

**THE HISTORY OF MERCY HOSPITAL**

**807 S. ELGIN, TULSA, OKLAHOMA**

**AND, ITS FOUNDER**

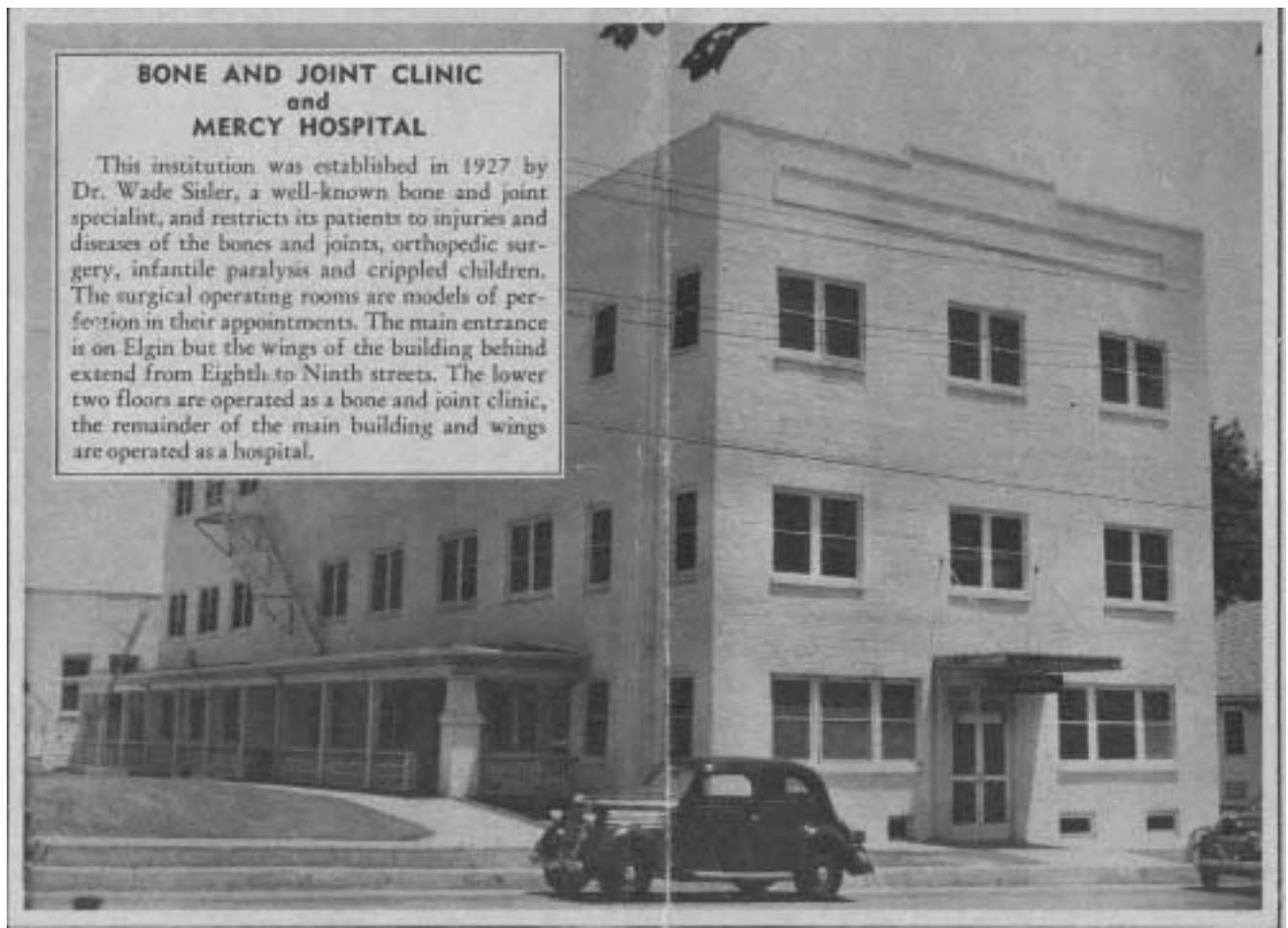
**WADE HORTON SISLER, MD (1897 – 1968)**

