

John Anderson McCurdy
February 6, 1895 - October 15, 1981

by May Lea McCurdy

John Anderson McCurdy ,was born February 6, 1895, in Cuero Texas. His father was Andrew Howlett Porter McCurdy, a Presbyterian minister serving the church at Cuero. His mother was Mary Ianthe (Anderson) McCurdy whose home was on a farm-ranch in Dewitt County east of Cuero on the Victoria road. The area was known as the Irish Creek area. Dr. McCurdy was a widower with three children: Robert, Andrew, Lucinda (Lucy) and Horace. John Anderson, the first of his mother's children, was named for his grandfather, John Denny Anderson. Being the first-born grandson, the boy was a great favorite of his grandfather who thought young John could do no wrong.

While the McCurdy family lived in Cuero, two other sons were born: Porter in 1897 and Albert about 1900. In 1898 Dr. McCurdy became Presbyterial Evangelist and Secretary of Home Missions for the Presbytery of Western Texas. This position kept him away from home much of the time as he worked to establish churches and build their sanctuaries. His early training in carpentry and construction gave him unusual talents in these activities.



Mary Ianthe and A.H.P. McCurdy



McCurdy Home - circa 1903
305 Prairie Street



McCurdy Home - April 1999

Leaving the Cuero manse, Dr. McCurdy built a two-story home close by a cottage owned by J. D. Anderson, now retired from active management of his ranch and living in town with his daughter

Alberta (Anderson) Kaapke, a widow with a small daughter, Janet, a year or two older than John Anderson.

In the country near the Anderson ranch lived another Anderson daughter, Margaret Lee (Anderson) Caldwell, who had a daughter, Kathleen, also slightly older than John Anderson. These two cousins were his frequent companions, and there were many visits and overnight stays at the ranch. There was much of interest to a growing boy - a windmill, blacksmith shop, farm animals, farm tools and machinery, wagons; the chores to maintain all the farm and ranch activities. There was Irish Creek with a swimming hole and the Guadalupe River where older boys could swim. There were great, moss-hung, oak trees, some covered with wild grape vines. Annually the grapes were picked to make grape juice and jelly and the boys swarmed in the tree tops to drop the clusters into the wagon below.

There were visits to the Caldwell farm where Aunt Maggie had a parrot, Old Polly, who had the run of the place, indoors and out. Polly's favorite perch was on the roof peak, from which she could survey the landscape all around. In the country strange callers were always suspect, and Polly was alert to the presence of anyone she did not know. When she spied a stranger, she would call out, "Mr. Caldwell, Mr. Caldwell." If nobody responded, she would then call the dogs and cry, "Sick 'um, sick 'um". The puzzled caller could not tell who was calling or where the calls came from and would usually retreat. Polly also had a great affection for small children, and the Anderson mothers visiting together were under threat of Polly's sharp attack if they decided to discipline a child.

In town the Anderson families had access to the produce of the farm. Summer time would bring wagon loads of watermelons to be stored in the parlor of the Anderson cottage under a big square piano. Grandchildren were always welcome to come in and cut a melon.

In 1905, Dr. McCurdy accepted a call to the pastorate of the Presbyterian Church in Brownwood and moved his family there. Robert by this time was studying for the ministry, and Lucy was soon married to Albert Coffin. Her daughter, Margaret, was born about the same time as Marion Wallace McCurdy (1906), the fourth son of Porter (AHP) and Ianthe McCurdy. John Anderson worked at odd jobs all through his boyhood, mowing lawns and milking neighborhood cows every morning and evening; and very early he was handy with tools, building all sorts of things for the children's enjoyment. Fifty cents a week was good pay for chores, and all such income was automatically turned over to the family exchequer. The manse was near the home of the Mays family who had several boys the ages of the McCurdy boys. They played together constantly; and especially in the summer. The tribe spent long days on the nearby bayou. One summer the boys decided they needed transport for their swimming equipment. There was a buggy in the Mays barn which the boys insisted had not been used for years; so commandeering two wheels, they built a contraption to carry their effects down through the high-cane trails to the water. This subsequently caused quite a commotion in the neighborhood when the lack of wheels on the buggy was discovered.

