

REMINISCING ABOUT A REMARKABLE CAREER

An Interview with Dr. Allen Copping

FRANK L. HEBERT, D.D.S.

Thank you, Dr. Copping, for this interview. In order to keep it as informal as possible, why don't you just start at the very beginning and tell us about yourself and what you consider the high points of your career.

Dr. Copping: Although I don't remember much of the occasion, the record shows that I was born on Feb. 11, 1927, to Allen J. and Marie Burns Copping in a house on Grand Route St. John right next to the New Orleans Fair Grounds Race Track. (This may account for my lifelong love of thoroughbred racing.)

After several years, we moved into the ninth ward where I attended B. M. Palmer Grammar School. Later, I attended E. D. White High School for half a year until the new Francis T. Nicholls high school was completed in February 1939 and graduated from Nicholls the last Friday of May 1943.

The next day I started Loyola University where I spent the next six years doing my pre-dental and dental studies, getting my D.D.S. with the class of 1949.

After graduation, I immediately entered the U.S. Navy as a dental intern in training at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. The Korean War started in June of 1950, and I was assigned for 18 months to the USS *Consolation*, a hospital ship based in Korea caring for the wounded from that war.

Following duty in the war zone, I asked for and was assigned to the dental clinic at the Naval Station in Algiers. After about a year, I was released from active duty and entered private practice in New Orleans for the next 19 or 20 years.

From the very beginning of this period, I was on the part-time faculty at Loyola teach-



Dr. Allen Copping, former president of Louisiana State University, with a portrait of his mother, Marie Burns Copping, in the lecture room at LSU School of Dentistry dedicated in her honor.

ing dental anatomy and crown and bridge. When Loyola closed the dental school, I took a part-time position at LSU.

In 1969, I became director of continuing education at LSUSD while still engaged in private practice. When Ray Luebke opened a private endodontic practice, I closed my practice and accepted the full-time position of assistant dean and professor of crown and bridge at LSU. After three years in this position, Dean Jeansonne retired to teach and do research and I was appointed dean of the dental school.

Then Governor Edwin Edwards appointed Medical Center Chancellor and

former United States Surgeon General William Stewart head of the Louisiana State Department of Health and Human Resources. The governor asked me to take Stewart's job as Chancellor after only two months as dean of the dental school, a job I felt qualified for and really liked. I demurred, but Dr. Silas O'Quinn, dean of the medical school, assured me that most of his clinical people would like to see me accept the job.

They contacted Jimmy Peltier, a member of the LSU Board of Supervisors, who liked the idea and took it to the board. The board approved and named me chancellor of the Medical Center. I accepted the challenge and served for 11 years. From my standpoint, I believe that it is the best job in the state.

Nevertheless, Dr. Martin Woodin, president of the LSU System, had, for several years, attempted to retire and began to press the board on that issue. They had approached me twice about taking his job, but I enjoyed the chancellorship of the Medical Center and refused.

Finally, two of the board members cornered me and indicated that Woodin could not postpone retirement any longer and was definitely leaving. Because of my refusal they made me promise to talk to the governor about the job, and I agreed.

Governor Edwin Edwards, who was newly re-elected, said to me, "Allen, Dr. Woodin is moving out and this board is unanimously behind you. I would like to help LSU in my next four years, and I would like you to be at the helm since I know you." Well, there wasn't much I could say to that except, "Yes." So I accepted, and it was rough sledding for a long time.

Among other things, the oil industry collapsed, and during my first 11 years as pres-

ident, we had 14 budget cuts. When I started the job, there were about 25 or 30 people working in the office; now that figure is about half as many.

Despite this, it has been a privilege to serve the state and the university in this position for the past 14 years. It has been a great experience.

Even though those were rough times, you did have your successes—for example, the establishment of the Pennington Research Center. Tell us about that.

Dr. Copping: Sure. Let me tell you that story. It was while I was still chancellor and just before I became president of the system—I can't remember the exact year—when the chief executive officer at Kaiser Aluminum in Baton Rouge, also a member of the LSU Board of Supervisors, told me about a gentleman in Baton Rouge who had made it big in the oil industry and wanted to give some money for research. He told me that this person was talking with some other universities around the country and suggested that I make an appointment to see him, warning me as he made the suggestion that this person was a good businessman but tough, and a little eccentric.

Since I didn't have anything to lose, I made the appointment and met "Doc" Pennington for the first time in his office in the American Bank Building in downtown Baton Rouge.

I remember distinctly that he smoked a big cigar and was very nice, and that on his desk was a little sign that read, "**He Who Has the Gold Rules.**" We started out exchanging a few pleasantries, but he didn't mess around with much of that. He was a person who got right to the point.

He looked at me and said, "If I gave you \$100 million, what would you do with it in the field of research?" That rocked me on my heels, and the wheels began to turn in my head, but before I started to talk, I noticed a large credenza behind his chair on which were lined up lots of medicine bottles that I recognized as bottles containing vitamins. That lit a light in my head.

Fortunately, we had been talking about nutrition centers, so I remarked that, unlike

other sections of the country, the South was lacking in a Nutritional Research Center that could contribute to knowledge in preventive medicine and other related health areas.