**BY**

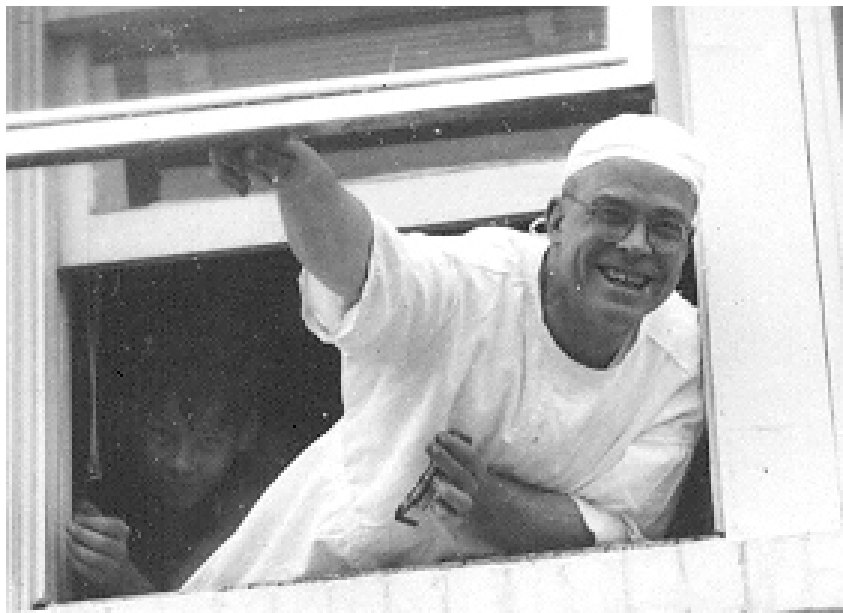
**Jerry Sisler, MD (1934 - )**

**Written for Tulsa County Medical Society History Project**

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**Mercy Hospital, photo from Tulsa World 6/21/1939**



**1947, Wade Sisler in working clothes checking on his children playing on the vacant lot behind the east wing of Mercy Hospital. Note author in background.**



***1927, Wade Sisler purchased this apartment building, destined to become Mercy Hospital***



***House on corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Elgin is The Brace Shop.. Note small sign above the door – “Sisler Hospital” and trolley tracks in the street.***



***Wade Horton Sisler M.D. founder of Mercy Hospital (9/10/1937)  
Tulsa Oklahoma***

***1927 – 1938, Mercy Hospital, the early days***

Each time I make a trip to the downtown Home Depot, which occupies a large building and parking lot that sprawl over several city blocks between 8<sup>th</sup> Street and 10th Street along Elgin Avenue and extends east to the old Midland Valley railroad track, I get a flood of memories. These memories start as I emerged from my infancy and end when the job of tearing down the buildings to make a parking lot was finished. A number of buildings including Mercy Hospital, an apartment building, Ketchum lumber company, several residences, the first Warehouse Market grocery store in Tulsa, and a tile company formerly occupied this area.

**THE BEGINNING:** To understand the administration of Sisler Clinic, which later became Mercy Hospital, it is helpful to know the background of the owner/operator. Wade Horton Sisler was born in Como, a small northern Mississippi town. His father was a schoolteacher who could not make an adequate living in that occupation and moved several times before the death of his second wife (Wade's mother) in 1903 when Wade was age 5. Wade attended public schools in Water Valley, Mississippi, being cared for by his aunts and grandmother while his father, George Washington Sisler III, attended medical school at Maryland Medical College in Baltimore.

After graduation from Water Valley High School, Wade attended undergraduate colleges at University of Mississippi and University of West Virginia. Then he attended 2 years of medical school at University of Mississippi and the last 2 years of medical school at Northwestern University in Chicago. After graduation, he interned at Memphis General Hospital in the years 1920 -21. He had 2 years of specialized orthopedic training, a new branch of surgery, at the Willis C. Campbell Clinic in Memphis. He was the second resident to complete training at this prestigious institution. In 1924, after finishing his training, he moved to Bristow, Oklahoma, where he established his first practice. He remained in Bristow for nearly 2 years until 1925/26. While in Bristow, he engaged in general practice including some OB, in addition to handling many orthopedic cases resulting from the booming oil field activity. He joined with his half brother, Frank Sisler, MD, who came from West Virginia and their father G.W. Sisler, MD, who had semi-retired after nearly 30 years of practice in Water Valley, Mississippi. Together they operated a small hospital in Bristow. When Wade left Bristow, his brother, Frank, continued to run the Bristow hospital with his cousin, O. Hiram Cowart, MD, a retired military surgeon.

