

Dr. Eldon George (Frenchy) Chuinard (1904-1993)



By Martin Plamondon II

Frenchy Chuinard was born December 9, 1904 in Kelso, Washington. He graduated from Kelso High School in what was a rather unique coincidence of circumstances. Graduating with him was Hazel Bain, a longtime member of our committee who died two weeks before Frenchy. Also graduating in that same class was another honored member of our foundation, Mitch Doumit, who died several years before Hazel and Frenchy. Each of these three people served terms as president of the National Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, Hazel being the first woman to do so. Frenchy attended the University of Puget Sound, and the University of Oregon Medical School in Portland. While at the University of Puget Sound, he met and married Fritzi Goff of Tacoma, Washington. They both loved nature and spent many weekends hiking on the Olympic Peninsula. Things were tough for them in those days and Frenchy said it was better to die of starvation hiking those trails than back in Tacoma in their small apartment.

After finishing school, Frenchy entered medical practice as an orthopedic surgeon with Dr. Richard Dillehunt and Dr. Les Lucas. All three served as chief surgeons at the Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children in Portland, Oregon, and became well known worldwide as pioneers in the field. Frenchy wrote several dozen medical articles and originated three specific orthopedic procedures. He received many medical honors from various groups during his life and served in many organizational positions over the years. He retired from medical practice at age 76.

Frenchy became interested in Lewis and Clark when he was ten years of age. He was a member of the committee which helped establish the modern trail route and was one of the founding fathers of the National Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation. He served as the foundation's second president (1971). He had a large collection of Lewis and Clark related literature which he donated to Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. Frenchy was a long time chairman of the Oregon Governor's Lewis and Clark Trail Committee. He was instrumental in efforts that established the interpretive sign at Kelly Point Park, the William Clark commemorative

memorial at the University of Portland, both in Portland, Oregon, and the Lewis and Clark Nature Trail in the west end of the Columbia River Gorge.

One of the disappointments of Frenchy's life was his inability to convince the State of Oregon to build a Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center in the Columbia River Gorge. Frenchy had great admiration for Meriwether Lewis and shared with Lewis an enthusiasm and impatience for his project that sometimes put people off. If there were disappointments, there were also achievements. Frenchy was able to write and have published a book on the medical aspects of the Lewis and Clark Expedition called "Only One Man Died." Frenchy saw it go into its third printing. After his retirement from medical practice Frenchy made a number of trips around the United States and to Europe and Asia teaching the practice of orthopedic surgery. With advancing age and poor health Frenchy was no longer able to maintain the beautiful flower gardens as he had always done and, finally, unable to maintain their home, Frenchy and Fritz moved from Portland to Lacey, Washington, where they could be cared for by their family. Frenchy suffered a number of strokes before dying at age 88, Tuesday, February 9, 1993.

This author remembers Frenchy as a man who had great compassion and love for his fellow man. Many times during the years since we first met I have encountered people who remembered Dr. Frenchy as the man who took their crippled bodies in childhood and gave them normal lives. Whenever we met Frenchy always asked about the health of my wife and then the children followed by the question, "How's the book coming?" He asked me to write a proposal for a grant to finish my work on the Lewis and Clark maps and hand carried it to various agencies looking for money to finance the project. That is the kind of man Frenchy was, kindly, interested, enthusiastic, full of life. It is with some sadness that this author recalls the final months leading up to the 1992 Annual Meeting of the national foundation in Vancouver, Washington. Frenchy sent me a number of letters with suggestions about things that might be added to the meeting. Unfortunately, his memory must have been failing him. His words were so confused that I and others could not understand exactly what he was talking about. Frustrated, Frenchy wrote me apologizing, fearing he might damage our friendship. Frenchy is a man that I, along with many others, will sorely miss.

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*Prepared by Bob Gatten, 2011*