

April 2007

**COFFMAN RESEARCH CENTER CELEBRATES 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY**  
**MARKS MILESTONE IN WASHINGTON COUNTY'S ONGOING**  
**PARTICIPATION IN CANCER RESEARCH**

On Wednesday, April 3, 1957 the leading story in the Morning Herald was "Cure for Cancer Could Be Discovered in Hagerstown." This story appeared a day after ground was broken for a laboratory and research center to study the association between cancer and the environment. The announcement in the local newspaper that day involved years of preliminary study, planning and negotiating. The Coffman Research Laboratory, the first facility of its kind anywhere, was constructed using the personal funds of Andrew K. and Gladys B. Coffman, local philanthropists, and dedicated in November 1958. The Laboratory was constructed by J.B. Ferguson and Co., Inc, on land donated by the State of Maryland and the Washington County Board of Education. Once the structure was completed, the National Cancer Institute established the Environmental Cancer Field Research Project. The federal government staffed and equipped the laboratory. Henry Greenville, an engineer and chemist was in charge of the local operation which employed a staff of about 15 professional, technical, and clerical personnel. The National Cancer Institute's program in Washington County was a continuation of its studies of the geographical distribution of cancer in the United States and the environmental factors associated with cancer. Using data published by what was then the National Office of Vital Statistics, the National Cancer Institute computed the relative frequency of cancer deaths in each county in the United States and this information was studied to determine whether patterns of geographic distribution emerged that may have been significant. Patterns observed at the time indicated that cancer distribution should be studied in relation to population characteristics and geologic "strata" at the surface, the ground, relative elevations, reported areas of radioactive "strata" and other measurable environmental factors. The object of the project was to determine if there was in fact an association between the environment and cancer and to determine what public health control measures may be indicated.

Washington County has been the site of ongoing cancer studies since that time. The county was selected as a site for continued studies for several reasons: the area was close to the National Cancer institute in Bethesda and the population of the county had been remarkably stable for many years. It was also helpful that Dr. Ross Cameron, the health officer at that time, had been interested in what seemed to be a considerable variation in cancer deaths within the county. After several years of data collection when none of the expected associations of cancers with geography developed, the National Cancer Institute decided to terminate the study.

In 1962, Dr. George W. Comstock, with a long history of directing community projects and an interest in community based cancer research, continued the legacy started in 1957 by the Coffman's. Dr. Comstock joined the Johns Hopkins faculty and became the Director of what was then known as the Johns Hopkins Training Center for Public Health Research, and has since been renamed in honor of Dr. Comstock to the George W. Comstock Center for Public Health Research and Prevention. The facility was a joint enterprise of the Washington County Health Department, the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. Early support of the Center came from a contract with the National Cancer Institute to conduct a private health census of the county to collect personal and housing information that would allow completion of the study of geographic and residential distribution of cancer cases.

Two of the most notable "home grown" studies at the Center are the CLUE studies. CLUE I ("Give us a Clue to Cancer") was conducted in the fall of 1974 when approximately 26,000 blood samples were collected. CLUE II ("The Campaign Against Cancer and Heart Disease") was conducted in the spring through fall of 1989, when approximately 33,000 blood samples were collected. Over 8,000 county residents participated in CLUE I and CLUE II. Follow-up in the form of a mailed questionnaire has been on-going since 1996. Although the Center started primarily to research cancer, in 1987 research was expanded to include cardiovascular disease. An additional Research unit associated with the Center was established on the Public Square in downtown Hagerstown. This unit is the base of operations for the Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities (ARIC) study which is one of the four collaborative sites studying cardiovascular risk factors among persons aged 45-64 years of age. ARIC was followed by the Cardiovascular Health Study (CHS) and was limited to persons over the age of 65 years.

On the day of the dedication on November 14, 1958, a program that was distributed contained these words:

*"dedicated to improvement in the health of mankind through the discovery of methods of control of cancer and other diseases". The intent of the Coffman's generous gift has been, and continues to be met. The studies that have been conducted in Washington County have resulted in the publication of over 500 scholarly papers that have been published in peer-reviewed journals. The Coffman's would be proud to know that Washington County has gained the attention of the medical community world-wide.*