Wade realized that opportunities for an orthopedic practice would be much better in Tulsa. In late 1925 or early 1926, he moved to Tulsa and set about building an orthopedic practice. He was the first trained orthopedic surgeon to locate in northeastern Oklahoma. Only Kelly West and Earl McBride in Oklahoma City preceded him in the state. Wade's name first showed up in the 1926 Tulsa City Directory in room 319 of the Palace Building, and his residence was listed in the newly built Tulsa Hotel. The 1926 City Directory listed the building that was to become the Sisler Clinic at 807 S. Elgin as belonging to David Bradley who used it as an apartment building. The small house at 809 S. Elgin was listed to C.M. Field who

used it as a grocery store. Dad used 809 for storage and an on-call bedroom. The earliest pictures of 807 S. Elgin show a two-story brick building dated 1927. Pictures dated 1932 show the same building now adorned with a small sign “**Sisler Hospital**”. This view looking northeast shows a house on the corner of eighth and Elgin. This house was used as a brace shop, which was run by Don Smith, Orthotist.

In the late 1920s, Northeastern Oklahoma was a mother lode of orthopedic deformities. These included deformities from old and fresh trauma, clubfeet, congenital anomalies, congenital dislocated hips, post polio deformities, bowed legs, knock knees, cerebral



***(1938 picture shows the main hospital building, as I knew it – now 3 stories high. In addition, there was a full basement and a partial subbasement. Interior pictures show the third floor with terrazzo floors, and a sterilizing room. The two operating rooms were located at the east end of the third floor. The doctors’ and nurses’ dressing rooms, instrument storage room and labor and delivery rooms were also located on the third floor. Note the spacious third story roof, which my older sisters used for suntanning and some of us used for launching water bombs or paper airplanes. It also afforded a magnificent view of downtown Tulsa.)***

palsy and osteomyelitis, acute and chronic. This was the post World War I time. Surgeons returning from the war were well trained to treat acute injuries and simple fractures, although usually were happy to refer the more complex cases. Needless to say, Dr. Sisler was a very busy man. The April 1929 issue of the Journal of the Oklahoma State Medical Association singled out for special praise Wade Sisler’s hospital for bone and joint diseases.

After completion of the main building that had capacity of about 20 beds, an “East Wing” was added. This was a 2-story addition; the top floor had capacity for about another 20 beds and the bottom floor was utilized for the maintenance shop, pharmacy, linen supply and storage. In about 1938, the “North Wing” was added to increase the capacity for the “colored patients”.

This added about 25 more beds. The south end of the east wing joined to an old house (where I think I was born) known as 409 E.9<sup>th</sup>. In the 1950s, this house was the office for the OKLAHOMA LAUNDRY, one of Wade's many side businesses, this one based in the hospital laundry.

There was one more building in the complex. This was located east of the south end of the east wing. It was originally an automobile garage, but served well as a boiler room and laundry for the hospital. Access was off 9<sup>th</sup> Street. There was also a large built in incinerator in this building. This place was really spooky at night and was the source of many nightmares for us kids. Beneath the boiler was a "pump room". This room, about 12 by 10 feet, was full of pumps, compressors, etc. and was super scary at night as it made all kinds of noises and usually was pitch black.

Growing up in a hospital was great fun and quite exciting for the family of nine children. We could peek in on an operation, loiter around the ER entrance hoping to see some poor smashed up soul, build things in the workshops, race wheelchairs in the basement hallways, roller-skate down ramps and inclines or climb the outside fire escape to the third floor roof for a beautiful view of downtown Tulsa. Occasionally, a family member would drop a water bomb near unsuspecting cars or pedestrians.

Although our official residence was 1132 E 20<sup>th</sup> Street, Dad could not decide if he wanted us living at the residence or at the hospital where he was always nearby. Undoubtedly, our 1132 neighbors preferred us living at the hospital because Dad filled the backyard with chickens, ducks and a horse. In order to get the horse in the backyard we had to push the horse through a corner of the kitchen. Furthermore, noise started early at our house. At 6 a.m., music lessons started and lasted about one hour. There was never a dull day at our house.

