Raphael Eustace Semmes, 1885–1982

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"There are men and classes of men that stand above the common herd: the soldier, the sailor, and the shepherd not infrequently; the artist rarely; rarer still, the clergyman; the physician almost as a rule. He is the flower (such as it is) of our civilization. Generosity he has, such as is possible to those who practice an art, never to those who drive a trade; discretion, tested by a hundred secrets; tact, tried in a thousand embarrassments; and what are more important, Heraclean cheerfulness and courage."

Robert Louis Stevenson

There was no man concerning whom those words of Stevenson's were more appropriate than "Pappy" Semmes. He died in Memphis, Tennessee, his home, on March 2, 1982, at the age of 97 years. To all of his friends and many of his acquaintances he was known not as Raphael or Eustace, but as "Pappy." It was a term of endearment, of respect, and of admiration. All of these stemmed from his kindness and consideration of everyone. Well, almost everyone, for he tolerated idiots, incompetents, thieves, and liars not at all. He was compassionate, as was always shown in his consideration for and attention to the welfare of his patients. He was respected by everyone for his honesty and forthrightness.

Dr. Semmes was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1885. His mother was of French and Spanish and his father of Norman English descent. Pappy was a loyal but not a bigoted southerner. He was very proud of his great-uncle, Raphael Semmes, Admiral of the Confederate Navy. His maternal grandfather was Admiral Albert Lavalette of the United States Navy, who was instrumental in the founding of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland.

At the age of 9 years he met Professor LeFevre of the University of Missouri at the United States Government Experimental Station at Beaufort, North Carolina. This was a fortunate association, for Dr. LeFevre convinced Semmes to enroll at the University of Missouri and later to transfer for his medical education to The Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore. Among his fellow students both at Missouri and Johns Hopkins were three others who later became distinguished physicians — Walter Dandy, who succeeded Cushing as Professor of Neurological Surgery at Johns Hopkins, Thomas Grover Orr, who became Professor of Surgery at the University of Kansas, and Ralph Major, who became a leading internist as well as an author and a historian.

Semmes was awarded his degree as Doctor of Medicine by Johns Hopkins in 1910. He interned at Hop-
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kins and then moved to the Women’s Hospital in New York City for a surgical residency. He was now ready to practice surgery and for this he returned home to Memphis. As neurological surgery was non-existent in the Middle West and in the South and almost everywhere else, Dr. Semmes began to undertake operations on brain tumors. In this he largely trained himself, but he also benefited by trips to Boston and to Baltimore to observe Cushing and Dandy who had preceded him by only a few years in this new surgical specialty. His practice was interrupted by World War I, during which he served as a neurosurgeon in France.

After the war, he resumed his practice of neurological surgery in Memphis, and raised this specialty in the South and the Middle West to its highest level. In 1920 the Society of Neurological Surgeons was formed, but as membership in this organization was restricted largely to men who had obtained their residency training with one of the senior members, Semmes was not admitted. Realizing the need for neurosurgeons to meet and discuss their problems he, together with Glen Spurling, W. P. Van Wagenen, and Kenneth McKenzie founded the Harvey Cushing Society (now known as the American Association of Neurological Surgeons). He was also a founding member of the Southern Neurosurgical Society and was a very influential advisor to groups of young neurological surgeons who founded the Congress of Neurological Surgeons and the American Academy of Neurological Surgery. He served on the American Board of Neurological Surgery in its early years.

He began to teach neurological surgery at the University of Tennessee in 1913, and became the Professor there in 1932. In 1933 a young man, Francis Murphey from Mississippi, who had received his M.D. degree from Harvard, was serving his internship at the University of Chicago. He came to me and indicated his interest in neurological surgery. In this I encouraged him. He also said that he wished to practice in Memphis and this seemed to me, at that time, a poor idea as Dr. Semmes had the practice of neurological surgery in Memphis and the surrounding area completely under his control. Shortly thereafter I happened to be visiting Dr. Semmes in Memphis. He expressed his need for an associate but he wanted an untrained man whom he could mold to his own ideas and needs. I immediately telephoned Dr. Murphey in Chicago and advised him to come immediately to Memphis. He did and from that came their close and productive years of association.

Dr. Semmes was a meticulous, superb, yet outstanding, courageous neurological surgeon. His philosophy in this regard is detailed in his paper, “In Favor of Simplicity. Applied to Medicine in General and Neurosurgery in Particular” (J. Neurosurg. 15:1–3, 1958). His philosophy can best be summarized in his own words, “never do anything with greater difficulty than is required; never use any technique merely because it is new, but only because it is better; never subject your patients to any unnecessary diagnostic or therapeutic measures; keep the blood in the body; always express yourself as clearly, as simply, and as briefly as possible.” What better guidelines for a young neurological surgeon have ever been uttered? Among neurological surgeons, he is probably best known for his work, with Francis Murphey, on herniated intervertebral discs, both cervical and lumbar. He was a strong advocate of the use of local anesthesia in neurosurgical procedures.

Probably “Pappy” Semmes’ greatest contribution to neurological surgery was the many young men whom he trained and whom he educated to be gentle with tissues and compassionate with their patients.

Dr. Semmes enjoyed going fishing in the Mississippi Sound and the Gulf of Mexico, but it would be an exaggeration to say that he enjoyed fishing. Rather he enjoyed the rest and relaxation and the freedom from the telephone and the newspapers which a few days on a boat on the water provided. He was an avid duck hunter in the nearby swamps of Arkansas. He was a delightful host.

It is no exaggeration to say that he was unique and will never be duplicated. His contribution to the establishment of neurological surgery cannot be overestimated. Particularly, he was a charming man, a great and loyal friend. He will be sorely missed.