

Having just turned 100 years old this past September, Dr. A.A. Houser still maintains an active interest in Alpine Farms, a 5,000-acre cattle farm that began with the purchase of his family home many years ago.

Enjoying Life At A Hundred

by Don Trimmer

Annandale, standing in the center of Alpine Farms and dating back to 1813, once belonged to Dr. Houser's grandfather. Dr. Houser and his wife Sue recently restored the elegant house and now make it their home.

What does a twenty-two-year-old college student ask a man who, over the course of a century, was a successful farmer, doctor, merchandiser, businessman and cattleman? This thought and many more entered my mind as I headed up Interstate 81 from Southwest Virginia towards Buchanan. Exiting the interstate, I knew that Alpine Farms was just over the next set of mountains. However, I didn't realize that the only road into the farm was not much more than a mountain pass. After crossing the Chessy railroad tracks and winding along the James River, I entered the rolling grasslands of Alpine Farms.

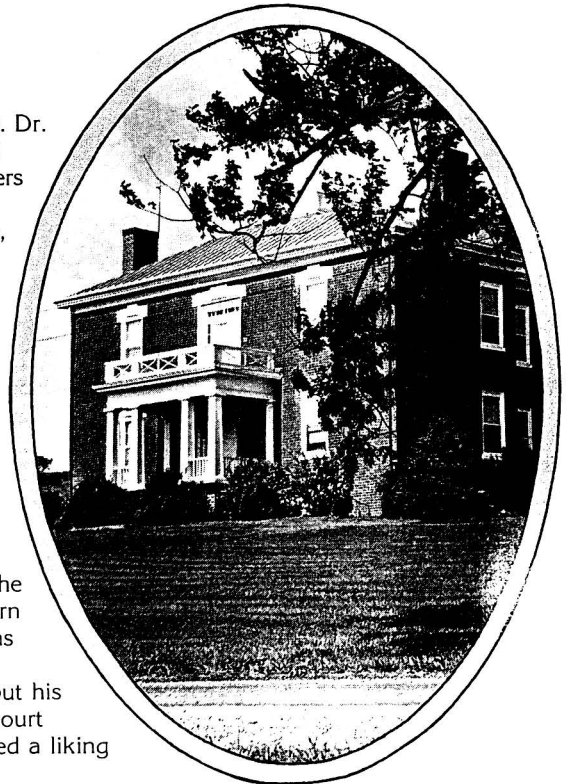
The excitement was building inside of me as I turned towards Annandale, Dr. Houser's home, for it is rare that a person has the opportunity to meet a centenarian. And as I approached the historic place, I was struck by the beauty of this quiet valley.

Dr. Houser was waiting for me on his porch and welcomed me with a firm handshake. He offered me a seat beside him and for the next hour, I sat and listened as he re-

lived many of his past experiences. Dr. Houser, as could be expected, had been interviewed by many newspapers and magazines as he neared his 100th birthday last September. So, as he began to relate his experiences to me, he mentioned, "I've been interviewed by many journals before, but I expect you need to know something about me and my past for your own information." And so began a witty, and sometimes humorous, account of Dr. Houser's life.

Businessman, Teacher, Doctor

Dr. Houser still owns the home he grew up in at Rocky Point, Va. Born in 1881, Aubrey Alphin Houser was the only son in a family of seven children. He grew up in farming, but his father sent him off to attend Botetourt Normal School, where he developed a liking for mathematics.



He later decided to enter Massey Business College in Richmond. But in order to do so, Dr. Houser said, "I sold a horse for \$130 and used the money to pay for my tuition and a place to stay." He graduated from the commercial department of the school in 1901.

He returned home to assume the duties of bookkeeper in his uncle's general store; a position he held for three and a half years, but almost lost it during one Christmas season.

"I looked around one day towards the beginning of December and saw that the store was bare," Dr. Houser relates, "so I decided to order our Christmas inventory. When the merchandise arrived, it took us two and a half hours to unload it all. Needless to say, my uncle was upset."