***Hospital remuneration problems:*** The sad part of the orthopedic story was, and still is, to some extent, poor to no remuneration for services rendered to crippled children. Many people/families with significant orthopedic deformities or their families were broke. After all, this was during the time of the Great Depression. Hospital stays were lengthy and multiple surgeries the norm. State or county aid was virtually non-existent. Wade teamed up with the Junior League of Tulsa to start a rehabilitation hospital and clinic, which was called the

Crippled Children's Home, later to be called Children's Medical Center. This served as a postoperative rehabilitation center, which featured intensive physical therapy. It enabled orthopedic care for a number of children here-to-for unable to get care. When the numbers of crippled children diminished, Children's Medical Center lived on as a psychiatric and developmental abnormality study institution, Years later, the Shriner Hospital program for crippled children filled the niche for crippled children and their families and at the same time provided a much-needed supply of orthopedic deformities and problems necessary for resident training.

Wade had ongoing friction with the state run Crippled Children's Commission over payment for the care of these crippled kids. Likewise, the county commissioners balked at paying claims on county cases. Mercy Hospital was not the only institution with remuneration problems. In 1947, Dr. Layne Perry, D.O., filed suit for relief of discrimination against the osteopathic physicians and the Oklahoma Osteopathic Hospital for refusal to pay claims from the Board of Education health care benefit program. In 1947, the county commissioners balked at funding the Tulsa County Health Clinic at that time run by Dr. Jeff Billington. Details of these problems were partially explained in newspaper clippings in the Tulsa County Medical Society archives.

Wade was a pioneer in medical photography for documentation and education. He displayed in the hospital lobby, a set of before and after treatment photos of deformities. Some were quite grotesque. Not only did this exhibit give hope to people with similar deformities; it was also a very clever marketing tool. Wade also produced a 16 mm film library targeted for physician education on his method of treatment of various deformities. This is a fairly simple task using modern equipment, but in the late 20s and early 30s, it was a different story. Film was purchased in bulk; processing, editing and cataloging were all done by hand using his dark room and equipment.

The decades of the late 30s, 40s and early 50s found Dr. Wade Sisler and his hospital at or near its zenith. Jack Richardson, M.D., orthopedist, who started practice in Tulsa in 1948, was interested in becoming an orthopedic surgeon and thus visited Wade Sisler while holding clinic. This was during the World War II years. Jack described a long line of patients waiting to be seen. The line went out the front door of the clinic/hospital and south along Elgin about



one block to the Warehouse Market. He describes the medical efforts of Dr. Sisler as truly amazing.

***Dr. Sisler's treatment of Blacks:*** One might expect that a person, born, raised, and educated in the deep south, would absorb racism and bigotry toward Blacks. Not once, did I hear or see any clue of racial bias in my father. Mercy Hospital was one of the first in Tulsa to desegregate, and black doctors were welcomed to the staff. James Chatmon, a black man, served as Wade's right hand man (in a PA capacity) throughout the duration of Wade's practice. Dr. Charles Bate, a black surgeon, commented to me that Wade was always kind to him.

Exactly how Wade continued to run hospital business that he had created is beyond my imagination. Although the wages he paid the employees was low, he developed a loyal coterie of workers on which he could depend. There was a black man, James Chatmon, who started work for W.S. in 1927 at the age of 18. James could do almost any needed job in the hospital ranging from application or removal of casts, taking x-rays, dressing changes and caring for minor injuries that showed up in the E.R. James worked long hours and never questioned his boss about his wishes. Many people thought James to be a doctor since he was heavily engaged in patient care. James was not above grabbing a mop when needed or holding forth in the kitchen if the cook called in sick. He routinely fixed Sunday lunch, always deep pan-fried chicken that was out-of-this-world. Not only was his chicken superb, but while cooking it he would sing a large repertoire of blues songs.

Another very important employee was George Perault, a builder/carpenter with unique building skills. He was recruited from a job on the Holy Family Church. I have always heard that he was instrumental in building the Holy Family Cathedral. He was responsible for enlarging the hospital, systematically. The hospital was just one of his duties. For example, Wade would request that Perault build a 300 ft state of the art hog barn complete with farrowing pens; Perault could build them. Wade knew the job would be done right. Over time, there were dozens of dependable employees that would make that place work. I salute them all.

