

SOONER SPOTLIGHT • Lowell Dunham

Lowell Dunham almost backed out of a nine-day trip to Venezuela last December. After years of visits to three continents, the lure of international travel was dimming for the 74-year-old Regents professor emeritus of modern languages. Only the opportunity to pay homage, perhaps for the last time, to the man whose work had dominated his own teaching and writing career finally convinced Dunham and his wife Frances to board the plane.

Dunham had been invited by the Venezuelan government to participate in the closing events of the year-long celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Rómulo Gallegos. As the personal friend and premier world authority on the works of this literary giant and former president of Venezuela, Dunham was the only foreigner to be included in the official observance. When he arrived in Caracas, however, he discovered that he was there not only to honor but also to be honored by his grateful hosts.

In the next few days he received the Order of Andrés Bello, First Class, the country's top literary award, granted only occasionally by the Venezuelan Academy of Language; the Order of the City Council of Caracas with the keys to the city, given twice annually, usually to Venezuelans; and a commemorative Simón Bolívar coin, presented by Venezuelan President Jaime Lusinchi.

These were not the first honors to be bestowed on Dunham by Venezuela. In 1949 he received an Andrés Bello literary gold medal and in 1957 the \$1,500 Juan de Castellanos literary prize from the Miles Sherover Foundation for the outstanding book of the year on Venezuela. In 1975 the Venezuelan ambassador came to Norman to present Dunham with the Order of Simón Bolívar, the equivalent of British knighthood.

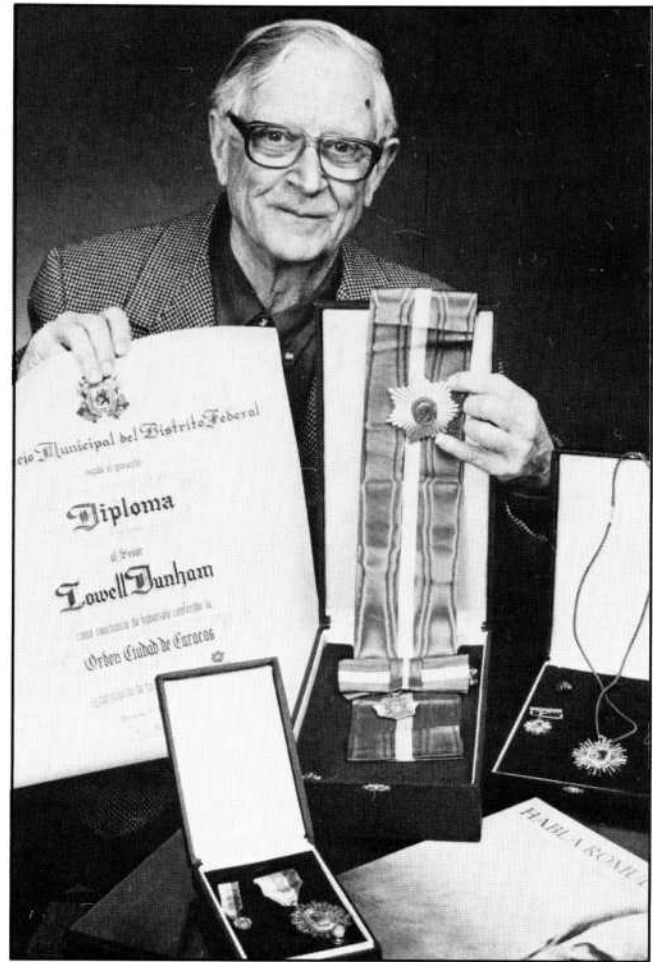
Dunham's fascination with Venezuelan literature, Gallegos in particular, began in 1931 when three OU petroleum engineering students from Venezuela brought two books by Gallegos to a Spanish Club meeting.

The young professor met Gallegos casually when the Venezuelan president came to Bolivar, Missouri, in 1948 to present the city with a statue of its namesake, the South American liberator. Dunham later obtained permission to edit a Gallegos novel, which still is used as a text.

Their personal friendship began in 1951 when the Dunhams vacationed in Mexico, where Gallegos was in exile following a military coup d'état. The following year Gallegos and a nine-member entourage of family and associates-in-exile visited in the Dunhams' Norman home, leaving behind Gallegos' son, Alexis, who lived there until 1957 while attending University High and later OU.

Gallegos himself spent a year at the University in 1953 as an artist-in-residence and wrote his last novel in a little apartment in the home of Lucy Tandy, then head of OU's correspondence study department. Tandy recorded Gallegos reading from his novels to small informal groups. The tapes later were reissued by the Venezuelan government as the only recordings ever made of his voice.

Another coup in 1958 made it possible for Gallegos to live out his life in his native country, where he died in 1969 at the age of 85. He never wrote again after leaving Norman.



A half-century love affair between Lowell Dunham and the people of Venezuela has brought honor to both parties.

All the wonderful experiences and honors which have come through his association with Gallegos and Venezuela Dunham attributes to the availability of Spanish instruction in the small high school he attended in Wellston, Oklahoma, and to the good relationship which OU had with the Venezuelan students who came to study engineering. "Those students now are occupying positions of leadership throughout Venezuela in business, government and industry," he says proudly.

But whatever gratitude Dunham may feel for his association with his Venezuelan friends, the citizens of his "second home" also feel for him. The *Caracas Daily Journal* quotes Venezuelan critics and writers as saying that Dunham "has contributed more than any other foreigner to the study of preservation of Venezuelan literature . . . this man has explored the life and work of Venezuela's greatest masters and has given it a special place in the world of international history."

Paul Donnelly, cultural director of the North American Association of Venezuela, puts it best: "Mr. Dunham, you have left a footprint to follow for the thousands of students who read about Rómulo Gallegos as seen by a distinguished professor from Oklahoma." — CJB