When asked what he planned to do with it all, he replied to his uncle, "I'm going to sell it!" Beaming like a proud salesman, Dr. Houser continued, "And that's what I did! What wasn't sold by Christmas, we reduced by half. And by New Year's Day, we had sold every bit of it. The store had made more money in those few weeks than it had over the entire year!"

He left the store in 1905 to sell farm machinery in the nearby counties. Later that same year, he enrolled in Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va. "My first year was tough, since I had only an eighth grade education," Houser said, "but I caught up during my second year."

After two years at Washington and Lee, young Houser began the study of medicine at the Medical College of Virginia, completely financing his education by working as a laboratory assistant at the college and by continuing to sell farm machinery during vacation months.

During his first year of medical college, he wrote a thesis and received a certificate in chemistry from Washington and Lee University. He also taught mathematics at the YMCA night school and chemistry at the Virginia Mechanics Institute. Graduating in medicine in 1911, he continued to teach at the Medical College of Virginia and served as the first resident of St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Richmond, where he remained as a member of the staff for many years.

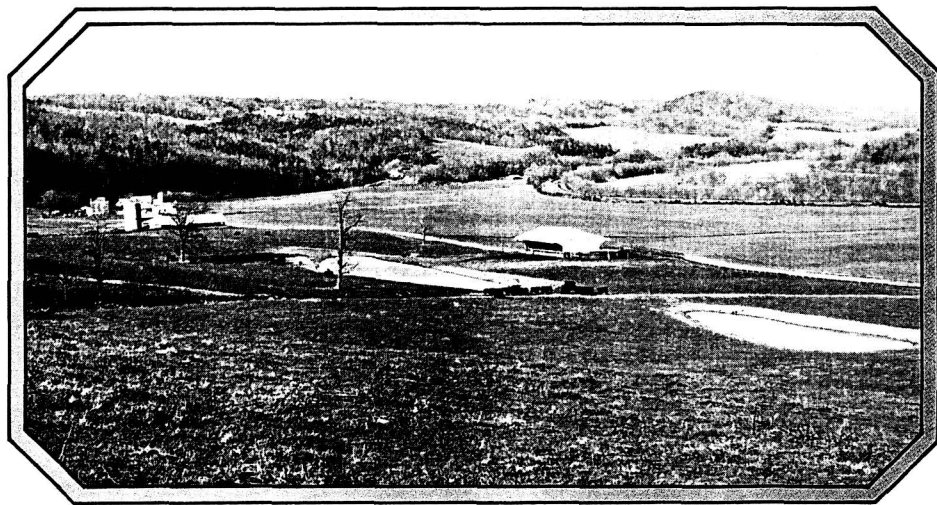
Treating Minds and Bodies

As a doctor, he was not content just to treat diseases and symptoms. When the ill-effects of anxiety and tension, now conceded to be the most important single cause of illness, were almost entirely unrecognized by physicians, Dr. Houser was treating the minds as well as the bodies of his patients. He instituted a thorough laboratory and physical study on each patient before diagnosis. He organized an Educational Health Service based upon a yearly examination. He was the first physician in Virginia to run routine

Wassermann tests on all his patients. But more important, he gave to his patients many thousands of hours of health and living counsel each year, designed for and consistently effective in relieving them of the tensions, anxieties and inner resentments that were in such large measure responsible for their illnesses.

Patients came to him in ever-increasing numbers and his workdays continued to be sixteen or more hours long. And always, service to his patients was his one aim.

"I can remember coming home at night after seeing over one hundred patients," Dr. Houser remarked. He made no more than a living from a volume of practice that would have made many physicians exceedingly wealthy.



This valley along the James River represents some of the most fertile land in the 5,000 acres which make up Alpine Farms. From his porch, Mr. Houser proudly comments, "I own two miles to my left and three miles to my right."

Drug Company to Farming

At the age of 38, he became interested in the Poythress Company, which then operated as a combination retail prescription drugstore and a small drug manufacturer and distributor. This interest was sparked when he endorsed a note for a friend who wished to invest in the company.

Years later, the Poythress Company was at the point of being dissolved because of financial difficulties, and Dr. Houser was asked to take over its management.