John Anderson was sometimes called on to "house sit" for out-of-town neighbors. At one such time, he found himself coming to the empty house one evening well after dark. As he entered the door, he heard a thump from a bedroom upstairs. Mustering up his courage, he crept up the steps, flash-light in hand, opened all the doors to closets and rooms. He found an overturned chair in one room but no one there to account for it. Back out in the hall, he looked up just in time to dodge a civet cat leaping out of the attic opening left ajar, over his head and down

the stairs. He was glad to open a door and shoo it out.

Instead of attending the local high school, John went to the preparatory department at Daniel Baker College. He became known as Giggling John - his "funny bone" was easily turned over, and he often got amused by some incident in the classroom. When this occurred, his self control was soon shattered; and upon occasion he would be banished to the hall to sit on the stairs until he could maintain a straight face.

One year he grew very rapidly - nine inches in that one year. In those days boys wore knickers buckled under the knees instead of long pants. The usual bag in his knickers grew less and less until finally they had to be buckled above his knees, much to his chagrin. Finally, his father said, "Son, I think it is time we got you some long pants."

Dr. McCurdy served not only as pastor of the church but was called upon also to be acting president of the college. After a time, the pressures of two jobs impaired his health. He resigned both jobs and, in 1912, took his family to New Mexico to homestead land south of Deming. John was given the job of traveling on the freight train with the horse, chickens, and family furniture. The horse's stall was set up in one end of the box car and the furniture in another with a bed for John on top of the piano.

There was a long stopover in El Paso, and John decided to leave the car and see something of the town. Coming back later, he surprised a hobo trying to make off with a chicken. In the ensuing confusion, some of the chickens got loose and scattered into a nearby lumber yard. For several hours John was busy trying to round up those frightened chickens.

There were in New Mexico a number of McCurdy relatives, already established homesteaders. Newton McCurdy had a jewelry store in Deming in addition to his homesteading. His sister Susie and her husband, Jess Shinn, were there, as were A.H.P.'s daughter Lucy and her husband, Albert Coffin and Albert's sister Rebecca Coffin who taught school at Hondo. Newton's brother Andrew (Andy) was also part of the tribe. He had fallen in love with Ellen Yeargan and when A.H.P. arrived, one of his first duties was to perform the wedding ceremony.



New Mexico Homestead

Dr. McCurdy and the three older boys had gone out before the mother and two younger children came. They lived in a shack belonging to the Shinns who had moved into Deming. After the first crop was in, all the relatives gathered to build a house for the Porter McCurdys. Then John returned to come back with the freight and his mother, brother and sister in the coach. The house had been built on the land the family was homesteading. There was a well, boxed in above ground where rattle snakes liked to gather on the shady side or where water spilled had made a damp place. The dog was a good watch dog for snakes and even a successful killer. He was a constant companion of three-year-old Mary whenever she was out-of-doors. He also liked to accompany John when he was traveling in the wagon and to hunt rabbits, which, provided meat for the family. Rabbit was served in myriad ways: "chicken" salad, meatloaf,

baked rabbit, rabbit stew, fried rabbit; and the dog's ability to catch rabbits augmented the hunters' efforts.

Part of the homesteading requirement was the raising of crops. Tomatoes and beans proved the most successful for the McCurdys. Tomatoes were sold fresh and canned to the grocer in exchange for needed supplies, among which was flour essential to the baking of biscuits which were added to a diet of rabbit, beans and tomatoes.

Dr. McCurdy stayed only one year, returning to a pastorate in San Antonio, while his family stayed to prove up the homestead. Albert and Marion attended school in Hondo nearby, and John and Porter worked for relatives on their homesteads in addition to working their own. John was employed at Newton's jewelry store repairing watches at one time. There were wells to be dug, pumps to maintain, irrigation ditches to be built and maintained. Working with a helper one day on a ditch John was startled to see the man suddenly grab at his clothes and throw them off. He couldn't get his shoes untied so he jumped into the irrigation ditch water with only his shoes on. It developed that he had dug into a red ant bed and been well stung. (Always the retelling of this incident brought on more funny bone turnover)



John at the Homestead

Keeping the wells and pumps in operation required trips down into the wells to extend the pumps to the falling water line. One day John went down for this task, completed it and climbed back out. Wells would become like caves as the water with a burden of sand was pumped out. This well had a fifty foot cave above the water line, and suddenly without any warning it collapsed. A few minutes earlier, it would have buried John alive fifty feet underground.

