

Gordon Joseph Cummings

April 30, 1919 — April 5, 2005

Gordon Joseph Cummings was born in King Ferry, Cayuga County, New York, on April 30, 1919, the son of Peter and Ida Cummings. During Gordon's formative years, when life in the 1930s of the Great Depression was so difficult and opportunities were limited, Peter Cummings alternated jobs between farming and work in Ithaca; in these alternations, young Gordon attended schools in both locations. These early years in a small upstate community laid the groundwork for a theme that would run through Gordon's entire life, namely, a love for rural life and the small communities in the state.

The Cummings were Irish and Roman Catholic, and as such exposed to the underside of upstate New York in the 1920s and 1930s. Gordon told of the Ku Klux Klan dumping nails in the road in front of their farm. However, typical of Gordon, he told this straightforwardly, without bitterness, even with a twinkle in his eye.

Gordon graduated from King Ferry High School and immediately enrolled at Cornell University. His university education was interrupted by World War II, during which he was stationed in Okinawa and Japan. He was in Nagasaki, Japan just five days after the atomic bomb destroyed that city. As an agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps, he had close contact with the Japanese people and came to appreciate many aspects of the Japanese and other Southeast Asian cultures. After the war, he returned to Cornell to complete a Bachelor of Science degree in 1948, a Master of Science degree in 1950, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1954. Immediately after completing his Ph.D. degree, he joined the Department of Rural Sociology in the College of Agriculture as an Assistant Professor with a predominant responsibility in Extension.

The core subject of the more than 50 reports, articles, and papers he would write, dealt with "Leadership in Rural Life," "How to Identify Policies and Organization to Improve Community Life," and, near the end of his career, "The Evaluation and Improvement of Health Care in Rural Areas." One of the many projects in which he participated and of which he was most proud was "Operation Advance." This work on public policy and public decision-making was joined by Professors Clifford R. Harrington and Edward A. Lutz, and together they prepared discussion guides on topics such as "Community Growth and Development," "Education and the Future," "Resources – Land, Water and People," "The Changing Environment for Living, Work and Play," and "Managing Community Growth." Related to these topics, among the courses he taught were those titled "Small Towns," "Sociology of Leadership," and "Organization of Rural Health Care."

His projects were largely implemented through the auspices of the Cornell Cooperative Extension Service. He also served as Department Extension Leader for many years and, along with Professor Robert Polson, on the New York State Citizens Council Field Service Committee. In 1975, he spent his sabbatic leave with the New York State Health Department in Albany, helping to organize Comprehensive Health Planning and community mammogram centers for breast cancer screening. He also served as Chair of the Planning Committee of the Governor's Health Advisory Council.

Professionally, he was a member of the Rural Sociological Society, the Adult Education Association, and the Community Development Society.

His passion for the local community extended into his retirement years. He became Historian for the town of Genoa, and the village of King Ferry in Cayuga County, and was the first President of the Board of Directors of the Genoa Historical Association. Gordon was President of the Community Development Federation and on the Board of Directors of Blue Cross of Central New York. He was always looking for projects both in his professional and private life. He used to tell his children the story of two frogs swimming in a bucket of buttermilk, wondering if they could stay afloat. One turned to the other and said, "Please don't be discouraged brother, one more kick and this stuff will turn to butter." So it was with his projects: never be discouraged.

After a long marriage he was predeceased by his wife, Jane Powers Cummings, and is survived by son Thomas (Beverly Ludke) of Pittsford, New York; son Gregory of Washington, D.C.; son Daniel (Danielle) of Syracuse, New York; daughter Molly (David Rose) of Rochester, New York; and four grandchildren. At his funeral Mass in King Ferry, they observed that the heart of his life concerned his family; their accounts of "Life with Pop," were filled with love and affection, and, most of all, with respect. They also recognized that Gordon Cummings loved Cornell as an institution in its variety of activities, and especially its Cooperative Extension program in playing out its role as part of a Land-Grant University, as well as the various communities of people with whom he worked so closely.

Paul R. Eberts, Frank W. Young, Eugene C. Erickson