

Joe Vincent Meigs

1892-1963

By Langdon Parsons, Boston, Massachusetts

ONE OF THE most beloved, best known, and most productive figures in modern American Gynecology, Joe Vincent Meigs, died on Oct. 24, 1963, while returning from a medical meeting in Rochester, New York, where he had just taken part in a panel discussion on his favorite subject, pelvic cancer. It was his seventy-first birthday.

One cannot comment on the amazingly productive professional life of Joe Meigs without focusing on his extraordinary personal characteristics. He had such charm, understanding, and compassion and was so genuinely modest and humble, despite his distinguished accomplishments, that all who knew him instinctively trusted him and regarded him as a close personal friend. To all who know him intimately, as well as those who were only acquaintances, he was always Joe.

He was a legend to the long line of medical students, residents, and associates who were privileged to work with him. You never worked for him nor were you ever told that you must do something. His enthusiasm, inquisitive nature, and unbelievable capacity to work were so contagious that it was impossible not to be inspired to try to follow his example. We can only hope to approach the high level of achievement he set in patient care, teaching, and research.

Joe Meigs' devotion to medicine began when he was born into a medical family in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1892, for his father was the Dean of the general practitioners and surgeons in this area. There was never any question about what he wanted to do. He prepared for Medical School in the Lowell

Schools and went on to graduate from Princeton in 1915. Princeton never had a more ardent supporter and the University has had few graduates of whom she can be any more proud. The same can be said of Harvard Medical School, from which he graduated in 1919, and the Massachusetts General Hospital where he served his surgical internship immediately after. His life time interest in gynecology began at the Free Hospital for Women in Brookline, Massachusetts, where he served as Dr. William P. Graves' private assistant. This was an inspirational period for he acquired many fundamental skills from this superb technician and solid student of gynecological problems. This was the beginning of his very real interest in pathology and led to the publication of his first book, *Tumors of the Female Organs*, which he published in 1934. The pathological slides of every case mentioned in the book received his personal attention. From then on, Joe Meigs was as much interested in why and how things happened as he was in the mechanics of dealing with them.

This is very evident when one reads any one of his 150 manuscripts or the six books he wrote or edited. Recognition of these interests also appears in the Citation for the Doctor of Science degree that Northwestern University conferred upon him in 1959 for they emphasized Dr. Meigs' "ability to combine successfully the role of research investigator and clinical surgeon." These qualities were also widely recognized abroad and were the basic reason he received Honorary membership in 15 foreign medical societies and degrees from three universities.

His many accomplishments in the field of gynecology were equally well known in this country and were rewarded by active membership in more than a score of national gynecological, obstetrical, surgical and scientific societies. He was enormously pleased to be honored by election to the presidency of this association in 1959.

To record all of Joe Meigs' contributions to the discipline of gynecology particularly in the field of pelvic cancer, would be a monumental task. His interest in cancer was widely known and his ideas on the role of surgery in treating cancer of the female genital tract have been widely accepted and applied. It stemmed from his extensive experience at the Massachusetts State Hospital for Cancer at Pondville where he acted as chief of the division of pelvic cancer for more than 30 years. His uncanny ability to communicate his thoughts to others was particularly evident in the field of pelvic cancer for he had a leading role in both generating and propagating an interest in the Papanicolaou smear and in directing attention toward a reconsideration of the role of surgery in the treatment of cervical cancer.

Joe Meigs will always be one of the great names on the roster of members of the Mas-

sachusetts General Hospital. The affiliation of the Vincent Memorial Hospital and the Massachusetts General Hospital was accomplished largely because of his ardent sponsorship. Of this he was justifiably proud as he was of the impressive list of residents who passed through this teaching program.

Perhaps the honor that pleased him most was the establishment of the Joe Vincent Meigs Professorship of Gynecology at the Harvard Medical School in 1962. This was made possible by generous contributions from his friends, colleagues and former patients. The clinical activities associated with it center on the Vincent Memorial Hospital and the Massachusetts General Hospital. It was a source of great satisfaction to him that the first occupant of the Chair was a former pupil and associate, Howard Ulfelder.

