

Irvin Cahen, MD

Many considered Irvin Cahen a genius. He certainly was a trailblazer if nothing else and a premier orthopaedist. Born in New Orleans in 1915, he graduated from high school at 13 and earned his medical degree from Tulane in 1937, when he was just 21. After training in Orthopaedics, he entered the Army and served with the 64th General Hospital in Europe. In this he was able to study and master the techniques that German orthopaedists had developed to treat fractures in battlefield conditions. They had also applied these techniques to American airmen shot down over Germany. Initially, American Army doctors who examined freed prisoners of war believed that the nails, pins, rods, and screws used by the Germans were torture devices. Dr. Cahen realized that this was not the case.

He mastered some of the German technology before returning to New Orleans. Preparing to open his private practice, he was contacted by a local veterinarian. A valuable racehorse had broken his leg. Instead of destroying the animal, the vet wanted to try a surgical repair using internal fixation. He asked Dr. Cahen to lend the expertise he had gleaned in Europe. Dr. Cahen agreed, the operation was a success, and the horse lived out his life at stud. The vet ultimately handed Dr. Cahen a check for \$10,000, an unheard of sum in the late 1940s, for his part in the successful operation.

The vet explained that it was customary to charge 10% of the value of such an animal, if the lifesaving surgery was a success. The animal was valued at \$200,000, and the vet gave Dr. Cahen half of the fee. He used it to open his office. So, you could say he owed his initial success to his single foray into veterinary medicine.

In 1947, he joined the faculty of the newly reorganized Department of Orthopaedic Surgery at LSU under its chair, Dr. Henry Simon. In 1959, Dr. Cahen was named Chair to replace Dr. Simon. He remained in that position until 1976, when he was succeeded by Dr. Robert D'Ambrosia. So beloved in the community was Dr. Cahen that, when the Alumni planned to dedicate a chair worth \$1,000,000 to the School in his name, even Tulane-trained orthopaedists contributed.

He retired to Sun Valley, Idaho, where he played golf in the daytime and relaxed at night with a Dewar's Scotch on the rocks.

He died in 1993 at the age of 78.

