

FRED SEVERS CLINTON, M.D., F.A.C.S.

By Louise Morse Whitham¹

"The history of Oklahoma, however condensed the historian might make it, could not be written without including the name of Fred S. Clinton. In his profession of medicine and surgery, in the civic life of Oklahoma and of Tulsa, and as a pioneer in the industry that has made the state and the city famous throughout the world, Dr. Clinton has achieved eminent rank among the founders and builders of a splendid state."

—Richard Lloyd Jones.²

Fred Severs Clinton was the eldest son of Charles Clinton, rancher and cattleman, who came to the Territory from Georgia in the early 1870's. Mrs. Charles (Louise Atkins) Clinton, was a member of the Creek Nation and a teacher in its schools. Dr. Clinton was born near Okmulgee, April 15, 1874. Next year the family moved to the Half-Circle-S ranch on Duck Creek, and in 1884, to Red Fork where Clinton Junior High School now marks the long-time Clinton homestead.³ His father died when Fred was fourteen but his mother lived to see her children well established in booming Tulsa. His brothers, Lee and Paul, were brokers. Vera, the only sister, married J. H. McBirney, founder and President of the National Bank of Commerce.⁴

This incident of Fred's early boyhood has been told as typical of his native spirit: "It became necessary to send a message immediately to Muskogee, fifty miles from Red Fork, over a rough country with trails hardly discernible by day, yet the boy rode through the night, guided only by the stars and his instinct, and reached his destination before sun-up."⁵

Dr. Clinton enjoyed telling tales about the Presbyterian Mission at Muskogee where he had some of his elementary schooling under Dr. Ann Eliza Worcester Robertson, who once gave him a sound paddling, "And, I deserved it," the doctor would add.⁶

¹ Louise Morse Whitham was a teacher in the Social Studies Department of Central High School, Tulsa, from 1918 to 1950, with community history as her major field. To enable her students better to carry on civic projects and research in local history, The Tulsa Historical Society of Central High School was organized. Dr. and Mrs. Fred S. Clinton were among its first advisors. Several projects and articles covering fields of student research have been published in *The Chronicles*. Mrs. Whitham was awarded a Civic Recognition Scroll by the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce in 1943 for sponsoring the organization of The Tulsa Historical Society.—Ed.

² Richard Lloyd Jones, *Oklahoma and the Mid-Continent Oil Field*, 1930, p. 230.

³ *Who's Who in America*, 1920-1921, "Clinton, Fred S.", p. 595.

⁴ *The Tulsa World*, April 26, 1955, pp. 1, 4.

⁵ Richard Lloyd Jones, *op. cit.*

⁶ Miss Alice Robertson, daughter of Dr. A. E. W. Robertson, also was one of Fred Clinton's teachers; and later, first Congress-woman from Oklahoma.

Grammar and secondary schools attended by the long-legged young Clinton were: St. Francis Institute, Osage, Kansas; and Drury College, Springfield, Missouri. He attended the Gem City Business College, Quincy, Illinois and graduated from Young Harris College, Georgia. His professional training was from the Kansas City, Missouri, College of Pharmacy and Allied Sciences, Ph.G., 1896; and from the Kansas City University Medical College, M.D., 1897.⁷ In the summertime, young Dr. Clinton had been getting practical experience with Dr. J. C. W. Bland, with whom he began active practice after his graduation. Shortly thereafter, he married Miss Jane Heard, of Elburton, Georgia, whose musical ability and social charm added much to Tulsa's cultural life.⁸

The ruling passion of Dr. Clinton's life was to relieve or to cure human ailments. His mind was analytical and his mental and muscular coordination so perfect that for over thirty years Dr. Clinton had foremost rank among the city's surgeons. In fact, he was the official surgeon for all the transportation lines in or through Tulsa. For several of those years he had to work under primitive, frontier conditions without a hospital. Old timers still tell of mangled bodies being brought to the Frisco station and Dr. Clinton saying "There's no time to lose. Cover the windows and we'll operate right here."

Sometimes a counter at the rear of a general store served as an operating table; sometimes it was a cot in a tent; sometimes the patient could be taken to Red Fork, to the doctor's mother.