Joe Meigs loved his family more than he loved medicine. Without the unselfish devotion of his wife and children he never could have accomplished all the things that he wanted so much to do. We all can take as much pride in them as we did in him for making it possible. We, who knew him intimately, can have no higher goal than to follow in his footsteps to the best of our ability.

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JOE VINCENT MEIGS, devoted member of the American Gynecological Society, died unexpectedly on his seventy-first birthday, Oct. 24, 1963, while flying back to Boston from Rochester, New York. He died literally "in harness," for he had just delivered a lecture on the long-term results of the surgical treatment of patients with cancer of the cervix.

Joe Meigs was the second child and the first son of Joe Vincent and Sarah Parker Meigs. He was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, on Oct. 24, 1892. His father, uncle, and grandfather were physicians and there appears to have been no doubt in his own mind that he, too, would be a doctor. He graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1919, after preparing at Lowell High School and Princeton University. His future special interests within the field of medicine may have been aroused when he served, while still an undergraduate, as student intern at the Free Hospital for Women.

After graduation, he was appointed a House Pupil on the East Surgical Service of the Massachusetts General Hospital. In 1921, he returned to the Free Hospital for Women where he served as House Officer with additional duties of assisting Dr. William P. Graves, a superb teacher and technician but a hard task master. Then he returned to the Massachusetts General Hospital where he established and maintained his entire subsequent career. In 1921, he married Elizabeth Wallace who survives him with their three children, Wallace, Sarah Parker, and Elizabeth.

At that time all gynecological patients were treated on the general surgical service of the Massachusetts General Hospital. With encouragement from his superiors, Meigs began to focus his attention on gynecological

problems with special interest in the area of cancer and he soon established a gynecological section within the Tumor Clinic at the Massachusetts General Hospital. In 1927 he joined with Ernest Daland and others to establish the Massachusetts State Hospital for Cancer at Pondville. He then collected and reviewed all the material in the files of the Massachusetts General Hospital, related it to his experiences at Pondville, and recorded his conclusions in clinical and pathological detail in his first book, *Tumors of the Female Pelvic Organs*, published in 1934.

During this period also, he first came to know the Vincent Memorial Hospital, established as a tribute to Mrs. J. R. Vincent and developed under a most capable superintendent to be an active Women's Hospital for acute illness and elective surgery.

From the time that he published his book until the onset of World War II, he perfected his techniques, assimilated and expanded his vast store of clinical information, cultivated a devoted private practice, and trained a succession of House Officers and Junior Assistants, whom he readily infected with his own enthusiasm. The culmination of his career must have been about 1940 when he was offered an appointment as Professor and Chairman of the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics in one of the major schools in Philadelphia. Harvard countered with an appointment as Professor and the Massachusetts General Hospital offered him a service of his own. By a lucky chance, the Vincent Memorial Hospital was debating a change in location and the Trustees had concluded that affiliation with a large teaching hospital would be the ideal solution to their difficulties. With Meigs as counsel and mediator, a happy union between the Vincent and the Massachusetts

General Hospital was negotiated. Building plans were shelved during the War but finally in 1947, an attractive, geographically distinct facility was completed. New and adequate space was now available for offices, laboratories, forty-three semiprivate and ward service beds, and up-to-date cystoscopy and conference rooms. It was now possible for Meigs to have his extensive private practice in one area, thereby enhancing his ability to communicate his ideas to his junior colleagues and the successive generations of well-trained surgical residents who rounded out their education under his supervision. It was impossible not to absorb at least a portion of his enthusiasm for his specialty. No one who was exposed to him could fail to develop a thoughtful approach toward pelvic surgery, with a strong feeling for anatomic principles and respect for living tissues. In his laboratories he fostered and stimulated a research program with particular emphasis on refining and expanding techniques in cytology and in the study of the behavior of malignant disease.

