1945, he was the recipient of the Skelly Award for Superior Achievement in Agriculture.

The presentation of Kansas State College's Distinguished Service Award in Agriculture to Claude C. Cunningham was a highlight of the annual wheat field day in 1958. He was only the third man to receive the honor, being cited for being one of the nation's leading plant breeders.

Cunningham's last official recognition came to him the year before his death, when he received a certificate making him one of only six honorary members of the Kansas Crop Improvement Association.

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