Before I could go any further, he held up his hand as if to stop me and said, "**You've got the hundred million dollars!**" I had hit the right button.

He added \$25 million more to it in common stock. I soon learned what a "smart, tough businessman" meant. We didn't get \$100 million in a lump sum. We got about 10% in oil and gas royalties and \$30 million in debenture bonds paying 12% every year, which translated to about \$5 million a year.

I convinced Dr. Woodin, who was still president, to let these funds stay in the foundation and accumulate in order to avoid wading through all the bureaucratic red tape that other investing would involve. By the time I became president, the laboratory and administration building of the Pennington Center was completed.

It took me another year and a half to raise \$17 million to equip the building because "Doc" Pennington balked at using any of the money for operation since he wanted it to be used exclusively for building construction. We butted heads several times, and he was angry with me a lot of the time because of this. It made me nervous to butt heads with a man who had a sign on his desk that read "**He Who Has the Gold Rules,**" but everything worked out in the long run.

The advisory committee, chaired by Jules Hirsch of Rockefeller University, reported unanimously at one of its biennial meetings that "the Pennington Center is outstanding and has done a fabulous job."

Well, that certainly is a remarkable and interesting story. It seems that you have a lot of them.

Dr. Copping: Yes, I do, but I can't tell them all right now. However, I do want to make it clear that the success stories of the Pennington Center, the Medical Center and the School of Dentistry resulted from a lot of help from many people. It's nice to take credit, but I had lots of good people around me all the time.

One thing that I've carried with me

throughout life was something I learned from the Pankey philosophy, namely "**Know Yourself.**" I can look in the mirror and say to myself that I know my shortcomings and what it takes for me to succeed. I always surrounded myself with the best people possible because I knew that if I had those kinds of people around me I would be successful.

Let me tell you one more story about an incident that has influenced me emotionally and left a permanent impression on my life. It involved the events incidental to the dedication of the Ronald Reagan Library in Simi Valley, Calif.

Sometimes you don't need brains if you have luck. Well, in this instance my luck was in knowing Lodwick Cook, CEO of ARCO (Atlantic Richfield Company) at the time.

Cook is a prominent LSU alumnus who has tremendous influence around the world and has done wonderful things for the Baton Rouge campus. He financed the new Alumni Center, and through personal influence, brought Margaret Thatcher, President Nixon and President Reagan to Baton Rouge for LSU graduations. My good fortune is that we have gotten to be good friends.

Well, Lod was chairman of the committee for the dedication of the Reagan Library, and he invited me to the dedication. It turned out that I was the only university president at the ceremonies.

Bob Rasmussen accompanied me, and as we arrived at the Bellaire Hotel in Beverly Hills for a reception on the first night, we were greeted personally by two gentlemen, Ambassador Walter Annenberg and a Mr. Kreugge, reputed to be the richest man in the United States at that time. The crowd was small, and we were in a group with Nancy and Ronald Reagan. I was overwhelmed.

At dinner, which was given in honor of the biggest contributors to the library, I was seated next to Cook and Pete Wilson, the governor of California.

The following day we attended a luncheon hosted by Rupert Murdoch, the publishing tycoon, at a country club near the library. The crowd that day was larger because this was for the "not-quite-as-big" contributors; however, this was obviously a relative consideration since there were gifts from Tiffany's

on each chair and other elegant amenities.

Some lady approached Bob and me and thanked us for our donations that made the library possible. I smiled and nodded knowingly to Bob.

Saturday night was another big dinner party at a hotel on Rodeo Drive: black tie, orchestra and many movie stars — very impressive.

The following day we were transported from the parking lot to the library via Universal City trams carrying us along with Bob Hope, Charlton Heston, Phyllis Diller and other celebrities. As we approached the library, sounds of the U. S. Marine Corps band and the Marine Corps choir could be heard.

We finally were ushered to the second row

in front of Bob Hope and behind Charlton Heston. Right in front of us the families of all the ex-presidents entered and took their seats, the Kennedys, the Johnsons... all of them. Then five women appeared—the wives of the five living presidents of the United States.

Lod Cook, the master of ceremonies, came forward and introduced each of the presidential wives as they took their seats. Then, the five living presidents appeared. It was the first time in the history of the United States that five presidents were ever together — Carter had flown in from Africa to be there.

One by one, Lod Cook introduced each president, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush. Cook called Charlton Heston to the

platform to make the opening remarks.

Following him, each president was called up to speak—not about politics, but about the United States and how great this country is. Between each presidential talk was an interlude of Marine Band music. Ronald Reagan spoke last and did his usual magnificent job.

After President Reagan finished, Cook introduced Lee Greenwood, who sang, "God Bless the U.S.A." as jets flew over. I can truthfully say that there wasn't a dry eye in the house. It just doesn't get better than that. That's why I saved this reminiscence for last. ▲



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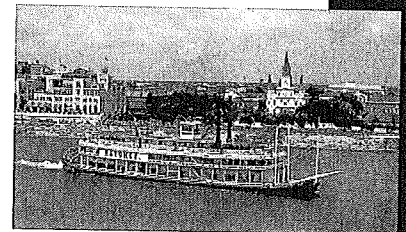
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