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A LOOK BACK: ELMER L. MEYERS

Well-regarded local physician
left lasting legacy to community

Meyers put accent on schools

EDITOR'S NOTE: Staff writer Todd Meyers is the great-grandson of Elmer L. Meyers on his mother's side. He is intrigued with family history.

By TODD MEYERS
tmeyers@leader.net

Homeroom teachers at Elmer L. Meyers High School were provided explicit instructions to read aloud to the student body on Dec. 17, 1936, the day after Dr. Elmer L. Meyers, 72, died in General Hospital after a stroke.

In all capital letters, the school's daily bulletin instructed:

"All students and faculty will participate in a memorial service in his honor. Everyone will return to home rooms at 1:30. We want everything to go along quietly and smoothly with nothing to mar the service. At the end, everyone will stand for the last hymn and remain standing in silent tribute until the brass quartet has played the dismissal."

The sternly worded bulletin further admonished:

"Impress upon them the need for absolute quiet — no talking when entering the service — no talking as they leave. Everyone will join in singing the hymns and in the Lord's Prayer."

A solemn farewell to a modest physician who considered his three decades of involvement with city schools his chief "hobby."

Meyers voiced his hope one final time during his Dedication Night speech that the opulent high school be instead named for the late Judge Charles E. Rice, prominent in the state judiciary. That according to The Elmpoint, the student newspaper that covered the dedication of Elmer L. Meyers High School on Nov. 21, 1930.

Some may have excused the popular doctor who served on the Wilkes-

Barre School Board for 25 years for being heady at the prospect of having his surname splashed across the grand \$2 million edifice — a school that would cost \$18.6 million to build today.

It was an honor rarely bestowed to a living man.

But "All dim" was the terse answer Meyers wrote in response to the item "Highlights of your career" on a form provided by the Wilkes-Barre Record for an article shortly after the school had been named in his honor.

Joe Lord, Class of '33, recalled "Those First Mad Days" of Meyers High in The Elmpoint in 1931:

"Former Coughlin and G.A.R. students united to help each other make their ways through the halls. And what halls, small ones, large ones and endless ones! You could leave chapel from any door and gosh! you were lost. After wandering around for several minutes, you might find yourself and you might not."

"Then, the construction was still being completed. Piles of marble, cement,

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- 1 Elmer L. Meyers High School, complete with indoor pool, cost \$2 million to build in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The building would cost more than \$18 million to build today.
- 2 Meyers stands with his daughter, Margaret, next to the Wyoming Monument in 1906.
- 3 Meyers rides with daughter Margaret behind Ben the horse on Wyoming Avenue enroute to a house call in 1906.
- 4 Dr. Elmer L. Meyers, Princeton years.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MEYERS FAMILY



MEYERS

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boards, etc. were heaped about in the halls. We always managed to climb through, but it supplied a good excuse for being late to class."

A man who believed in education — as both a teacher and longtime board member — Meyers may have frowned at that last observation.

A graduate of Wilkes-Barre schools and Princeton University, Meyers headed the first college preparatory department at Wilkes-Barre High School, teaching Latin and Greek from 1894 to 1897. He also served as superintendent of White Haven Borough Schools from 1892 to 1894.

In his Dedication Night remarks, Meyers credited the community for the decreasing number of students leaving high school before graduation.

"These people possess the opportunity for an education without any personal cost. They seize this opportunity while it is so conveniently to be had. The people of this valley have learned to appreciate the value of education — neither commercializing their time nor wasting it in loafing."

And although he headed the nine-teacher team charged with preparing academic-minded students for college, Meyers also believed in the practical application of knowledge. He was well pleased with the art, printing, electric and industrial shops in the new high school.

"Not everyone hopes or wishes to attain academic education sufficient for higher education; however, academic branches are not the principal phases of education," Meyers told those gathered at the dedication. "In many instances, industrial experience is more beneficial, and the shops aid greatly in furthering this type of education."