All was not work. There were camping trips involving all the relatives and newfound friends from Deming, going into the Florida Mountains (notice accent on the i) with wagons full of tents, food and camping equipment. One night the tents were set up for the women and children, the men sleeping under the wagons. Not far away an old prospector and his donkeys had a camp. Sometime in the night cries from the tents brought the men running to find curious donkeys pushing into the tents to see what they could find. It took quite a while to banish the live stock and restore peace and quiet. (Our John's funny bone got a good work-out on this occasion and many another.)

In the fall the older boys would take the wagon and team up into the canyon north of Deming where a family raised good mountain apples. The couple on this ranch were well-educated people, musically trained. The boys enjoyed the piano and singing and John's developing bass voice was well used.

Deming is not far from the border with Mexico, and Mexicans often passed through the area on their way to find work. One group stopped over long enough to make adobe brick to build a silo for one of the homesteaders. John designed and built the curved forms in which to make the brick, shaped to form the round silo, and then supervised the building process. After

the work was done, the Mexicans were paid off. Next morning the wagon and team were gone. A hurried horseback trip into Deming brought John to the grocery store in front of which stood the wagon and team. Inside he found the grocer holding the Mexicans - he had recognized the

team and knew they were not the rightful owners. John sent them on their way and took the team home.

Pancho Villa was active in Northern Mexico about this time and made a raid at Columbus, New Mexico, a small settlement on the border just a few miles south of the homestead and Deming. This caused a flurry of concern among the homesteaders but did not disrupt their activities too much.

In 1914, having proved up the homestead acreage, the family returned to San Antonio where Dr. McCurdy was pastor of the Pine Street Presbyterian Church, a small church he had chosen above more affluent churches which had called him. Porter, Albert, Si (Marion) and Mary entered public school and John Anderson went to work to help family finances. He worked in construction, at a battery manufacturing plant, and in the service department of an automobile agency - varied and interesting experiences in line with his mechanical bent.

In 1917, World War I enveloped the United States, and John enlisted in the Army Air Service. Basic training, including engine repair and navigation was taught in Austin on the University of Texas campus for awhile and then in abandoned buildings at 19th and East Avenue. After



Lt. John A. McCurdy

completing this, he was sent back to San Antonio to Kelly Field for flight training in which he excelled. He was given charge of cross-country flying and made the first night landing ever made at Kelly. Returning from rescuing a stranded cross-country student, he was caught by darkness. There was no communication between planes and the ground in those days, and he approached the field and flew close to the tops of the hangars to attract attention. A soldier turned on a strong beam of light and focused it right on the plane, blinding John so he could not see to land. He dived at the light several times to make the man turn it away, which he finally did, and John was able to land.

Twice John received overseas orders, made all preparations, said good-byes and left town only to have the orders canceled and to be sent back to San Antonio. His last post before the end of the war was at Eberts Field in Arkansas where he was in charge of flight operations with orders to keep the planes in the air throughout the daylight hours. During his stay



