



William Avison Meissner



William (Bill) Avison Meissner was born in Oregon City, Oregon on May 20, 1913. He obtained his A.B. from the University of Oregon in 1935 and gained his MD from the University of Oregon Medical School in 1938 intending to join his father's general practice. His father's death and Bill's remembrance of his father's disruptive life style, however, led Bill to decide on becoming a clinical specialist. A rotating internship at Multnomah Hospital in Portland Oregon (1938-39) was followed by a year of residency in pathology at the University of Oregon Medical School (1939-40), a common route in those days before selecting a specialty. Dr Meissner was so impressed by his mentors, Drs. Frank Menne and Warren Hunter, during that year that he decided to become a pathologist. He spent the next year of his pathology residency at the University of Chicago and the following year at Pondville State Hospital for Cancer in Walpole, Massachusetts. At the end of his residency Dr. Meissner joined the Department of Pathology at the New England Deaconess and New England Baptist Hospitals in Boston under Dr Shields Warren, whom he

worshipped and emulated. He became a diplomate of the American Board of Pathology in Anatomic and Clinical Pathology in 1943.

During World War II Dr. Meissner served in the United States Navy in the Pacific theatre. His hospital ship, Haven, was the first one sent into Nagasaki after the Plutonium Bomb to process and evacuate allied prisoners of war. Bill's observations on his autopsies of the Japanese victims, published in 1947, left a deep and long-lasting impression on him. Subsequently, he became Consultant in Pathology at the US Naval Hospital in Chelsea (1946 to 1974). He returned to the Deaconess and Baptist Hospitals in 1946, where he remained until he retired in 1976, having succeeded Dr Warren as Chairman of

Pathology in 1963. He served as President (1968-1970) and as Vice President (1970-71) of the Medical Administrative Board of the New England Deaconess Hospital and remained a corporation member until 1979. In 1976, the New England Deaconess Hospital honored him by naming the new building housing Pathology and Radiation Oncology, the William A Meissner Building. A plaque dedicated in 2009 now stands in its place.

Dr. Meissner was soft spoken, yet authoritative and convincing. Bill is remembered for his kind and straightforward attitude toward people. A visit to his office was always a pleasant occasion because of his genial personality, sharp insight into any problem and his positive outlook. He respected differences of opinion and clearly stated his own in an illuminating manner. He had a delightful sense of humor and a reservoir of brief, humorous stories that lightened the day. His mood was reflective, responsive and positive. He simplified complex problems. Throughout his life, his civility and collegiality were constants. Bill was not a religious man in the usual sense of the term. His bible was the well-known poem by James Henry Leigh Hunt about Abu Ben Adhem, who pleased God by loving his fellow man.

Dr. Meissner ran an exciting and exacting pathology residency training program. He possessed a unique ability to prepare his residents to behave humanely and civilly in their activities of daily living as well as in the practice of medicine, and to convey his tremendous enthusiasm for all aspects of Laboratory Medicine. He always asked his trainees for their opinions on cases but noted that he ‘controlled 51% of the vote’. Another favorite saying was “remember to praise your technicians when you are particularly pleased by their work as you will never forget to tell them when you are dissatisfied”. He did not allow the use of the passive tense and all pathology reports came back typed in the active tense regardless of the dictation. He and his wife, Bernice, hosted an annual lobster feast for the residents and staff of the New England Deaconess Hospital with lobsters contributed by one of his ex-trainees who lived in Maine. He took a great interest in his trainees and their lives. Many of these people continued to consult him about their career choices years after they had left the New England Deaconess and Baptist Hospitals. A number of his trainees became Chairmen of major academic departments or leaders in their fields including, among others, Don Singer, Gilles Tremblay, Rodger Haggitt, James Madara, Jean Michaud, and Ernest Lack. He also treasured his close relations with his surgical and medical colleagues and has been referred to as ‘the surgeons’ pathologist’. His ready presence in the operating room to discuss the interpretation of the frozen section was a source of great comfort and education for the surgeons with whom he worked.