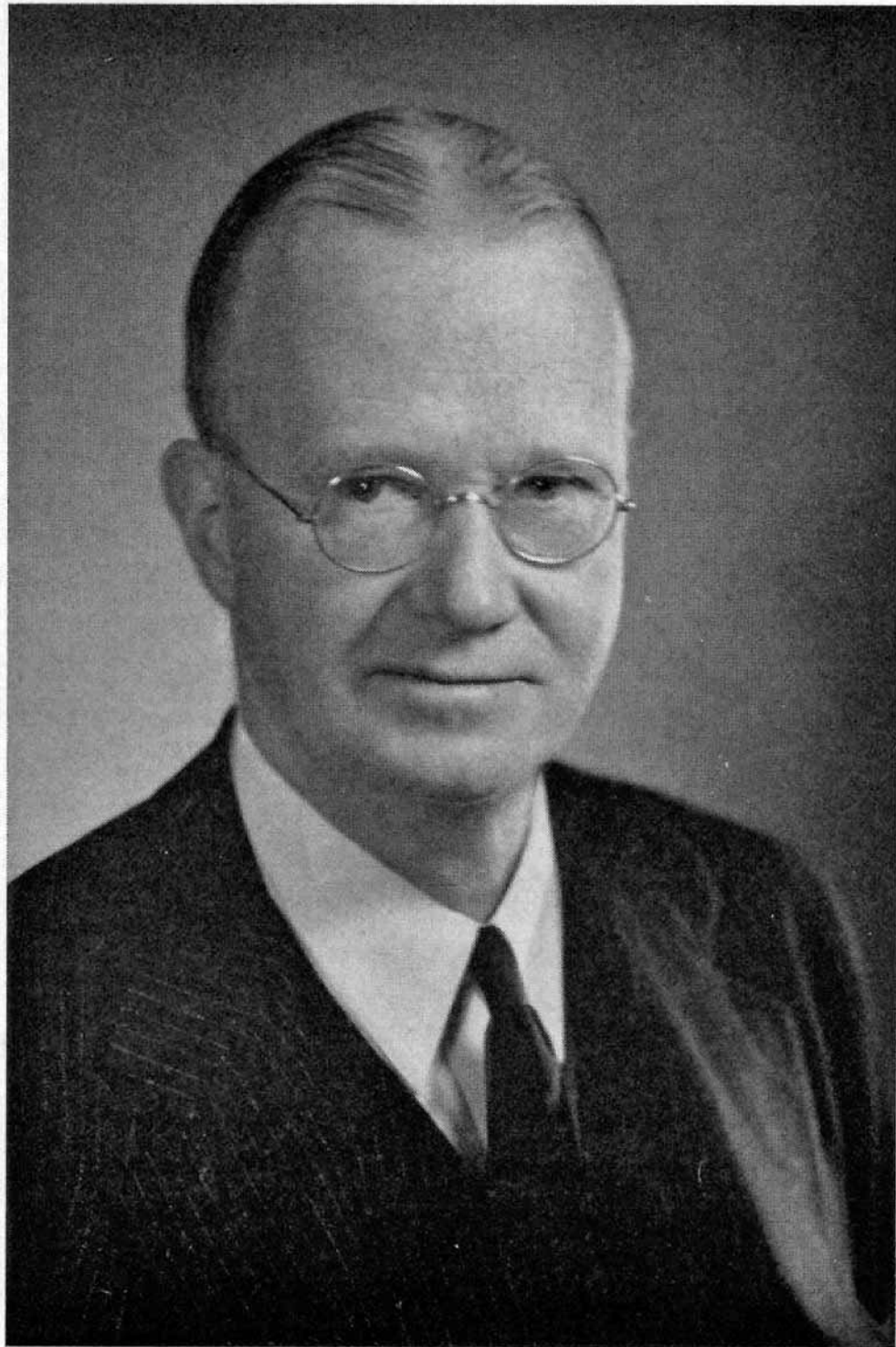
As he approached the age of fifty, the grand sweep of his career gathered momentum. With his easy facility for establishing close personal bonds, he was never without a host of friends, admiring colleagues, and attentive disciples. His reputation reached international proportions, and he became the intimate of leading gynecologists all over the world. Sixteen foreign associations elected him to Honorary Fellowship, including the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. In his own country he was invited to join all of the senior Obstetrical-Gynecological and Surgical Societies. Three universities conferred Honorary Degrees on him. Citations were also made by the American Cancer Society and by the Massachusetts General Hospital House Pupils Association (on the Hospital's one hundred fiftieth anniversary). In addi-