Lt. John A. McCurdy

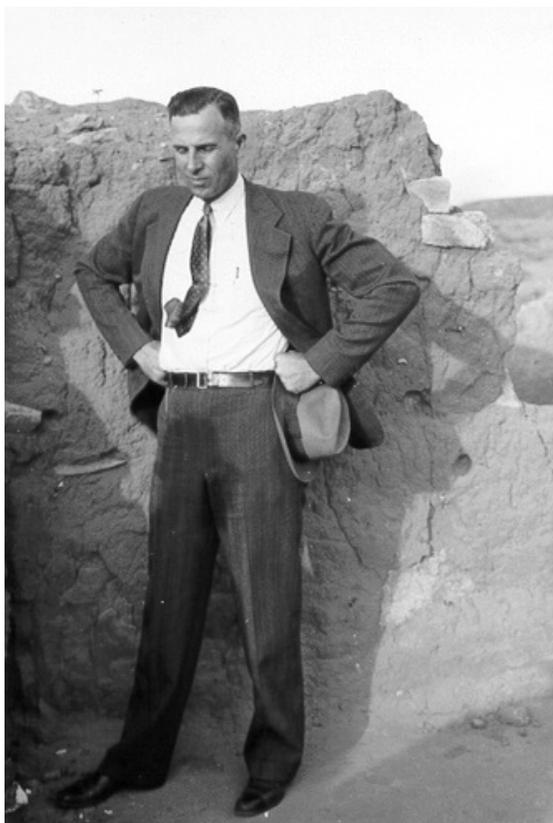
here, influenza broke out and most of the men went down with it. The camp doctor, an alcoholic, panicked, locked up his medicines, and went A.W.O.L. The cabinets had to be broken open to get the medicines needed to treat the afflicted patients.

There were no promotions in the Air Service which was a kind of orphan in the current military establishment, and John went through the war with heavy responsibilities and the rank of second lieutenant, which he had been commissioned on graduating from flying school. (Class #12, October 27, 1917)

After the war, he had tempting opportunities to keep on flying as a test pilot; but his realization that his father was growing old and he might be called on to take on increasing family responsibilities sent him back to school. He wanted to be a medical doctor; but time was pressing, and he studied business administration for two years. He received his B.B.A. degree from the University in 1922. One year was lost because of a severe bout with typhoid fever. He had made up his mind that he would not marry but would devote himself to caring for his mother and younger siblings and, to provide social life without involvement, he gathered together a group of seven or eight boys and a like number of girls from the Presbyterian Church student group. Rules were that no boy could date the same girl consecutively. The two groups had many picnics on week-ends and Sunday afternoon calls on ailing and housebound elderly people.

Since I was not in the Presbyterian Church at first and did not belong to that group, I was not bound by its rules. I began attending the Presbyterian Church with a friend and, of course, met John. He sang in the choir and I sat in the audience and our eyes met rather frequently over the heads of the congregation. The student group planned a boat-ride-picnic in the Spring, and we went in a double-decked party boat up to the mouth of Bull Creek, then walked with our provisions on our arms up to a pool formed by large fallen rocks. There we could swim and have our picnic. When time came to go home in the late afternoon, we returned to the boat. John was on the upper deck; and when I started to board below, he stretched out his long arms in my direction. I caught his hands and was lifted effortlessly up to join him on the upper level. After that, we took a lot of walks in the evenings and, by the time he left school in 1922, we had an "understanding." John's decision never to marry was never mentioned again.

After graduation, he went to Sweetwater as secretary of the Board of City Development. Sweetwater, a small town in West Texas, an interesting spot. The Board included a Catholic, a Presbyterian and a Jew, all good friends and men who saw eye to eye on their community problems and opportunities. All three became John's good friends and supporters of his moves to help the town's development. He started a Building and Loan Association to help promote home building. He became involved in school affairs, helping to elect a better school board after school officials were involved in misuse of school finances.



John at Sweetwater

At the time of the school crisis, the high school football team had a star player who did not keep up any sort of scholastic record and who actually was not in school at all at times. Because the school officials had allowed him to play in spite of his not being eligible, the boy marshaled the team and set out to wreck the printing plant of the local newspaper which had published stories about the school problems.

John's office was across the street from this plant, and he saw the boys coming and suspected their intent. He rushed across to the plant and, when the boys entered, leaped up on the counter across the front of the office. Facing the boys and calling them by name, he spoke quietly and firmly, urging them to avoid violence and unlawful activity. His six-foot three inches and 200 pounds of muscular frame combined with the air of command from his air service days made his point and the boys went straggling away.

Ku Klux Klan reared its head in Texas politics and showed up in Sweetwater, spreading anonymous questions about the Catholics and the Jews since there were no Blacks there to be targets. The local head of the Klan turned out to be an elderly lawyer, unsuccessful in his profession, whose wife ran the boarding house where John stayed and had his meals. John took a strong stand against the slandering of his Catholic and Jewish friends and helped marshal community opposition to the Klan moves.