Dr. Meissner enjoyed national and international status as a member of many professional societies. He served tirelessly on the boards and administrative committees of the American Association of Pathologists, the American Cancer Society (President Massachusetts Division 1964-66), the American Medical Association, the American Society of Clinical Pathologists, the American Society of Experimental Pathology, the American Thyroid Association (Vice President 1959), the Arthur Purdy Stout Society (President 1977-79), and the College of American Pathologists. He served as President of the New England Society of Pathologists in 1953. He was a member for 44 years of the medical dining club, The Roxbury Society for Medical Improvement, incorporated in 1867.

In addition, Bill was an excellent and enthusiastic teacher, and presented innumerable invited slide

seminars and lectures in North America. Many of these seminars were on diseases of the thyroid and gastrointestinal system. He had more than 84 publications including two editions of Tumors of the Thyroid Gland, in the Atlas of Tumor Pathology, of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in 1953 and 1969, and several chapters on carcinoma of the thyroid, including one in the standard text book, Anderson's Pathology. His last publication was his supplement to Tumors of the Thyroid Gland, Atlas of Tumor Pathology AFIP 1984. His collaborators included Shields Warren, Frank Lahey, Richard Overholt, Sheldon Sommers, Magnus Smedal, Rodger Haggitt, and Blake Cady.

Because of his special expertise in thyroid, soft tissue and oropharyngeal tumors, Bill was asked to join the World Health Organization Committee on Classification of Oral Pharyngeal Tumors (1964-71) and Committee on Classification of Thyroid Tumors (1965- 1973). He was an Associate Editor of the Archives of Pathology for ten years, a Consulting Editor of the Archives of Surgery for five years and an Editorial Board member of the American Journal of Clinical Pathology for six years.

Bill also served as Consultant in Pathology at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital (1953-1975), the West Roxbury Veterans Administration Hospital (1958- 1976), the Children's Hospital Medical Center (1960-1981) and the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) in Washington, D.C. (1967-1985). At the AFIP, he was a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of Consultants from 1968 to 1973, including two years as Chairman (1971-1973). At the Harvard Medical School, Dr. Meissner rose from Instructor in Pathology in 1946 to Clinical Professor of Pathology in 1963 and Emeritus Professor of Pathology at the New England Deaconess Hospital in 1979.

Dr. Meissner received many awards including one for his Outstanding Contributions to Cancer Control from the American Cancer Society (1965); the Distinguished Service Award for Continuing Education of the American Society of Clinical Pathologists; the Distinguished Service Award of the American Thyroid Association (1977); and the Joint Distinguished Service Award for outstanding contributions to American pathology of the American Society of Clinical Pathologists and the College of American Pathologists (1979); and in 1988, an award for Outstanding efforts in Furthering Oncology Education from the American Cancer Society, Florida Division, the Florida West Coast Association of Pathologists, and the University of South Florida Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine.

Dr. Meissner was a discreet philanthropist even avoiding tax deductions in order to remain anonymous. Among other donations, he and his wife established the William A. and Bernice Meissner Scholarship Fund at the School of Medicine at Oregon Health and Science University.

In 1978, Bill and Bernice, whom he had met when they were both students singing in the Messiah, moved to Sun City, Florida to relieve her asthma. Bill became consultant in pathology at the Veterans Administration Hospital and Clinical Professor of Pathology (1978-1985) and Emeritus Clinical Professor of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine (1985-2008) at the University of South Florida Medical School, Tampa. He was also Visiting Professor of Pathology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School (1973- 1982).

Dr. Meissner died at age 95 on December 6, 2008 in Sarasota, Florida following a fall at home. He was

predeceased by his wife Bernice after 66 years of marriage in 2002. He is survived by their close friend Audrey Meeker of Sun City Center; his daughter Janice Murray of Sarasota, Florida and his son William of Sao Paolo, Brazil, four grandchildren, Eric Meissner and Hugh, Laura and Nicholas Murray, and three great grandchildren.

Bill will be long remembered by younger pathologists for his expertise as a teacher and consultant and as a cherished friend by all those who were privileged to know him.

Respectfully submitted,

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