"I never would have accepted the responsibility," stated Dr. Houser, "if I had not the experience in merchandising that I gained years before at my uncle's store. Since I enjoyed the business aspect of the store, I agreed to take over the Poythress Company's management."

Accepting the challenge, he reorganized the operations of the Poythress Company, eliminating the retail drugstore and confin-

ing the operations to the manufacture and promotion of prescription drug products. At the age of sixty, when most men think of retiring, Dr. Houser gave up the practice of medicine and devoted all of his great energy and talents to the building of the Poythress Company.

He quickly established a profitable operation, paid off the debts without outside financing, and over the years has, step by step, enlarged the scope and area of operation to twenty-five southern and eastern states.

Though his achievements have been many, it is easy to sense that Alpine Farms is truly Dr. Houser's "pride and joy". Alpine Farms began with the purchase of Dr. Houser's homestead many years ago. However, the majority of land that composes Alpine was acquired after he reached the age

of 60. Dr. Houser refers to the development of Alpine as "an accident, something that just happened."

Through the Poythress Company, Dr. Houser bought up a number of small and abandoned farms in a section near his homestead. When he was through, 32 farms in all were purchased to form the 5,000-acre property which is the home of Alpine Farms.

Fertile Valley and Angus Cattle

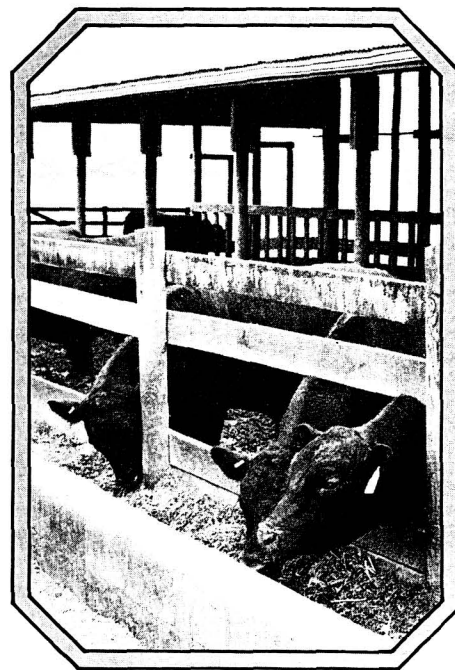
Alpine Farms lies along the James River and is surrounded to the east and west by the scenic Blue Ridge Mountains, which serve to form a fertile valley of rolling hillsides and rich bottomlands. The 350 acres of bottomlands stretch out for five miles along the James River and are utilized to produce much of the farm's crops.

From his front porch, Dr. Houser pointed out, "I own two miles to my left and three miles to my right. The farm runs from Rocky

Point on the south end, to the nearby historic Natural Bridge to the north."

In addition to cropland, Alpine Farms has more than 2,000 acres of pasture on which they run a 1,000-head beef herd, including approximately 500 registered Angus brood cows. In fact, the farm encompasses the entire valley where cattle graze lazily.

To produce additional farm income,



Producing quality seed stock through improved genetics has long been the goal at Alpine Farms. Twenty years of performance records back the 1,000-head herd, which includes 500 Angus cows.

Alpine Farms is in the process of utilizing its 2,000 acres of woodland through an annual harvest program on a rotational basis.

Although Alpine Farms was built by Dr. Houser, he has since turned the farm over to his stepson, Dr. William M. Davis. Even though Dr. Davis lives in Tucson, Ariz., where he is a vascular surgeon, he guides the major operational moves of Alpine. Many annual visits to the farm and weekly farm reports sent to Dr. Davis by farm manager Tom Stagner make this arrangement possible.

Dr. Houser believes the farm is in good hands with Dr. Davis. "He's a very intelligent man who uses his common sense," Houser adds. "Since he is in charge, I can sit back and enjoy the farm."

For the daily operation of the farm, manager Tom Stagner is assisted by assistant farm manager Jim Tate, four other full-time and two part-time employees. In addition to commercial bull sales, where bulls are sold to producers in Virginia and much of the east and southeast, Stagner noted that Alpine

Farms is planning to start holding annual production sales of top-quality females from their herd.

