

"John Cunningham"

Carroll County Times Article for 16 March 1997

By Jay A. Graybeal

In my 23 February column I presented John Cunningham's description of the 1929 bank robbery of The Farmers and Mechanics National Bank of Westminster. His long career in banking was recognized by a telegram from President Kennedy in 1963: "Congratulations on being named by your friends and associates in Westminster and Carroll County as 'America's Oldest Banker in Years of Continuous Service.'" Your 77 years record as a banker is certainly an impressive one and you deserve all the honors which have been given you. With sincere good wishes for many more years of productive banking service to your community."

Mr. Cunningham continued in the banking industry until his death on New Year's Eve 1965, a few hours short of his 99th birthday. His obituary related part of the story of his rich life, including his interests in bicycling, walking and poker:

Westminster, Jan. 1 [Special].

"John H. Cunningham, believed to have been the oldest banker in the United States, died yesterday at his home before he would have rounded out 99 years.

Born on New Year's day here in 1867, Mr. Cunningham went to work daily at the Carroll County National Bank, where he was chairman of the board, from 1885 to the beginning of his final illness seven weeks ago. Many days he walked the mile to work from his home at 95 West Green street.

Continued Career

On January 1, 1885, while a senior at Western Maryland College, Mr. Cunningham began his banking career as a clerk with the Farmers and Mechanics National Bank, following the footsteps of his father William, who was a clerk there.

He continued his career there through the bank's merger with two others into the National Bank in 1948, when he was made chairman of its board.

On January 1, 1960, the directors of the bank honored Mr. Cunningham by establishing the John H. Cunningham Scholarship, a \$1,000 grant for each of four college years awarded to a Carroll county student.

Mr. Cunningham was believed to be Western Maryland College's oldest living alumnae, and was at the time of his death the State's only living charter member of the Maryland State Fireman's Association.

Set Watches By Him

Mr. Cunningham would be at this desk every working day promptly at 9 a.m. and would not leave until 3 in the afternoon, except on days when the board of directors met. Fellow employees reportedly set their watches by him.

He brought promptness to his outside interests as well: In November, 1964, a newspaper sketch observed that Mr. Cunningham had not missed a town meeting in Westminster since 1883, the year he became old enough to vote.

Club Meets

New Year's Day was the occasion for Mr. Cunningham's poker club to meet for a game that began promptly at 11 a.m., broke for dinner at 5 p.m., then resumed until 11 p.m. During the year Mr. Cunningham played every Tuesday night between 7 and 11 p.m.

Mr. Cunningham's interest in politics was rewarded during the Coolidge Administration with his appointment in 1923 as Surveyor of Customs at Baltimore, a post he held for nine years. In 1911, Mr. Cunningham ran unsuccessfully for State Comptroller.

Beside politics and poker, Mr. Cunningham loved walking. On weekends as late as 1964, he hiked along country roads, a white handkerchief tied to his cane, for safety.

"I only walk half as far and about half as fast as I used to," he told an interviewer in November, 1964. "It's a strain to walk more than 4 or 5 miles," the then 97-year-old explained.

In his earlier days, Mr. Cunningham, who gave up driving an automobile six years ago, was a bicyclist of renown. According to a banker's association bulletin, in 1898 he bicycled 200 miles from Westminster to Atlantic City, N.J., in one day.

Was Mason

Mr. Cunningham was a past master of the Masonic order and was a member of the Westminster Church of Christ. His wife, the former Mary Irwin, died in 1949.

Mr. Cunningham is survived by his daughter, Miss Mary L. Cunningham, of 95 West Green street.

Services for Mr. Cunningham will be held at 10 a.m. Tuesday at the Baker Chapel of Western Maryland College."

Photo caption: John Cunningham posed in c1960 with his Poker Club friends in Thelma Hoffman's restaurant at 216 E. Main Street in Westminster. Standing left to right: Ben Thomas, Paul Whitmore, E. Miller Richardson, and Ralph Bonsack. Seated left to right: Frank Leidy, Norman Boyle, John Cunningham, ----- Brown and Theodore Brown. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.