tion to his first book, Meigs edited the *Surgical Treatment of Cancer of the Cervix* and *Progress in Gynecology* through four volumes. A personal bibliography of over 150 manuscripts reveals a close interest in cancer of the cervix, ovary and vulva, endometriosis, human female endocrinology, enterocele, and a host of other conditions which he could discuss authoritatively from the point of view of both clinician and pathologist. The syndrome of ascites and hydrothorax sometimes found in association with benign solid ovarian fibroma is now generally accorded the eponym, Meigs' syndrome.

As he approached the statutory retirement age in 1955, he resigned his administrative and academic positions and, with health unimpaired, devoted himself with great personal satisfaction to an active private practice. A Professorship in gynecology at the Medical School was established through the gifts of a host of friends and patients and early in 1962, he was guest of honor at the dinner which signaled achievement of this goal and the activation of the Chair named in his honor.

Unquestionably, his personal qualities were appealing. His real hold on us, however, was established by the depth and sincerity of his interests. He was accorded respect without apparent effort on his own part and many of his most distinguished confreres insist that he exerted a major influence on their development. During his career in gynecology Meigs gave repeated proof that the specialty must intelligently embrace all areas of medical knowledge and must be able to use, in addition to surgery, new techniques as they appear in the allied fields of physiology, endocrinology, anatomy, pathology, and radiology. This breadth of interest was his greatest attribute and was recognized consciously or unconsciously by all his colleagues as his unique contribution to medicine.

Howard Ulfelder



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Obituaries

JOE VINCENT MEIGS

A.B., M.D., Hon.D.Sc., Hon.F.R.C.S.E., Hon.F.R.C.O.G.

OCTOBER 24th last was Joe Meigs' seventy-first birthday. He had been giving a paper at Rochester, N.Y., and his friends saw him to the plane. They offered him a drink whilst waiting and he refused saying that he would wait until he got home for his birthday celebration. He was in his usual high spirits and on his way to the plane, the steps of which let down from the tail, he called back "I don't need a speculum for this one". In the plane between Rochester and Syracuse, Joe suffered a massive coronary thrombosis. He was just living when admitted to hospital in Syracuse and died very shortly afterwards. Thus mercifully and swiftly and with practically no suffering there passed one of the greatest gynaecologists of our time.

Joe Meigs was born at Lowell, Massachusetts, on 24th October, 1892, and he graduated Bachelor of Arts from Princeton University in 1915 and Doctor of Medicine from Harvard in 1919. From that moment Harvard had a loyal and devoted supporter. Ten years later, after interning at Massachusetts General and doing a gynaecological residency at the Free Hospital for Women in Brookline, he was appointed Instructor in Surgery to Harvard Medical School, later Clinical Professor of Gynaecology and later still Emeritus Professor. His loyalty to Harvard broke down once a year when Harvard played Princeton at football. Then he would go and cheer on Princeton because as he said "I was there before Harvard".

In 1941 he became chief surgeon to the Vincent Memorial Hospital, and was for many years chief of gynaecology at the Commonwealth Cancer Hospital at Pondville and after his retirement from hospital work he continued his practice until his death.

Joe Meigs will always be remembered for the syndrome which now bears his name, although he was not the first to describe a case. It was at

one of his Thursday rounds at the Vincent (at which his staff, nurses, students, social workers and all connected with the patients attended) that Joe discussed whether it was Cullingworth in London or Lawson Tait in Birmingham who first recorded the syndrome when someone said, "Is it mentioned in the Old Testament?" Joe enjoyed the joke immensely and all his rounds were a mixture of medical wisdom and bright good humour, led of course by Joe himself. Ironically enough it was at another Thursday round that news of his death first reached Boston.

