

In Memoriam

GEORGE S. SHIRK (1913-1977)

GEORGE S. SHIRK, WHOSE 1965 book, *Oklahoma Place Names* served as a guide for many subsequent authors doing similar works, died from cancer March 23, 1977 in Oklahoma City. He was born in Oklahoma City, loved Oklahoma dearly, and carried the image of a cultured gentleman over the world. Following his father's footsteps into the profession of law, he was admitted to the Oklahoma bar and the bar of the United States Supreme Court, and served as Special Justice of the Supreme Court of Oklahoma.

An ANS member since 1966, Shirk used his Phi Beta Kappa intellect and keen interest in almost anything worthwhile to carve his name in history as an author, public speaker, scholar, scout executive, civic leader, ambassador of good will, world traveler, soldier, historian, diplomat, peacemaker, mayor, collector, devotee of the arts, humanitarian, and philanthropist. His law partner, William J. Robinson, characterized him as "a central clearing house."

In his preface to the 1974 edition of *Oklahoma Place Names*, Shirk gave substantial importance to the American Name Society effort in 1969 to initiate first steps for a nationwide place-name survey of the United States, to the organization of a Survey Commission, and to pilot studies instituted in several states. He looked forward to the ultimate goal of a national center for all place-name information in the U.S.A.

The preface hinted at the increased interest one book on place-names could generate. With the cooperation of the Oklahoma Press Association for the second edition, appeals to readers to come forward with help concerning lists of place-names brought as many replies as did the first list. Reader interest had been re-kindled, or perhaps new individuals who had not known of the earlier appeal came forward with needed resource material and information.

Shirk hoped that *Oklahoma Place Names* would be a pleasant and satisfactory mixture of what George R. Stewart in his meritorious *American Place-Names* termed the interests of the "linguist, the geographer, the historian, and the folk-lorist." He believed the entire panorama of Oklahoma history to be reflected in its place-names. Expressing his desire to "serve the needs of history" rather than any

other objective, he stressed the “designation of a *place occupied by people*” as an indication of his humanitarian viewpoint. The human element prevailed, as he illustrated in the story of the engineer from Pennsylvania in charge of construction of the Santa Fe Railway from Purcell to Ardmore, who in laying out the stations along the road adopted names of places in his home state found along the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad west of Philadelphia.

Shirk was an enthusiast when it came to creating order out of chaos. Jack Wettengel, Executive Director of the Oklahoma Historical Society, worked closely with George during his two-decade term as president of the Society. It was largely through Shirk’s initiative that three and one-half million priceless documents, which formerly had merely been stored, were catalogued. Through his efforts, the Society’s unfinished building was completed. Under his guidance—and mainly through his personal work—the state society identified and investigated data and marked more than 250 historical spots. Membership grew from 2,000 to 6,000.

While his interest in history was contagious, and his dynamic application of it brought Shirk his greatest recognition, he was a “source” in unusual circumstances. Jack Wettengel tells of an interesting example: “It was always George Shirk’s philosophy and practice to promote Oklahoma wherever he might find himself. In Stockholm, while mayor of Oklahoma City, Shirk told the President of the Scandanavian Airlines that Oklahoma City had more records on his firm’s aircraft than the firm’s home city did. His host was skeptical. A month or so later George received a letter in which his host conceded that the Federal Aviation Administration Aeronautical Center in Oklahoma City did indeed have more SA records than anybody.”

When Shirk found a hint of something “interesting” he was like a bloodhound following the scent: tireless in his efforts. In an old book he stumbled on to evidence that Edward B. Fairchild had operated a notable pre-statehood winery somewhere northeast of Oklahoma City shortly after the 1889 run. Shirk looked up the legal description from the early-day owner’s land patent. He spent several weekends stepping off the section, and finally found the remains of the 14x40-foot rock structure in an old creek bed. It had been built with two-foot-thick walls, and over a spring to provide cooling. Ever a man of action, and willing to invest his own funds in a project, Shirk hired a contractor to remove tons of mud and silt. He brought back to life the natural stream that flowed through the site, replaced torn away rock and stone. With brush cleared away, the wine cellar was totally restored—and the

Fairchild Wine vault is now a national historic site.

Tirelessly, he spent his own energy and funds finding and preserving other historic places. He did not hesitate to go to wealthy friends to help acquire places of historic interest. He was always good-natured and practical. Often he tried to save something threatened. When urban renewal doomed the Baum Building, a replica of the Doge's Palace in Vienna, Shirk led an effort to move it. Then, convinced that the idea was too expensive to try, he gave in good-naturedly—but paid to salvage its cupolas. At age 30 he was the youngest full Colonel to serve on General Eisenhower's SHAEF General Staff during World War II. He could explain the significance of each medal of valor, some of them tracing back to days of the imperial courts in Europe. He was awarded the Legion of Merit, Bronze Star Medal, Croix de Guerre, and was named Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor.

It would be impossible here to list his service to various humanitarian and civic interests, his contributions, offices, and awards. His influence was felt in almost every worthwhile institution, organization, commission, etc. in Oklahoma City and elsewhere. He touched hospitals, schools, the Salvation Army, Scouts, all the arts, the United Fund, Junior Achievement and, of course, the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. He was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1969, selected in 1966 for Sertoma Club's Services to Mankind Award, and in 1974 was honored by the Cowboy Hall of Fame Western Heritage Center with a special award for his unique contribution to the preservation of history.

Shirk was widely traveled. On one occasion he visited remainders of the seven wonders of the ancient world. On some trips he circled the globe. Each November for several years he took part in the famed London-to-Brighton race for autos made before 1905. He loved and owned Rolls Royce cars, including one previously owned by oilman Harry Sinclair. He owned a station wagon that had belonged to Winston Churchill. Everywhere he went he made lifelong friends, with whom he exchanged visits over the years. He was at ease with any class of people, at ease in any situation.

As Dolphus Whitten, President of Oklahoma City University said, "He could speak their language, whether he was with the Lord Mayor of London or the garbage collectors of Oklahoma City. He was humane and compassionate. He gave much of his time and means to helping people in need. He knew the real meaning of Christian charity."

He had a keen sense of humor. He placed an Oklahoma City limits sign in Northern Norway. He issued a proclamation annexing the moon

after our astronauts landed there. Wearing his cowboy hat, he was our "Renaissance man with a western drawl." So what is the end of a man of so very, very many varied interests, talents and accomplishments? There is none! The solid bricks of human endeavor and accomplishment which George Shirk laid will be used by future generations to create an even greater tomorrow.*

Charles K. Fewkes

* After a year of planning, in the fall of 1976, while Shirk was still alive, friends raised funds and dedicated the George S. Shirk History Center, occupying one-third of an entire floor of the OCU Library. He had never married. In his will he left his personal library and historical collections, maps, stamps, mail covers and all his notes, card index files, correspondence and reference material used in preparation of his book *Oklahoma Place Names* all to OCU.