

The Man Behind T.F. Riggs High School

By Sarah Eckert and Kailee Schultz

South Dakota native Doctor Theodore Foster Riggs was a remarkable man, so much so that a high school was named after him in our state capital. That being said, most of the students have lived here all their lives and hardly know his story. Pierre takes in a few new students and a few foreign exchange students each year. As a new student myself, I only find it appropriate that all of the student body—native, foreign, or new—be informed of our school's history.

Riggs's parents, Thomas Lawrence Riggs and Cornelia Margaret Foster Riggs, were missionaries with the Sioux Indians. Riggs was born in an Indian village in South Dakota on July 7, 1847. He and his father traveled, visiting his father's "out stations" and staying in teepees, following his mother's death in 1878. He was married in 1914, became a widower and had two sons, Tom and Foster.

In his youth, Riggs attended mission school with Indian children as well as traditional elementary schools in the East. His future aspirations as a physician were not intended to be urban. He graduated with a Bachelor's from Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin, and then in 1903 he received his Doctorate in Medicine from Johns Hopkins medical school in Baltimore. He knew he wanted to return home to Pierre, South Dakota, that had a



Dr. T.F. Riggs. (Courtesy of the South Dakota State Historical Society)

humble population of 3,000.

After surgical training, and visiting medical centers in Berlin,

Vienna, Berne and London, Dr. Riggs

returned to Pierre in 1909 to begin his medical practice. He retired from his career in surgery in 1955, making 46

years of fascinating achievements. An

article written about Riggs, "City to Honor Dr. T. F. Riggs" by Harold S. Milner, states "None of Dr. Rigg[s]'s 15,000 'more or less' major operations stand out, because 'they were all important.'" A woman of age 96 reached out to Principal Mutchelknaus in October. She was kind enough to share her interaction with Dr. Riggs when she was two years old. When she caught her left hand in an electric clothes wringer, doctors at St. Mary's Hospital decided that the hand was to be amputated. However,

Theodore F. Riggs stepped in and saved the hand after 13 operations. In the letter she addressed to Mr. Mutchelknaus, it is written, "All went well and my hand healed and has been as useful as anybody's allowing me to lead a full and rich life. So as I think back on my time at PHS and think of TF Riggs High (where 3 of my children graduated), I think of the great man who came to serve the people of Pierre and who changed my life beyond what I can imagine."

In 1927, Dr. Riggs was elected to the Pierre Independent

District School Board of Education where he served for 30 years.

He was president of the Board from 1931 to 1933, then from 1940

to 1954. He was a State Medical Consultant for the South Dakota Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (1944-1961) and the Department of the Service of the Blind (1948-1953) "His services to the state of South Dakota and the rehabilitation of the physically and mentally handicapped persons is unparalleled." Because of his service to

the Board of Education, the newly constructed

high school in Pierre, South Dakota, received his name. A public recognition day was held in his honor on May 16, 1948, to honor his dedication to many organizations around the community. He received "distinguished service awards" from the State Educational Department, the State Medical Association, the State Advisory Board and the Selective Service system.

Doctor Theodore Foster Riggs died in 1962, and was buried in the Riverside Cemetery in Pierre, South Dakota. Although his life has long since passed, his memory lives on. He is alive in the heart of the woman whose hand he saved, he is alive in all of the Indian villages in which he called home, he is alive in our high school, in the lobby's mural, and he is alive in St. Mary's hospital where he left his greatest mark.

Dr. Riggs will forever be remembered as the man who served Pierre, South Dakota, for the pure sake of caring for the people in his hometown. When students look at our school or walk into it, a new meaning of our school should come forth. Hopefully the current and future students of T.F. Riggs High School will learn more about him and his extraordinary impact.



T. F. Riggs High School. (Courtesy)