



Charles Edward Cunningham

September 7, 1922 - February 3, 2021

Born at home in Commerce, Texas, September 7, 1922, Charles Cunningham was the second son of William Cunningham and Naomi Stokes. After failed attempts at farming, William and Naomi packed their two boys into a Model T Ford and moved west to the Texas Panhandle in the late 1920s.

As a boy, Charles helped his dad deliver blocks of ice to customers in Pampa Texas. Later, after the family had moved from Pampa to Amarillo, he was old enough to drive the one-horse wagon himself. In the early days of the Great Depression, the Cunninghams, like everyone else they knew, struggled to get by.

“My parents, who had no more than eighth-grade educations, were determined that their sons would go to college,” Charles recalled in his 2015 memoir, *Life Well-Traveled*.

Eventually, with an ice plant of their own in the town of Panhandle, William and Naomi did just that. Charles, like his older brother Clarence and younger brother Bill, attended Texas A&M in College Station. Charles was still in his first semester in the fall of 1941 when illness forced him to leave.

“I was at home on Sunday, December 7, when my mother called for me to turn on the radio,” Charles said. “The Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. I knew my life was about to change.”

As a cadet at Texas A&M, Charles was nearly in the army, but not quite. He returned to College Station in the spring of 1942, then joined Army Reserve in 1943 and qualified for special training. He was ordered to the University of Missouri to study Engineering, but after two semesters, the army changed its mind.

“The war was not going well,” Charles said, “so the army decided it needed more infantrymen than engineers.” By November 1944 he was serving with the 34th Infantry “Red Bull” Division in Northern Italy. The next seven months were rough as his outfit rotated back and forth to the front line. Finally, in May 1945, the last remnants of the German army in northern Italy surrendered to the 34th Division. The war with Germany was over, but it would be another three years before Charles returned home.

In those days, Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby and others were crooning a popular tune called *The Isle of Capri*. The opening lyrics were, “’Twas on the Isle of Capri that I found her, beneath the shade of an old walnut tree...” In circumstances fit for a novel and far more

complex than the song, Charles Cunningham met Bianca (Mazzarella) Kohn on the Isle of Capri in December, 1945.

Although his outfit was just days away from returning to “the States,” Charles was drawn to Bianca. While dancing on New Year’s Eve, they agreed that he would try to leave the army and stay for a while in Italy. On July 11, 1946, surrounded by friends and family, they married in the spacious villa of her Uncle Antonino Mazzarella, a prominent figure on the island.

After a series of civilian jobs in support of the U.S. Army, Charles was eager to complete his education. In June of 1948 the young couple, by then with a one-year-old son, left one of the most beautiful islands in the world for their new home on the dusty high plains of Texas.

“I warned Bianca what to expect,” Charles said.

He needn’t have worried. Bianca flourished, quickly adding “Texan” to the four languages she already spoke as she gathered friends and got to know her new relatives. When Charles returned to Texas A&M in the fall as an Accounting major, the family of three moved into married students’ housing; rows of hastily-built wooden barracks partitioned into small apartments by walls so thin “you could hear the neighbors whisper.”

Charles graduated from Texas A&M in 1951, passed his CPA exam and landed a job with Arthur Young & Company. It was the beginning of a long career than spanned four decades and five continents.

In 1955, after Charles joined Continental Oil Company, the family moved to Ponca City, Oklahoma. By then, Bianca and Charles had two children, Richard and Diana. A third child, Linda, was born there in 1957. They returned to Houston in 1959.

A major career change in 1961 put Charles on the road, or more precisely in the air, when he joined the International Division of Continental Carbon Company, a subsidiary of Continental Oil. In the first few years, working to establish new manufacturing plants in Spain, South Korea, India, Scotland, and Australia, Charles circled the globe three times. In 1964, he became Continental Carbon’s International Manager. The promotion meant a move to The Hague, Netherlands, where most of the family remained for the next 16 years.

It was a high-profile job. As point man for his company outside of the United States, Charles got to know business leaders, ambassadors, royalty and occasional heads of state around the world. His passport, with extensions to handle all the visas, was as thick as a paperback book.

Over the next 12 years the three children, Richard, Diana and Linda, moved back to the States for college. Charles and Bianca finally returned to Houston in 1980, where he was promoted to International Vice President. Charles retired from Continental Carbon in 1985. Charles and Bianca loved their time overseas. For him, the extensive travel and the challenge of managing a large international business was invigorating. For Bianca, living

in Europe was a return to her roots, with the chance to visit relatives and friends as often as she liked. The kids, too, all benefited from the international experience. Still, during those sixteen years, there were things that Charles sorely missed. Baskin Robbins ice cream, for one, and juicy Texas barbecue, but the thing he missed most was Aggie football.

In retirement, Aggie football became his second career. For many years, Charles and Bianca did not miss traveling to a single game, anywhere on the planet. Even Hawaii was not too far for the chance to see Aggies take the field. Off-season, Charles supported the rest of the Aggie athletic program as well, from basketball to baseball, softball, volleyball and soccer. If there were players and a ball, he had season tickets.

Charles also enjoyed returning to Italy, where he and Bianca maintained her family home on Capri. The long walks and steep climbs that Capri demanded were no problem, because a lifelong habit of daily exercise kept him fit.

Bianca and Charles stayed in their West Houston home until 2015, when they accepted the offer to combine households with their daughter and son-in-law, Diana and John Holden. Bianca continues to live with them now.

Charles and Bianca raised three children who produced eight grandchildren and at last count, ten great-grandchildren. Charles remained generous, sharp, witty and occasionally grumpy to the end. He died of natural causes in the hospital on the third of February, 2021, but less than a week earlier, Charles had a joyful lunch with a group of longtime friends. By every measure, his was indeed a “life well-traveled.”

The Holy Mass will be celebrated Monday, March 1, 2021 at 10:30 AM. To livestream, please follow <https://youtu.be/CFv4-B59xWk>

Events

MAR **Funeral Mass 10:30AM**

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Live Stream

TX, US

Comments



“ My husband Federico and I are so sorry to hear of the passing of Charles Cunningham. I will always remember his devoted participation in the activities of Italy in America Association. I know for Bianca and his children, his passing is a great loss to them. He was such an exceptional man and role model. They were all so lucky to have him around and so lucid as well, for those 97 years. It is sad, but also a blessing.

Diane Nizza and Federico Zegarra - March 14 at 06:43 PM



“ Esther Cavaleri and Rosanne & Sam Musachia purchased the Delightful Dieffenbachia for the family of Charles Edward Cunningham.



Esther Cavaleri and Rosanne & Sam Musachia - February 27 at 01:10 PM



“ A prayer for all of you, with certainty that Charles rests serenely, free of life's shackles. He and I worked at Continental Oil, but did not know each other at the time. We had many conversations about those days that I will miss. He gave Elaine and me a copy of his memories, and the minute we got it home, we elbowed each other getting the love story. And what a story. Now, a new chapter is being written in the minds of all of us who were lucky enough to know Charles. Details might differ, but the common thread is that we will all miss this terrific father, husband, and friend.

Bless you all,
David and Elaine

David and Elaine Fontaine - February 15 at 10:23 AM