Sweetwater as the County Seat sponsored a Fair and Stock Show each fall. This was one of John's big projects each year, and he had many friends among the local ranchers. One who turned out to be a Lea cousin from Gonzales, had a ranch south of town in the "breaks". There was a small canyon where a spring ran with water cress growing on its banks. Many picnics were held there Saturday evenings around a campfire, with singing, to a guitar played by John's office secretary. Usually on the way home, rattlesnakes would show up, lying in the road under the lights of the Model T car. The rifle in the car would quickly dispose of the snake whose rattles would be added to the collection inside the guitar.

John became a member of the Volunteer Fire Department, the most prestigious "fraternity" in the town. When the siren would sound, he would join the crew dropping all activities and rushing to the fire station to go put out the fire.

Two years after John went to Sweetwater, he came to Wichita Falls and we were married in the dining room of our cottage on Eleventh Street, the first and only home my father and mother owned. We left in his Model T, driving to Amarillo and visiting Palo Duro Canyon next day. Then we headed back to Sweetwater - back to work.

We stayed in a rented room and had meals at the boarding house the first year we were there, then moved to an efficiency apartment with a bed that folded up into a closet in the day time. We began to build a house south of town into which we soon moved.

About this time, the election of the Board of City Development members was scheduled. A group opposing development ran a ticket which won the election. John was distressed and with his usual very strong sense of responsibility felt he was responsible for the defeat of the group he had worked with and for during several years. After a few days, he sent a letter of resignation and we headed out in the trusty Model T for Rockport where members of his family were vacationing.

This was my first experience in Rockport, which had been the family vacation place from the time John was little over a year old. We stayed in a big two-story house on Water Street - no screens in the windows, lots of mosquitos and no breeze to blow them back, a crowd of family I

did not know, and John still very upset over the election. Some introduction to the place which was to be our family vacation center through two generations - more than fifty years.

When we returned to Sweetwater, it was to find that the new Board had refused to accept John's resignation and had elected him to a new term as its secretary. Soon, however, he was approached by two Houston men, alumni of the University of Texas: Thomas Watt Gregory, Attorney General of the United States in the presidency of Woodrow Wilson; and Will C. Hogg, oil man and financier, son of Governor Jim Hogg.

These men invited John to come to Houston at their expense to talk about the University and the Ex-Students' Association. John wasn't interested in leaving Sweetwater. He was happy in West Texas, busy, and liked his job. But he finally went. Gregory and Hogg had great ambitions and plans for the University, which they felt was making no progress. The Ex-Students' Association was without a secretary, and they saw an opportunity to make it a leader in revitalizing the University. They were very much fired up, and for several days poured out their ideas to John. He caught their enthusiasm, and when the job of Ex-Student secretary was offered to him, he accepted. And we moved back to Austin in the fall of 1926.

John entered the new job with high enthusiasm. Si was attending the University, and he had his meals with us which helped defray his expenses for preparation to enter medical school. We returned to our University connections so recently severed - church and friends and University activities. In 1927, just before Margaret was born, we moved to a cottage just a block north of the campus. Brother Si continued his University work and his supping with us; and in 1928, Dr. McCurdy died and Lammie and Mary came to live with us. John had indeed been able to prepare for the time when he would be needed by his family.

Then in the fall of 1929, my father developed tuberculosis and was hospitalized in the Thompson Sanatorium in Kerrville. My mother came to live with us also and to be close enough to go by bus every week-end to see Dad and to help him keep cheerful and to recover. She was with us nine months, then spent the summer in Kerrville with Dad in a rented cottage, returning to Wichita Falls, with his illness arrested, in the Fall.

The 1930's brought great activity in the University world. Oil had been discovered on University land in West Texas. Funds began to be available for buildings to replace the World War I shacks which dotted the campus. To hasten the process of renewal, the Association mounted a campaign for a building program. Mr. Gregory had dreamed of a Men's Gym (Gregory Gym) to replace the shack currently used. The program was expanded to include a Women's Gym, a Union Building, and an auditorium (Hogg Auditorium). University officials were anything but pleased. One administrator with tears in his eyes, said: "John, we can't even take care of those buildings. You are selling us out to the janitors!" Regents were cool, but the Association Council went ahead with fund raising and plans for the buildings.

