

THE GLENN CUNNINGHAM STORY

It was another bitterly cold morning in Everetts, Kan., a rural farming town like so many hundreds of communities throughout the American Midwest as the world was waging the Great War, World War I.

The residents in those small towns were not strangers to hard—often back-breaking—work, and from early childhood, they learned to value, even to love, hard work. Chores were doled out nearly as soon as a child could walk.

Such was the life of the Cunninghams: father Clint was a water-well driller who moved his family around a lot in a struggle to keep them fed.

On Aug. 4, 1909, while living in Atlanta, Kan., Clint's wife bore him a son, whom they named Glenn. By the time he was six, little Glenn was already working.

He and his nine-year old brother, Floyd, were assigned the onerous duty of walking almost two miles to the schoolhouse (that's what they still called them back then, and many really were just abandoned houses that were converted to schools) to start the fire in the stove.

That way, the room would be warm by the time the teacher and other students arrived.

One cold morning in February of 1916, Floyd and Glenn arrived at the schoolhouse and unlocked the door, and were slapped in the face by the bitter cold wafting out of the still structure.

The two boys loaded the large, pot belly stove full of firewood, and took the kerosene can and soaked the logs thoroughly, as they always did. The kerosene accelerated the process of ignition, while also soaking into the logs enough to allow the flames to begin consuming the wood.

This morning, though, something went terribly wrong.

After letting the logs soak in the fluid for a bit, Floyd struck a match and dropped it into the pot belly stove. Almost instantaneously, the fire took on a life of its own. With a

percussive “whoomp,” fire exploded everywhere, engulfing Floyd in a horrific sheet of flame.

Someone had mistakenly filled the kerosene container *with gasoline*.

Both of the boys were knocked to the ground by the mini-explosion, writhing in unspeakable pain. The flames quickly escaped the confines of the stove and violently swarmed throughout the front room of the schoolhouse.

On this day, their older sister Letha had accompanied them to school. She had been tending to other duties nearby, and heard the commotion coming from the schoolhouse. She saw the menacing flames and rushed to the front door, her horror growing by the moment.

She managed to open the door and coax her siblings out of the inferno. She ran for help; by the time she got back, Floyd was barely alive. He died shortly thereafter.

Little Glenn was mercifully unconscious for hours, as local doctors proclaimed him more dead than alive. His lower body had been ravaged by the flames.

He awoke in the local hospital, his legs swathed in bandages. The pain was unspeakable. He thought suddenly of his older brother, and tried to spring out of his bed to find him, but he could not move his legs.

He was crushed to learn that his brother had passed.

He was forced to stay in the hospital for weeks. His legs remained bandaged and lifeless. As he drifted in and out of consciousness, he overheard whispered conversations between his mother and doctors. First, they thought he would not survive. Later, they said he would never walk again, and urged amputation of both his legs.

His mother, mindful that her son had already lost his brother, refused to let him lose his legs, too.

When the bandages were finally removed and Glenn was sent home, it was easy to see why the doctors had been so pessimistic.

Glenn had lost all the toes on his left foot, and the transverse arch of the foot was ravaged. The flesh on his knees and shins had been eaten away by the flames. The right leg was grossly misshapen and was now a full two inches shorter than the left leg.

He still could not walk.

The doctors had done all they could. There was no such thing as transplants and skin grafts in those days nearly a century ago, and even if there had been, the Cunninghams were not likely candidates to afford the processes.

They sent him home with a wheelchair and crutches, advising the family to massage the legs to stretch the muscles and restore suppleness to his lower limbs.

Cunningham commented on the arduous regimen in his autobiography, *American Miler: The Life and Times of Glenn Cunningham*, by Paul J. Kiell.

“It hurt like mad,” Glenn said, “especially when my father stretched my legs...When my father would get tired I’d ask my mother to do the massaging and stretching and when she couldn’t do any more I’d start doing it myself.”

Glenn was determined to walk again, and endured the excruciating routine as a necessary evil.

One sunny day, during the summer of 1919, his mother wheeled him into the yard for fresh air, as was her custom. She went back inside. A few minutes later, she was astonished to see Glenn crawling on the ground!

She rushed outside, thinking something was wrong. By the time she had reached her son, Glenn had pulled himself across the grass and raised himself up on the picket fence.

He then proceeded to drag himself along the fence, stumbling as he tried to *will* his legs into functioning, determined that he would walk, all the while resisting his mother’s attempts to help.

He did this every day for weeks, until he had worn a path along the fence.

Slowly—over a period of months—Glenn’s legs began to function, to the astonishment of the doctors. After he began walking again, he made another discovery:

“It hurt like thunder to walk, but it didn't hurt at all when I ran. So for five or six years, about all I did was run.”

Well, he actually started doing something more akin to hopping fast than running. But before long, young Glenn Cunningham was known throughout the community for his running. Because he ran *everywhere*.

He once said, “I didn’t move 10 feet without breaking into a run. I ran and ran and ran.”

By the time he was 12, Glenn—running despite having legs that were still riddled with scars—was outrunning everyone in his age group in Elkhart, Kan., where his family had set down roots.

He went on to run track at Elkhart High School, becoming a miler. In his last schoolboy race, he set a national record, running the mile with a time of 4 minutes, 24.7 seconds

It is reputed that Cunningham ran a sub-four minute mile at Elkhart, but such outrageous rumors are unsubstantiated.

Cunningham took his incomparable determination and will to the University of Kansas in 1930, running for legendary track coach Brutus Hamilton, who himself had been a famed decathlete, winning a silver in the discipline at the 1920 Antwerp Games.

