

TULSA MEDICINE HISTORY

WENDELL L. SMITH. M.D.

This is an excerpt from an interview with Dr. Smith conducted by Gerald E. Gustafson, M.D., and C. T. Thompson, M.D., on February 28, 2001. As part of a project to collect and maintain an archive of the history of medicine in Tulsa, a series of interviews with TCMS leaders is planned.



Wendell L. Smith, M.D., recalls over 60 years of practicing medicine in Tulsa.

Wendell L. Smith, M.D. missed Oklahoma statehood by six months and 150

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miles. He still became president of the Tulsa County Medical Society and has lived to see dramatic changes in the practice of medicine and in the boomtown built on oil.

Dr. Smith was born in October of 1907 in Topeka, Kansas. His family moved to Tulsa in 1913 and lived in a house at 13th and Troost.

“My dad was a salesman for the Wearever Cooking Utensils Company,” Dr. Smith said. “In those days, that was about as exciting as Williams Sonoma is today. He called on every oil field lease between here and Ponca City. There were not many cars then but quite a few buggies.”

“There were not many houses either and there was a peach orchard between 13th and 14th from Utica to Peoria,” Dr. Smith recalled. “Tulsa was a town of about 19,000 people. It had three streetcar lines.

One came out to Orcutt Lake, which was an amusement park with a roller coaster and other things. It burned down the year before we got here. It was a good size lake with boats on it.” The former amusement park is now Swan Lake.

Dr. Smith remembers that there were quite a few coalmines in the area including one at 21st and Lewis. There were also oil wells in the neighborhood. “There was one at 15th and Lewis where the new Albertson’s store is now.”

Dr. Smith attended Lincoln school at 15th and Peoria. “The school is now a restaurant and that big tree by the sidewalk was first base,” he said.

Tulsa was beginning to boom when the Smiths came to town. “Our next door neighbor was working on building the new Tulsa Hotel and a couple of years later the Kennedy Building downtown was finished.”

The two major hospitals in town were the Tulsa Hospital, a two-story house at 5th and Lawton and the Oklahoma Hospital, which is now the Tulsa Regional Medical Center. Morningside Hospital was built



Gerald Gustafson, M.D., left, and C.T. Thompson, M.D., right, interview Wendell L. Smith, M.D., on his years of medical practice in Tulsa.

on land owned by the McNulty family at 13th and Utica. The hospital later became Hillcrest Medical Center.

Dr. Smith and his brother worked taking tickets at the McNulty baseball park at 11th and Elgin where the Warehouse Market was built in 1929.

It was a time of growth and change. “There were a lot of men who had been in the war and a lot of oil field workers. There

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were some rough places and rough times,” he said. One morning in 1921, Dr. Smith’s mother woke him to report that, there was a race riot. “There were two pillars of smoke coming from downtown but I didn’t have any idea of what a race riot was. My brother walked downtown and later reported on the fighting and destruction.”

Dr. Smith received his medical degree from the University of Oklahoma in 1933. He completed an internship at Morningside Hospital and at the University Hospital in Oklahoma City.

Following service in the U.S. Navy during World War II, Dr. Smith returned to Tulsa to practice general medicine. His first office was at Admiral and Lewis. Later he moved to the Ranch Acres Medical Building at 31st and Harvard.

“The medical society really came into its own and became important and active when Jack Spears became executive director in 1941” he said. The TCMS offices were in the Medical Arts building downtown.

After the war a large number of physicians returned to Tulsa to start or resume their medical practice. A growing number of specialists also came to town.

Dr. Smith calls the advances in medicine and progress made in medical treatment “almost unbelievable compared to what we had to work with and our limited number of options fifty years ago.” He has seen smallpox eradicated, polio vanquished and many childhood killers like diphtheria respond to new drugs.

Dr. Smith served as president of the Tulsa County Medical Society in 1961. He

retired from practice in 1989.

His many awards and honors include TCMS Doctor of the Year in 1982, Outstanding Alumni for his service by the University of Oklahoma Alumni Association in 1981.

He was one of the founders of the Tulsa Medical Education Foundation, which established joint residency training programs in Tulsa and which was the major step leading to the establishment of the University of Oklahoma Tulsa Medical College.

When asked about what it was like to practice medicine in Tulsa during those years, Dr. Smith said, “it was really a very pleasant experience.” And that is an opinion shared by those physicians who had the opportunity to know and practice with Dr. Smith.



Wendell L. Smith, M.D., was president of the Tulsa County Medical Society in 1961.