Joe was never happier than when surrounded by his family. He always liked to entertain friends at his home in Boston and was even happier on these occasions if his family could be with him. Mrs. Meigs, whom he married in 1921, would preside on these occasions with friendliness and good humour which the Meigs family radiated on such occasions, and when an English visitor was present she would pour Martinis from a glass teapot and Joe would make sly remarks about tea parties in Boston.

I have before me as I write the last letter I received from him just three weeks before his death. It was typical of all his letters. His handwriting was almost illegible and so all his correspondence was typed, but to his friends he always liked to add a little touch in his own handwriting. His secretary would leave these letters unsealed for him to add his postscript. He would then post them on his way home. Invariably, he would forget to seal the envelope and his last letter, like many others, bears an official stamp "Received unsealed".

Joe's greatest contribution to medicine was his work on carcinoma of the cervix. Always a keen and excellent pathologist, his surgery was the dexterous application of his great knowledge



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of the pathology of tumours. He was, in his own words, not very keen on what he called “dead-meat men”. These were pathologists with little clinical interest and even less clinical training. His close friends in the field of pathology were men who either had been or still were experienced clinicians.

His interest in malignant disease led him with others to form the Society of Pelvic Surgeons at whose meetings he was a great stimulator of thought, and when the day’s work was done Joe would be equally enthusiastic to make sure that “the party went with a swing”. On these occasions at dinner he would proudly wear his

R.C.O.G. tie. At one time there were two other members of this Society with the right to wear these ties. He would never fail at some stage to tweak his colleagues’ ties and say, “You boys had to work at an exam. for yours”, and then he would tell everyone around how immensely proud he was of his Honorary Fellowship which he received in 1954.

In the middle of the last war began Joe’s greatest work—the practical application of Papanicolaou’s observations on vaginal cytology. Money was scarce and work which had no immediate bearing on the war effort was unregarded. Nevertheless, he managed to get a

room next to the laundry which was 15 feet square and, more important still, he persuaded Dr. Ruth Graham to collaborate with him. At first they began to confirm Papanicolaou's findings on obvious cervical carcinomas. On 3rd March, 1944, came the turning point. Two cases with positive smears were operated on by Joe Meigs. Both had had the conventional type of biopsy which had not revealed cancer. Joe was convinced that he would find something apparent to the naked eye in the gross specimen. He operated and to his horror both cervixes appeared normal. His distress was not lightened by the fact that his critics were not slow in becoming vocal. A few days later distress was turned to triumph. The histological sections showed that both cervixes contained cancer. From that moment he realized that cancer could be diagnosed in an asymptomatic stage and cured with certainty, and from that day to his death he never ceased to preach that gospel.

Sometime later, Joe Meigs and Ruth Graham were asked to prepare an exhibition of their work and methods for the American Medical Association. Typically he refused unless Dr. Papanicolaou had been previously asked and had refused. As a result all three prepared a

joint exhibition. After this they received a Certificate of Honour, gave away 2,000 reprints and Joe gave a champagne party to celebrate what he knew to be a great milestone in the fight against cancer. After his retirement from the Vincent, he worked even harder on the dissemination of the knowledge of cytological diagnosis and the treatment of early cancer. Honours came to him and he received in addition to his Hon. F.R.C.O.G., the D.Sc. of North Western University and of Lowell Technical College, and the Honorary Fellowship of the R.C.S. Edinburgh. After his retirement he announced his intention of continuing to "live it up to the end". This he did to the great delight of his many friends. In the end he was granted his last wish and a recent letter from Mrs. Meigs contains the words ". . . I am so glad for his sake that he died as he always wished 'with his boots on'".

To Mrs. Meigs, his son and his two daughters and his grandchildren will go the sympathy of Joe's many friends in the British Commonwealth. They are the better for having known him and are sad to realize that he will not cross their paths again.

STANLEY WAY.