



Chester O. Cox, in photo taken about six weeks before his death

MEDAL PRESERVES MEMORY OF TEXAS TEEN'S HEROIC DEATH

A Carnegie Medal awarded 91 years ago to the parents of a high school student who died saving a friend from drowning remains in the family and is a reminder of the hero's sacrifice: A month shy of his 18th birthday, Chester O. Cox drowned on April 16, 1922, while saving a 14-year-old girl during a picnic along the banks of the Leon River near Belton, Texas.

Cox's nephew, Perry L. Cox of Arlington, Texas, said that the afternoon picnic of a group of friends suddenly turned from a pleasant outing to an act of heroism and then to tragedy. On that Sunday afternoon, Edith M. Goepfinger attempted to swim across the river from a sandbar where the group was picnicking. She quickly began to struggle in the strong current of the river, which was swollen from heavy rain earlier in the day. Cox, who had warned Edith that the conditions were dangerous, immediately entered the swollen waters and swam to her. He took hold of her around the neck and attempted to swim back to the sandbar, and then he swam with the current as it took them downstream. He had gradually pushed Edith toward the opposite bank, enabling her to catch hold of tree roots there. She held to them until more help arrived, but Cox was swept farther downstream and drowned. His body was recovered from the river a week later.

Scheduled to graduate from Belton High School the following month, Cox was popular with his classmates, according to his nephew, and Belton Tiger football fans admired his "clean tactics" and ability on the gridiron. A contemporary news account said that he was "beloved for his sterling traits and noble character." The medal was presented to his parents, Perry S. and Lillie May Cox. Other survivors were his sister, Vera, and younger brother, Eldon, who was Perry's father. The family descended from pioneer farmers who migrated from Tennessee to frontier grasslands of Texas in the 1850s.

Cox's father owned and operated a barbershop in Belton, and his customers would frequently ask to see "the medal." It was kept in the shop until Cox's father died in 1937. Next in line to hold the medal was Eldon, who, according to Perry, was "a smaller version of his big brother." Eldon held the medal until his death in 1960. Perry said the family is hoping to return the medal to a location close to where it was earned, a public museum in Belton. He intends to have the medal refurbished before a decision is made on its final resting place.

Cox is buried in North Belton Cemetery. His nephew said a bronze Carnegie Hero Fund grave marker is proudly displayed on the gravestone.