During his quarter century on the School Board, Meyers helped oversee the construction of Weaver, Guthrie, Palmer, Grant Street, Miners Mills, G.A.R. and Meyers high schools.

Meyers left the city schools in 1897 to pursue a career in medicine. Before becoming a teacher, he had taken premedical courses at Princeton. He graduated as a physician

from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia and returned to Wilkes-Barre to practice medicine in 1902.

For 27 years, he served as a member of the staff of General Hospital. He practiced all phases of medicine but specialized in obstetrics later in his career. In 1917 he invented the Meyers Obstetrics Forceps, an improved version of delivery forceps.

He excelled in his practice, awarded one of the highest honors obtainable by a physician, a Fellowship in the American College of Surgeons. He also served on the board of the trustees of General Hospital and helped establish the Angeline Elizabeth Kirby Memorial Health Center.

Meyers maintained his office at 239 S. Franklin St., while living next door (in the same building) at 237 S. Franklin St.

In the 1960s, Wilkes College converted the large home into Doane Hall, the school's first infirmary and later a women's dorm. The college razed the historic home in 1975 to make way for a new physical plant.

At 39, Meyers married Grace Hampton Morgan of Wilkes-Barre at the home of the bride's grandmother at 141 N. Franklin St. The Record called the bride "one of this city's most popular young ladies" and "for the occasion the home of the bride was prettily decorated with flowers, palms, potted plants and other greenery."

The couple had two daughters, Margaret Faulke Meyers and Helen Welles Meyers.

"The girls always had the best. He wanted them to have a very good education, he wanted them to be adept at doing things," said Charlotte Hein of Ocala, Fla., Helen's daughter. "He didn't accept mediocrity."

A stickler for education, Meyers sent Margaret to Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y., in 1926, and Helen to The Baldwin School for girls in Bryn Mawr and later New York University.

Hein never met Elmer Meyers, who died two years before she was born. But she often rode the train from Allentown to spend the week with Meyers' widow, Grace. Grace carved the family home into apartments, while continuing to live on the first floor of half of the building.

"(Grace) always called him 'the

doctor' or 'Dr. Meyers,'" Hein remembered. She said the parlor was decorated with elegant framed pictures of the late physician.

"He had a flair," Hein said. "He always liked to have the family together at dinner. He sort of held court that way. He allowed the children to come in and say hello in his office. He led life to the fullest."

Although Meyers employed a household staff that included a cook, maid, chauffeur and gardener, the doctor was not fantastically wealthy. Shortly after his death, his estate was valued at about \$3,800 — about \$43,000 today. The family did lose an undetermined amount of money when the stock market crashed.

Between collecting rent from long-term tenants and making wise investments with the estate, Grace lived a long and comfortable life until her death in 1969 at the age of 92.

"She bought herself a beautiful mink stole, and she always had lovely dresses," Hein said. "She loved to eat at Percy Brown's, a cafeteria on Northampton Street. Everybody met there."

Hein said Meyers was among the most-skilled obstetricians in Wilkes-Barre and counted many wealthy women among his clientele.

Meyers was well-liked by patients, who pooled their money to send the doctor on a month-long European cruise in 1927. His North Cape Cruise log listed stops in Copenhagen, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Munich, Lucerne, Heidelberg, Wiesbaden and London.

Before purchasing an automobile, Meyers rode in his black buggy behind Ben the horse to make house calls as far out as Wyoming.

"He was a very hard worker," Hein said. "He didn't elevate his prices to the extent of gouging anybody."

In a letter written to his wife near the end of the cruise, Meyers said he enjoyed Europe so much that he wanted to return with his family. The opportunity never arose.

A quote published in the 1931 Anniversary Issue of The Elmprint, a year after the dedication, summed up well the life and career of Dr. Elmer L. Meyers: "Whose public works will best attest his fame, whilst private worth adds value to his name."