Mercy Hospital had an open staff. The patients for the most part belonged to Wade Sisler, but there were other doctors who admitted their patients there. Early on, Dr. John McDonald worked there and later established his own practice. J.D. Shipp, M.D., surgeon, also worked there for a number of years as did Dr. Charles Bate, M.D., surgeon, C.E. Calhoun, M.D., J. H. Barham, M.D., and O.E. Layton, M.D., all G.P.s who brought their patients to Mercy. Fred Woodson, M.D., anesthesiologist, was the mainstay of anesthesia.

Wade Sisler's life centered around the hospital. He met his wife-to-be, Augusta Collman, when she applied for a physical therapy job in July, 1928. They married on December 29, 1929, at her mother's home in upstate New York. This was only two months after Wade crashed his airplane (10/17/29) near the Elk River after building an airstrip. His passenger riding in the front seat was killed. Over the next 13 years Augusta had nine children plus one or two miscarriages. Wade kept this pack of kids busy with music, swimming, and bike riding.

The family resided at 1132 E. 20<sup>th</sup> Street or in a corner of the east wing of the hospital until Wade purchased a 300 acre farm/ranch on 66<sup>th</sup> Street North near Bird Creek in 1950. The farm became an obsession with him. The place passed through many stages; first a possible dairy (tried and rejected), pig farming (tried and rejected), feed production (silage and hay bailing tried and rejected), cattle production (tried and rejected). Since a part of the farm was exposed to flooding, he busied himself with building a protective levy. He conscripted labor for these endeavors from the family. By that time, the older children were off to college and the brunt of the farm work landed on the younger half of the family.

Wade was raised in Southern Baptist tradition. As such, he had difficulty with his children going to dances, dating and wearing lipstick – things that were commonly done by junior and senior high school students in Tulsa. Some major rifts developed in the family over these issues. French Anderson, fellow student of my sister, Patricia, would make a 10 mile run out to the farm where he arrived on foot to avoid aggravating Wade.

**Communications:** Mercy Hospital, in its fully grown state, was comprised of four buildings and two houses. Telephones were located in most work areas and required manual connection to one of the five outside trunk lines through a telephone switchboard. The switchboard had to be manned for about 18 hours of the day; at about 10 PM, when the

operator went off duty, the trunk lines were routed to various phones.. The nursing station on the second floor had to deal with the incoming and emergency calls. Finding a person in the hospital, who might be anywhere in these buildings, was accomplished by paging on the loudspeaker system. Dad did not want us to be paged if possible, but, if necessary, he wanted us to be paged by a more formal and dignified name.

Each family member adopted a pseudo-name (a page name). Listed in descending age order these were as follows: Wade Sisler (Mr. Brown), Augusta Sisler (Miss West), George Horton Sisler (George Horton), Nancy Sisler (Miss Rose), Suzanne Sisler (Miss Clarke), Jerry Sisler (Mr. Fletcher), Patricia Sisler (?Miss Woods), Robert Sisler (Mr. Adams), James Sisler (Mr. Jefferson), Anne Sisler (Miss Nightingale, later changed to Miss Lee), Charles Sisler (Mr. Knox). If one loitered around the hospital, it was not unusual to be called for switch board duty for an hour or so. In limited doses, running the switchboard was a fun job

Spending Money: We never had an outright allowance, but each of us had rights to raid the hospital petty cash box for spending money. If I took out a dollar, I would leave an IOU in the petty cash box. Alice Heap, Dad's trusty financial officer, would inform Dad if withdrawals seemed excessive. To my knowledge, this was rarely a problem. I was never asked to pay up on such an IOU.

Mercy Hospital was strategically located to please a foot bound (wheel less) connoisseur of dairy products. I could walk a couple of blocks northeast to the Glenclyff Dairy store and purchase a double dip ice cream cone for 10 cents. Along the way, I could walk past the Broadway Poultry Market and watch the workers wring the chickens' necks. I was fascinated that the chickens could flop around for a considerable length of time without a head. Or, I could walk a block south along Elgin Ave. to the Warehouse Market, which was built in 1939. One, of the first, supermarkets in Tulsa. Within the Warehouse Market, there was a small restaurant with a soda fountain where one could get a decent lunch or fountain drink. The cooks at the hospital sent couriers to the Warehouse Market for special diet food items, which were needed for patients' meals, sometimes making four or five trips a day. My brother, Charles, made a good income of pocket money selling empty soft drink bottles at the Warehouse Market. A half block to the east was the Midland Valley Railroad tracks. This is the railroad line that ran south through Maplewood and across the Arkansas River near 31<sup>st</sup>

St.. Several times a day a steam powered train would pass this way-belching smoke and steam as it slowly choo-chooed by. It spent a lot of time delivering railroad cars to the various businesses which were located along the tracks. These included Magic City Steel Company, Ketchum Lumber Company and General Sash and Door. There were other handy services nearby. These included an auto body repair shop, a shoe repair store, a jewelry and watch repair shop.