In those days, Dr. Clinton was crusading for better public health facilities, water, sewers and fireproof buildings. Tulsa grew at a convulsive and prodigious rate. Provisions had to be made for all sorts of utilities, and then, almost at once, it seemed, they had to be expanded and modernized. Dr. Clinton was in constant demand as a speaker for these city needs; was often quoted. Withal, he yet found time to write for national medical journals and to take part in many professional movements.⁹

Hospital operation was forced on Dr. Clinton when, in 1900, a severe small-pox epidemic raged over the area. With others whom he interested, Dr. Clinton secured a large house on Tulsa's outskirts where he cared for quarantined patients. By 1905 he was building Tulsa's first permanent hospital and nurse's training school, and in 1915, he led in the building of the modern Oklahoma Hospital, still in use at 9th and Jackson Streets. He also served as medical director of the emergency hospital set up during the influenza epidemic of 1918.¹⁰

⁷ *Who's Who in American Medicine*, 1926, p. 290.

⁸ *Women's Who's Who in America*, 1914-1915, "Clinton, Jane Heard," p. 186.

⁹ *Who's Who in American Medicine*.

¹⁰ Fred S. Clinton, "First Hospitals in Tulsa," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*. Vol. XXII, No. 1 (Spring, 1944), pp. 40-69.

Dr. Clinton's leadership extended far beyond his locality. He was the first Indian Territory representative of the Red Cross organization. He served as President of the Indian Territory Medical Association. In 1906 he helped combine the Territorial and the Oklahoma branches into a single unit—The Oklahoma State Medical Association. For many years he was Hospital Chairman of the Oklahoma Medical Association. He served as Vice-President of the Mid-West Hospital Association and then (1929-30) as its President. He was named a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons. In later years he was made an honorary life member of Tulsa County Medical Association.¹¹

Dr. Clinton was active in and honored by many civic and cultural movements. The Tulsa Masonic Lodge voted him an honorary membership as did the Oil Industry Pioneers. He was a charter member of the Association of Tulsa Pioneers, and of the Tulsa Civic Association. He was a Sponsor of the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, an active member of the Tulsa Philharmonic Society, and of the Hyeckka Society. Dr. Clinton had part in the erection of the three edifices used by the Boston Avenue Methodist Church in the fifty years during which he served on the Board of Stewards of that congregation. He was also happy to have been a charter member of the Tulsa Commercial Club, now the Chamber of Commerce, and likewise of the International Petroleum Exposition and Congress which has given Tulsa its place in the oil world.

Again, quoting Editor Jones, "From his part in the drilling of Tulsa County's first oil well, rests Dr. Clinton's unique part in Oklahoma history." Just what was "that part?" Dr. Clinton was not, as is so often assumed, owner of any part of the "Bland-Clinton-Red Fork" well. He was largely responsible for the idea of drilling on the Bland property; he helped finance it, and then when the well blew in, June 25, 1901, on the very day when Dr. Bland was suddenly ill, he acted for his physician-partner. Mrs. Bland, as a Creek citizen, was entitled to a homestead allotment. Dr. Clinton hurried to Muskogee where he contacted officials of the Indian Office under the Dawes Commission, and duly filed a claim for certificate of allotment of the well-area for Mrs. Bland. A marker erected under the auspices of the Oklahoma Historical Society now locates the well-site.¹²

As an oil producer the Sue A. Bland No. 1, was small, but its attendant opportunities were great. Therein lay the "unique" results which Dr. Clinton foresaw. Before he left for Muskogee he set in motion the publicity which spread nation wide, and was the foundation of Tulsa's later growth. Independent producers and big oil companies hurried to the new field, thus effectively stopping the

¹¹ *The Tulsa Tribune*, April 26, 1955, pp. 25, 31.

¹² Fred S. Clinton. "First Oil and Gas Well in Tulsa County," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXX, No. 3. (Autumn, 1952) pp. 312-32.

granting of large blanket-leases by the Creek National Council, that had seemed imminent but had never yet been approved by the Interior Department. In still another way Dr. Clinton helped fix Tulsa's importance as an oil center. He erected a six story, "ultra modern," fireproof office building for the oil companies. In later years, Clinton owned oil stocks in other companies. For his constructive imagination, he has been called "Tulsa's Big Brother."

The Clinton home was ever a center of hospitality. The Doctor loved his crepe myrtles and his magnolias and the nesting red birds, but most of all, he loved his friends.

