Historical Perspectives of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery: Stuart Harrington, MD (1889-1975)

Dr Stuart Harrington, the 20th president of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery, was born in Blossburg, Pennsylvania, on April 20, 1889. He attended Pennsylvania State College in 1908-1909 pursuing premedical studies and enjoying a year of varsity football. He went on to study medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, managing his time to include varsity football for 3 years, and was named to an All-American team in 1912 as a halfback. He was always known as "Tack" to friends and associates, suggesting a position other than halfback. In 1913 he received his degree of Doctor of Medicine from the University of Pennsylvania and interned at Howard Hospital in Philadelphia. During the 1913-1914 football seasons, he served as football coach at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to supplement his meager income.

Dr Harrington arrived at the Mayo Clinic in November 1914, as a Fellow in surgery in the Mayo Foundation, which was incorporated shortly after his arrival. His training included 6 months of general medical diagnoses and 5 years in various surgical sections. During this period, he earned a Master of Science degree in surgery from the University of Minnesota. In July 1920, he became head of a section of surgery at the Mayo Clinic, a post he occupied for 34 years, and ascended in the academic ranks to full professor.

Early in his career, while Dr Harrington was deeply committed to gastrointestinal and urologic surgery, Dr Will Mayo suggested that he assume a primary interest in thoracic and breast surgery. Though hesitant to do this, a negative reply to Dr Will Mayo was "not in the cards." It was promptly arranged for Dr Harrington to visit a number of pioneer thoracic surgeons such as Evarts Graham in St Louis, John Alexander in Ann Arbor, Peter Churchill in Boston, and Sauerbruch in Germany. Dr Harrington's tenacity and determined efforts with wise recruiting of associates soon established an international reputation in the diagnosis and treatment of diaphragmatic hernias and mediastinal tumors. His description of a one-stage repair of pharyngoesophageal diverticula led to a huge experience surpassing any recorded previously. A sign of the times contributed to a vast experience in managing chronic postpneumonic empyema, and pericardiectomy for chronic constrictive pericarditis. His results in surgical treatment of carcinoma of the breast were followed meticulously, producing valuable contributions in the management of this disease. He was given the highest awards by the American Medical Association for exhibits of treatment of the conditions mentioned above.

In 1937, Dr Harrington was elected the 20th president of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery and later a member of the Founders Group of the American Board of Surgery, organized in 1948. He was a member of many surgical societies but he was especially proud of the "Stuart Harrington Club" organized by his former residents, which met annually at the meeting of The American Association for Thoracic Surgery. Having experienced the occasional vicissitudes while

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working with the “firm taskmaster,” the former residents could, in a relaxed atmosphere, appreciate and enjoy the soft and likable side of their former chief.

During World War I, Dr Harrington was a First Lieutenant in the Medical Corp of the US Army and during World War II served on the Medical Advisory Board of the US Selective Service. While sometimes stern and intolerant of what he interpreted to be “less than excellent assistance,” Dr Harrington’s sincere and warm care of his patients was constantly evident. He and his lovely, devoted wife, Gertrude, were not blessed with children. Dr Harrington filled

the void with unusually long hours in the operating room. Mrs Harrington provided a faithful, prompt taxi service, appearing at the hospital entrance at all hours at his prompting. Aside from long hours in the operating room, automobile trips with his wife, Gertrude, provided special pleasure. Before his death in March 1975, Dr Harrington, virtually blind, enjoyed sitting in his beloved Cadillac with the garage doors open, because the running engine gave him a sense of riding.

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