**Shaving Cylinders:** Dad was a master at dictating reports. During clinic hours, he utilized a secretary/nurse/clerk who could use shorthand. As he flew from one patient to another, his



assistant was busy taking or transcribing shorthand notes and keeping up the correspondence. As time went on, his practice became more and more industrial—meaning more and more industrial reports. Some of his most

***Left: Picture of an Ediphone, an effective dictating machine used in the 1930s.***

loyal accounts were National Tank and Commander Mills. Usually, Dad would work late into the evening in his office catching up on reports and other correspondence. He used state-of-the-art dictation equipment, namely an Ediphone. This dictating machine employed a wax cylinder, about 6 inches long and 3 inches in diameter. One cylinder could store about 15 minutes of diction. After transcription, the cylinders must be “shaved” to remove the last dictation; then the cylinder was re-used. We fought for the rights to shave the cylinders for Dad. We got pretty good at it.



***The Warehouse Market. Built in 1939, one of the earliest supermarkets in Tulsa. Now preserved as an historic landmark and an example of Art Deco architecture. It was a very handy store to have nearby the hospital. We all used it. This building was saved by the Historical Society.***

Nancy, my oldest female sibling, became an excellent medical stenographer while still in high school. She used the state-of-the-art typewriter, a mechanical Royal. Accuracy and good spelling were necessary since two or three carbon

copies had to be made of each report. Wade frequently called on Nancy to type up a needed report. Moral to this story; do not get too skillful at jobs that require hard-to-find skills.

**Rolling Plaster.** Nowadays, when an orthopedist puts on a cast, he uses ready made plaster rolls, but not so, in the early days—you rolled your own. We used a “plaster table”, a special table built with a 3” rim around the table top. Plaster of Paris powder was scooped on to the table top. Next, we would roll out about 12 - 18 inches of crinoline; then using the flat of our hands we would work the plaster into the crinoline, then roll it up and repeat the process over and over. Sounds easy, but there was considerable skill involved. If rolled too loosely, the roll would “weenie out” (slip out from the center) when wetted. If rolled too tightly the plaster rolls were difficult to soak in the water. There was something about rolling plaster that made one cringe and send chills down your spine, particularly if you dragged your fingernails across the tin bottom of the table top covered with plaster powder.

Dad’s “up-to-date” 100 key adding machine: The adding machine of the day in the early 1930’s was a heavy machine weighing at least 50 lbs. It was a stand-up machine with at least 100 keys—10 keys in both directions. We laugh at it now, but it served its purpose for many years.

Most private hospitals (and many public ones, as well) eventually close or downsize, and Mercy Hospital was no different. The hospital was started with the purpose of providing top notch orthopedic care. Starting after World War II, there was a constant influx of orthopedic surgeons that populated every hospital in the city. During this period, and later, with the advent of medicare, it became necessary to make some radical changes in the physical plan of the hospital. Fire safety codes were upgraded, forcing large expenditures to stay up to code. Wade was required to install sprinkler systems in all buildings and a new kitchen had to be installed.

THE KNOCKOUT PUNCH: Throughout the history of Mercy Hospital Wade had survived or endured a host of difficult problems. One item that had far reaching consequences was the loss of the appeal to the State Supreme Court of the Daryl Whitten case. I do not know the small details of this case, but briefly, it involved a mild Volkmann’s contracture of an arm resulting from a forearm fracture treated by another doctor in Mercy Hospital ER. The

treating physician, in the meantime, had died. Whitten was a young child at the time of injury, so the statute of limitations did not start to run until a number of years after the injury. The records were damaged or destroyed by a flood in the record storage area. Wade could not come up with the name of his insurance carrier, so he was responsible for the defense, court costs, the judgment and receivership fees, and a futile appeal to the State Supreme Court. The well known opposing Trial Lawyer, who represented the plaintiff proved himself an unpleasant and formidable foe. If ever Wade had any hope of retiring, this case dispelled that idea. When he could not come up with the cash, Mercy Hospital was put into receivership. He was flat broke and could not make his payroll without borrowing money. It seemed as one of life's indignities to have this happen in his 7<sup>th</sup> decade of life. He would have no choice but to continue working until death since all of his savings were used in the lawsuit and for hospital improvements.