The mettle of a man is shown as much by the way he meets disaster as by the work of his vigorous youth. Reverses in health and fortune came to Dr. Clinton in the early nineteen thirties, brought on by a progressive anaemic condition and the financial depression of those years. Bedfast for months at a time, handicapped by sudden blindness in the right eye, he was unable to carry on as a surgeon and so could not protect some of his major investments. Only his physician and his wife knew about the loss of sight. It was part of his pride not to whimper; it was part of his honor not to attempt an operation with imperfect sight. His left eye did double duty until the last year of Dr. Clinton's life. Even when, in 1945, Dr. Clinton lost his beloved wife, there remained a gallant spirit which refused to sink into self pity. He found new avenues of service to his community.¹³

Dr. Clinton was interested in all phases of education. He had part in the establishment of Henry Kendall College, now Tulsa University. He was a Life Member of the Oklahoma Historical Society and served for several years on its Board of Directors; he was a most helpful Sponsor and Advisor of the Tulsa Historical Society of Central High School. Research writers came to him for source material and advice. He had time and patience for hundreds of interviews.¹⁴

This public interest in local history spurred the great undertaking of Dr. Clinton's later years, the writing of a series of articles published in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* and reissued in monograph form. Recognizing the value of these studies, the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce honored Dr. Clinton in 1944, with a Civic Award and scroll. The citation reads:

"Certificate of Civic Recognition for outstanding services to the city of Tulsa. Presented to Dr. Fred S. Clinton for research and publication of basic source history of Tulsa."¹⁵

¹³ Angie Debo. "Jane Heard Clinton," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, (Spring, 1946) pp. 20-25.

¹⁴ Angie Debo. *Tulsa, From Creek Town to Oil Capital*, Preface, p. IV.

¹⁵ Indicative of Dr. Clinton's life-long interest in contemporary and local history are the following subjects from his many published writings:

1915 "Tulsa, Oklahoma," a twelve page booklet reprinted from the May issue of the *Journal of the Oklahoma State Medical Association*. It contains his famous

There were blessings and comforts in Dr. Clinton's long years of semi-invalidism. His circle of friendships widened and deepened. He was most fortunate in his second marriage. Miss Beulah Jane Elliott, a long-time Tulsa teacher, married Dr. Clinton in Kansas City, Missouri, July 20, 1946. She read to him, helped with his research and gave him a sense of security. Together they made long drives to the Southern states, to Canada, or wherever their interest led them.

Dr. Clinton went to St. Johns hospital "for observation" November 16, 1954. He died there April 25, 1955. Characteristic of his whole life was his consideration of others during the illness and his appreciation of those who ministered to his needs. Memorial services were conducted by Dr. Paul Galloway of the Boston Avenue Church. Interment was in Oaklawn Cemetery.

Young Jenkins Lloyd Jones, now Editor of *The Tulsa Tribune*, who knew Dr. Clinton only in the last twenty-five years of his life, wrote of him:¹⁶

Few men have been granted the deep pleasure of such a wide range of interests as characterized the life of Dr. Fred Severs Clinton. Few cities have been granted the boon of having such men among their pioneers.

Since before the turn of the century, he took high pride in his community and in his profession. He was a man of medicine with all a doctor's understanding of people in sorrow and trouble. He was also a city builder, with all the hopes and ambitions of a man who continually sensed the tremendous promise of the future. He was responsible for Tulsa's first hospital. He was credited with Tulsa's first skyscraper. His activities included the petroleum industry which helped make Tulsa great, and also the history which recorded the steps to that greatness.

Few people will be followed to their resting place by so many remembrances of so many people. His monument will be in the hearts of all who knew him.

narrative, "The Pioneer," concerning Archie Yahola, Creek Chief and founder of Tulsa.

1918 "Interesting Tulsa History," a seven page leaflet distributed by the Oklahoma Hospital.

1943 "From Brush Arbor to Boston Avenue," a historical review of the development of the Boston Avenue Methodist Church, distributed at the Golden Jubilee dinner.

1943-1949 The following were published by *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, then issued in reprints and distributed by the author: "Hyeckka Club", "James Hugh McBirney", "Tulsa's Water Supply", "First Oil and Gas Well in Tulsa County", "Beginning of the International Petroleum Exposition and Congress."

Also, in *The Chronicles*, articles in Dr. Clinton's professional field: "First Hospitals in Tulsa", "The First Hospital and Training School for Nurses in Indian Territory—now Oklahoma", "The Indian Territory Medical Association", "Beginning of the Oklahoma State Hospital Association," and "University of Oklahoma Medical School Crisis Averted."

¹⁶ Jenkins Lloyd Jones, (editorial) *The Tulsa Tribune*, April 26, 1955, p. 40.