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DR. BENJAMIN JESSE COVINGTON

by Howard H. Bell

*Benjamin Jesse Covington was born in
Fall County, near Marlin, Tex. Source -
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Fifty-eight years a Houstonian and sixty-one years a practicing physician is the double distinction belonging to Dr. Benjamin Jesse Covington. Each week day morning at ten he leaves the stately white house on the corner of Dowling and Hadley, walks slowly down the street to his less pretentious office building, and settles down for the day — a day still comprised of medical journals, patients, problems and advice, and a long-standing concern for community health and welfare.

Decorating the walls of his office suite are many reminders of the past: a temporary permit to practice medicine at Wharton, Texas; a graduation picture and diploma from Meharry Medical College; photographs from medical conventions; numerous awards, citations, and certificates from a variety of organizations; and pictures of Booker T. Washington, Marian Anderson, and other notables who have been entertained in the Covington home over the past half century.

Born "in the sixth year of freedom" near Marlin, Texas, to parents who had known slavery, young Covington early learned that the life of the farm was not for the weak or the laggard. When he was eight years old he was already maneuvering farm machinery drawn sometimes by oxen, sometimes by horses or mules. He planted cotton, chopped cotton, picked cotton; milked cows; prided himself on his ability to stick to the top side of a bucking horse; took a keen interest in the welfare of farm animals, including surgery essential to the development of the highest quality of meat.

But the farm had few attractions for a lad whose dreams called him to new adventures. He secured the rudiments of an education in the local school near Marlin, and at fifteen or sixteen years of age he presented himself at near-by Hearne Baptist Academy where he was soon putting himself through college as janitor and bell ringer. He used the hand bell to assemble and dismiss classes, call to worship, and signal



Dr. Benjamin Jesse Covington

the end of the day. He swept floors and rang bells for six years. In 1892 he accepted the congratulations of the faculty on a task well done, and with diploma in hand, departed to seek his fortune.

He tried teaching school, but aroused the animosity of some members of the community who felt that a Negro should not be allowed to make the salary which his qualifications called for. He tried bookkeeping for a year, but in 1895 he was back in school, this time as a student at Meharry Medical College to fulfill a burning desire to become a physician.

Once again he swept the floors for a living, and once again he had the encouragement of the faculty as he set himself to master the intricacies of the human body and its needs. He graduated in 1900 and returned to Wharton where he had already spent a few months on a temporary permit to practice medicine. But he found little encouragement to stay, and he moved shortly to Yoakum where he was more favorably received by the medical profession.

His stay in Yoakum was highlighted by his development of a professional-looking goatee, and his marriage to the charming Jennie Belle Murphy. Together, the young couple

came to Houston in 1903. A decade or so later the goatee had disappeared, the stately white house had risen on Dowling Street, the Covingtons were well established as community leaders, and a daughter had been born.

Jessie Covington, an only child, grew up to be a lover of music. In fact, music was literally thrust upon her as the parents conspired even before her birth and during her earliest infancy to see that music should be the prevailing influence in her life. Mrs. Covington took piano lessons until the child was old enough to sit at the keyboard, and the doctor—self-taught in piano, violin, mandolin, and cornet — was ever on the alert to admonish and encourage the talented young pianist. Upon graduation in piano from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, she was awarded a fellowship at the Julliard Graduate School of Music where she did graduate work for four years. Her life-long interest, inspired and made possible by her parents, is reflected today in her encouragement of music and the arts at Dillard University where she is the wife of President Albert W. Dent — the one man who was able to persuade her to leave a promising career to assume the role of wife and mother.

Dr. Covington's medical practice in Houston grew rapidly. He was interested in pulmonary ailments, and came early to the conclusion that tuberculosis need not result in an early death. He is proud of his record in having lost very few patients from pneumonia. He reports successful treatment of patients during the influenza epidemic of the World War I period. In this he has the theory that influenza is a mild form of yellow fever. His treatment proved to be so successful that the local United States Army medical officers became interested and secured his formula.

Despite a busy practice Dr. Covington never allowed himself to drop behind in the constant effort to im-

prove medical knowledge and treatment. During forty-two different years he attended refresher and modernization courses at Prairie View or Tuskegee or Flint-Goodridge (New Orleans) or Mayo Clinic. And as he returned each year to Houston he brought with him the newer knowledge and the newer techniques so vital to the health and welfare of the community.

Dr. Covington has always been a strong believer in organized effort. Shortly after his graduation from Meharry Medical College he helped in the reorganization of the Lone Star Medical Association. He served as secretary-treasurer for ten years, and took his turn as president in 1920. His interests, however, have not been confined to the medical profession. He has given support and leadership to the Omega Fraternity, the Baptist Church, the YMCA, the Masonic Lodge, and the Business and Professional Men's Club. In these organizations he has associated himself with younger men — counseling, advising, lend-

ing a helping hand where needed. Through this association he has retained an understanding and respect for the outlook of the younger generation. And from these organizations in recent years he has received tributes, citations, honors, and awards. He is particularly pleased that a college scholarship has recently been established in his honor.

But Dr. Covington does not stand alone. Throughout the past fifty-eight years Mrs. Covington has shared the spotlight of leadership. She was one of the founders of the Blue Triangle Branch of the YWCA; she has been effective in church, hospital, and garden club work; she has served in responsible positions with the city and state efforts at interracial understanding. And she is today, as she has always been, the gracious mistress of the great white house at Dowling and Hadley.

Born during the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War, Dr. Covington has lived to see race relations in Houston steadily improv-

ing. The public transportation system has quietly integrated; several churches have bi-racial memberships; the school system has accepted token integration without incident; the leading newspapers welcome feature stories about Negro citizens; and the mayor of the city fulfills his duties as the representative of Negro and white alike.

In this relation Mayor Lewis Cutrer was recently the chief speaker at the opening of Riverside General Hospital, an outgrowth of the Houston Negro Hospital begun in 1925 by Dr. Covington and four other physicians. It is fitting that Dr. Covington, who had lived for over half a century in the hope that adequate hospital facilities would be available to all, should be among those honored on this occasion. The dream of a lifetime was at last a reality.

Dr. Benjamin Jesse Covington died on July 21, 1961.

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