**THE END:** On March 19, 1968, the first day I returned to Tulsa after spending a year in Viet Nam while in the Army Medical Corps, I stopped by Wade's office to say hello. It had been over one year since I had seen him. I assisted him in putting a cast on the leg of his stepmother (she had a minor fracture of the fibula). He had sudden chest pain and moist rattling in his lungs. He died with his shoes on as I drove up to the ER at St. John Hospital. His faithful right hand man, James Chatmon, told me later that Wade had been experiencing angina for the last year and had been under the care of a cardiologist. He kept a bottle of oxygen under his bed.

There were only a handful of Wade's patients in the hospital at the time of his death. I took care of them until they had a satisfactory disposition; then officially shut the hospital down. Since I watched my father struggle with a myriad of problems connected to the hospital, the option of continuing to run Mercy Hospital was last on my list of things to do. The hospital stood empty for several years until it sold. Then it was torn down and paved for a parking lot. 807 S. Elgin was born again when Home Depot bought the place and built a shiny new store on the premises. Not a clue remains as to it's former life.



***View of Home Depot looking east across Elgin Avenue where Mercy Hospital once stood.***

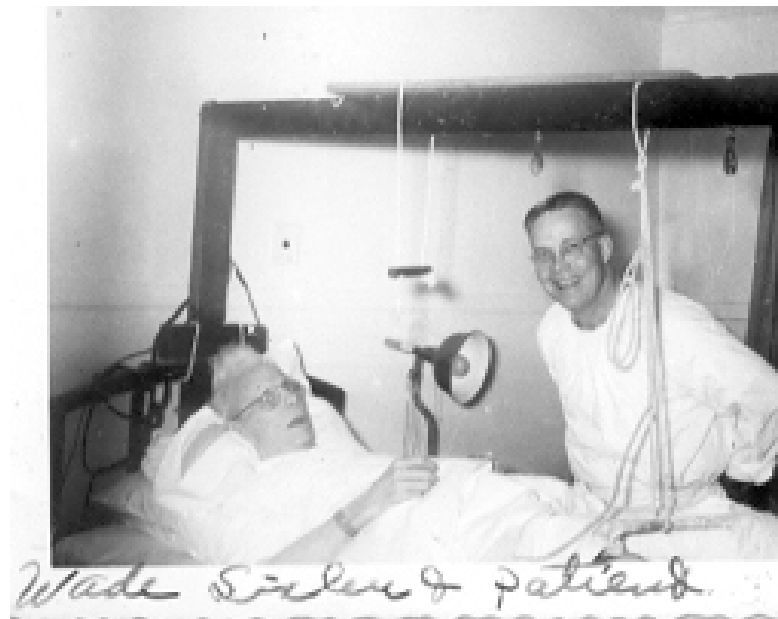
Author's Note: This essay was written mostly from memories with generous help from siblings, pictures from scrapbooks, newspaper articles, interviews and reprints supplied by the Tulsa County Medical Society. I was born 7 years after the clinic/hospital was started. Considering very little retained memory until age 6, the clinic had been functioning 13 years before I had significant permanent memories about it and most memories of a child are distortions of reality. As a student in high school, college, medical school and residency, I paid little attention to Mercy Hospital, or its problems. The hospital and clinic have been shut down for 34 years now. There are only a few people who know that Mercy Hospital existed. Out of sight, out of mind!



**Wade Sisler and his faithful “man Friday”, James Chatmon: He started work for W.S. at age 18 and worked about 41 years as an orderly, janitor, cook, chauffeur, surgical assistant, anesthesia assistant, x’ray technician, blues singer and the father of a dozen children. James started work for W.S. before he bought 807 S Elgin; in fact, James told me how he drove “doctor”(as he called W.S.) all over Tulsa County looking for the perfect spot. It seemed that every one in Tulsa knew James and vice versa.**

**Above: Wade Sisler and James Chatmon 1955**

**Right: Wade Sisler and patient. 1952**



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