The Alpine herd has long been on performance records, with Mrs. Houser compiling over 40 years of Alpine cattle information. Alpine Farms was a pioneer in the Virginia Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) and has participated in that program since the mid 50s. The herd is also enrolled on AHIR and young bulls undergo performance tests on the farm. Management and selection are geared toward developing quality seed stock through improved genetics.

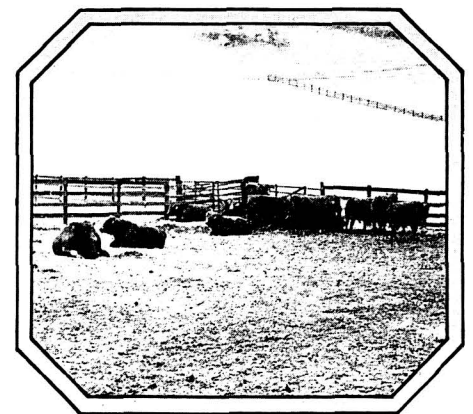
Historic Annandale

At the center of Alpine Farms stands Annandale, a gracious manor house that dates back to 1813. Dr. Houser purchased the home, which once belonged to his grandfather, George W. Alphin Sr. He has since

“The strong man does not drift aimlessly with the current of life. Through the pursuit of his ideals and through his strength of purpose he largely determines the course of his life . . . and he carries others with him . . .”

spent over one hundred thousand dollars to restore this beautiful old Georgian home. Dr. Houser and his lovely wife, Sue, moved into the 24-room plantation home last fall after months of restoration and redecoration to bring out its true southern flavor.

Mrs. Houser, Dr. Houser's second wife who also served as his personal secretary for



The breeding program at Alpine Farms is centered around performance records. Bulls are tested in large lots on the southwest Virginia operation.

many years, interrupted our conversation long enough to add some history of Annandale and its many historical articles which can be traced back through the Houser and

Alphin families. She also invited me on a tour through their home, which exhibited an influence of Virginia's two most famous sons: George Washington and Robert E. Lee. Even though Dr. Houser is retired from the management of Alpine, their home remains the center of many of the farm's events. From the front porch, one can view a majority of the farm and the Alpine cattle.

A Remarkable Individual

Dr. Houser is a special individual in every respect. His intelligence is overshadowed by few, his achievements unsurpassed by most, his memory still sharp and clear, and his wit as fresh as a new day. Dr. Houser has long been described as a man who is "tireless", who never takes a vacation and who is never sick. Dr. Houser related, "For me, work is play." He still remains active, keeping up with the happenings around Alpine and visiting

As I listened to him speak, I could feel a sense of satisfaction for a life well-lived. "I can't walk much. I can't see much. And I can't hear much. But boy do I feel good!"

with friends and guests who frequently visit Annandale.

"I'm just enjoying myself and having fun now," says Dr. Houser. "I've passed this (Alpine) and the Poythress Company on to Dr. Davis. It's their worry now, to make with it what they will."

As I listened to him speak, I could feel a sense of satisfaction for a life well-lived. "I can't walk much. I can't see much. And I can't hear much. But boy do I feel good!" Dr. Houser added, with a grin and gleam in his eye.

By now, it was time for me to go on a tour of the farm with Tom Stagner's wife, Nancy. As I left Dr. Houser, I was reminded of the words written about him in the book *Buchanan, Virginia: Gateway to the Southwest*, by Harry Fulwiler Jr.:

"The strong man does not drift aimlessly with the current of life. Through the pursuit of his ideals and through his strength of purpose he largely determines the course of his life and, within the sphere of his influence, he carries others with his, and thus magnifies and broadens his accomplishments and his service."

Dr. Houser has not only been a navigator of his own life, but also the lives of many other people by the example he has set for others to follow. He's been a success because he wasn't afraid to meet a challenge head on, and at times, to be wrong. He was willing to learn from both his right decisions and from his mistakes. Now, at a hundred, he can reflect back on a century of experiences that have produced worlds of successes—and enjoy his years to come at Alpine Farms. ♪