He sat out his freshman campaign, and in the 1931-32 season entered his first inter-collegiate competitions.

At the Big Six Meet that year in Lincoln, Neb., he set new conference records in the half mile (1:53.3), and the mile (4:14.3).

The following week, at the National Collegiate Meet in Chicago, he smashed the NCAA record in the mile, zipping to a time of 4:11.1.

No man had ever run the mile faster at an outdoor meet in the United States. Glenn Cunningham had arrived on the national scene, and it would be almost a decade before he would relinquish his place as the top middle-distance runner in the country.

1932 saw Cunningham win the NCAA 1,500 meter championship and earn a berth on the U.S. Olympic team. He placed fourth in the 1,500 meter race at Los Angeles, missing out on the medal podium by only a few meters.

In 1933, Cunningham graduated from Kansas with the highest academic marks in his class. That year, he won the AAU 800 meters in a time of 1:51.8; the AAU 1,500 meters with a time of 3:52.3; and he won the NCAA mile once more, with a time of 4:09.8.

He was rewarded with the 1933 Sullivan Memorial Award as the outstanding amateur athlete in America.

In the summer of 1933, he was captain of the American track team touring Europe. After running 20 events that summer, Cunningham was given the moniker of "The Kansas Ironman."

1934 was the dawn of a new rivalry between Glenn Cunningham and Princeton's Bill Bronthron.

Cunningham unveiled a brand new strategy: running the second half of the race faster than the first half.

On June 16, 1934, at the first Princeton Invitational Games, the favored Bronthron, Cunningham and Gene Venzki ran an epic one-mile encounter at Madison Square Gardens.

With over 25,000 watching, and thousands others turned away, Cunningham blitzed the competition by running lap times of 61.8, 64.0, 61.8, and 59.1 seconds, shattering the world record with a total time of 4:06.7, edging closer to the mythical four-minute mile.

Later that summer, Bronthron got a measure of revenge, adjusting to the stratagem and beating Cunningham in consecutive 1,500 meter races, the second in a world record time of his own, 3:48.8, while Glenn also beat the world mark with his 3:48.9 (a personal best).

Cunningham owned the major races in 1935, winning the AAU 1,500 meters championship in a time of 3:52.1; and taking the Wanamaker Mile in 4:11.0, with Venzke in second place and Bonthron in third.

After running relatively slow times at the 1936 U. S. Olympic trials, saving himself for the Olympic Games, Cunningham ran the best 1,500 meter time of his life...and once again lost a race while beating a world record.

He fell to Jack Lovelock of New Zealand in a new world record time of 3:47.8. Cunningham finished at 3:48.4 and said of Lovelock, "He must be the greatest runner ever," according to Cordner Nelson and Roberto Quercetani in the book *The Milers*. Cunningham finished his career with two NCAA titles, eight AAU championships, and a satchel of world records, one of which—his world one mile record of 4:06.8 in 1934—stood for three years.

He won 21 of 31 indoor races at Madison Square Garden, despite enduring a tedious regimen of stretching and warm-ups that was far longer than any other runner's, due to the lingering circulation problems in his legs, effects from the schoolhouse fire in 1916.

According to Nelson and Quercetani, Cunningham admired endurance, perhaps hearkening back to those bleak days of his childhood, spent dragging his almost-lifeless legs behind him as he navigated the picket fence in the back yard.

"If you stay in the running," they quote him as saying, "if you have endurance, you are bound to win over those who haven't."

If all of that weren't enough, Cunningham's post-racing career might mark his most remarkable accomplishments.

Despite living his adult life through the worst economic depression in American history, Cunningham shrewdly invested his winnings as a prize runner, and parlayed them into not one, but *two* sprawling ranches.

One of them, now known as the Cunningham Chase County Ranch in south central Kansas (near Burns), he acquired in 1939, and was given to his first wife, Margaret S. Cunningham, as a part of their divorce settlement.

His daughter, Dr. Sandra Cunningham, retains 320 acres of the property to this day, and raises Egyptian Arabian thoroughbred horses there. Her father had rescued animals and used the 822 acre plot to rehab them and provide them with a quality of life second-to-none.

He earned a doctorate in physical education, and served as the physical education director at Cornell College from 1940-'44, before serving two years in the U. S. Navy.

He married his second wife, the former Ruth Sheffield, in the summer of 1947. They settled into the ranch that he had purchased in 1938 and retained for himself, an 840 acre tract of land near Cedar Point, Kansas.

The family—which eventually included two daughters by Margaret and the 10 children borne to Glenn by his second wife, Ruth—lived in the 12-room ranch house.

However, Glenn and Ruth eventually ran a home for troubled youth, though neither of them had any formal training in the field.

They had as many as 84 people—mostly children—living together at any given time.

The Cunninghams eventually helped upwards of 9,000 troubled and underprivileged youths at the Glenn Cunningham Youth Ranch. Their method was simple, according to Frank B. Bowles in the *Biographical Dictionary of American Sports*:

“With virtually no outside help, the couple handled the youngsters with old-fashioned patience and tolerance.”

Perhaps Cunningham is best summed up in the words of his favorite scripture, one which soothed him as he survived his harrowing brush with death, and one which he instilled in the many youths that he raised.

It is Isaiah chapter 40, verse 31:

“But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Indeed, Glenn V. Cunningham mounted up on wings like angels—or perhaps we should say the legs of a cheetah—and ran without getting weary. He was not as effortless, graceful, or smooth as other runners; he was just more determined.

He ran all the way into the hearts of a nation, and his story of courage and inspiration should be passed on for generations.