Dr. Battle, Professor of Classical Languages, was chairman of the University's building committee. He refused to allow the architects for the new buildings to have offices on the campus; so they had to office in John's, which was an old five room house on San Antonio Street and 23d where the Pi Phi house now stands. Green, LaRoche and Dahl set up drafting tables here and John was delighted to share the work of planning. Many nights he would stay on until midnight hours pouring over the plans. He also made the contacts for the architects with faculty and staff who would be using the buildings. He designed fold-down arms to chairs in Hogg Auditorium to be used when lectures were held there. The manufacturing company patented his

design and used it widely in their business. He worked on the great electrical switch board in the auditorium and studied plans hours on end to design the best possible arrangement of rooms and services.

After these buildings were completed, the Association leaders and John decided the University ought to continue to replace shacks beyond the ability of the current income from the Permanent Fund. They suggested that a Constitutional amendment be passed to allow the University to issue bonds against the income from that Fund and to go ahead with building. The Regents and administration vigorously opposed this, but the Exes did it anyway; and after it was done, building did go forward. Then the regents got the Legislature to rescind that amendment. However, it was not long until they realized their mistake and came back to ask the Exes to pass it again.

That amendment made possible the beginning of a building program for the University, A&M and the medical college at Galveston which prepared them for the tremendous increase in college attendance which took place in the 40's and '50's and continues to this day.

The influence of state politics on the University system was usually misguided or inimical or both. An important part of John's job was to be aware of unfavorable movements as they were developing and marshal the Exes to resist and stop them. This made enemies as well as friends for him, both inside the Association and on the campus, as well as in legislative bodies. His job was entirely at the will of the Council- one-year contract only - which met in the Spring annually to elect its officers. Every year John was in doubt as to his chances for re-election, but miraculously he survived year after year for almost thirty years.

The years of the presidency of Dr. Homer Rainey were the most hopeful times the University had ever seen, in John's eyes. The University reached out with service to the state in ways it had never done before, and the cause of better standards for students and faculty was supported strongly.

The opposition which developed and finally resulted in the firing of Dr. Rainey in spite of the support of students and faculty, was a great blow to John, one from which he never really recovered. For a decade after that event, he continued his work but with greatly reduced hopes for the University's progress. Forces in the state, backed by leaders in oil and gas industries and other strong business interests, were alarmed by the teachings of professors which threatened their successful control of state legislation and government. They were determined to keep the influence of independent and impartial thinking from penetrating the opinions of citizens of the state; and they set a watch on all teaching in areas which might affect government and economics. Their sons could go to Harvard and hear these things, but they must be kept from the ordinary people of Texas.

John turned 60 in 1955, and his health was affected by the strain and frustration of his job. In 1956, he resigned after almost 30 years of service. The rest of that year was spent with



**Secretary of Ex-Students
Association (circa 1950)**



May Lea and John (circa 1965)

health problems, culminating in surgery for gall bladder removal.

In 1957, he was recovering his health and was able to do some remodeling construction for several friends and acquaintances. Then Walter Long called on him to help in his Texas Legislative Service, a private enterprise which sells complete reports on the actions of all the elements of state government. Daily reports of the progress of legislation introduced, sent to committee, amended, passed or killed; committee meetings and actions, etc., were recorded and sent to subscribers of the service. John worked for 12 years as the reporter in the House of Representatives. He made many close friends and watched the maneuvers of the interests of the state in their efforts to control the passage of legislation.

May Lea Guthrie McCurdy, August 8, 1902 - August 17, 1998, lived her last fifteen months at Westminster Manor in Austin, Texas. Reared in Corsicana, Texas, she moved to Wichita Falls during her high school years. She graduated from The University of Texas Phi Beta Kappa in 1923. In 1924 she married John A. McCurdy, who in 1926 became the Executive Director of the UT Ex-Students Association. She edited the Alcalde at various times during the 1930's and in 1950 became the Assistant Librarian for the City of Austin. Sometime after her retirement in 1967, she began writing family stories.



Compiled by son-in-law Richard Robertson, May, 1999

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