

# TULSA MEDICINE HISTORY

Myra A. Peters, M.D.

*This is an excerpt from an interview with Dr. Peters conducted by Worth M. Gross, M.D., and Harry E. Livingston, M.D., on July 31, 2002, as part of a project to collect and maintain an archive of the history of medicine in Tulsa.*



Myra Peters, M.D., was born and raised in Sheffield, Alabama, in the northwest corner of the state. "My dad was a locomotive engineer for the Southern Railroad and he had also worked for other railroads. During the war he worked out of Memphis hauling troops."

Dr. Peters had six brothers and two sisters. Only one sister, "Boots," is still

living and, as it happens, in a house just across the street from her.

Growing up, Dr. Peters always had an interest in medicine. "Across the street from our house lived a nurse by the name of Mrs. Knight and my mother had a first cousin who was also a nurse. Between the two of them I developed my interest in medicine and started thinking about making a career in medicine. The first time I mentioned it to Mrs. Knight, I told her, 'when I grow up I'm going to be a nurse like you.' She said, 'no you're not - you're going to be a doctor.' And from then on I would say, 'I'm going to be a doctor.' And everyone would laugh at me."

"So, when I was in high school that was my thing. I took all the high school courses that I needed to - chemistry, physics and biology. By the time I finished and went down to the University of Alabama, I enrolled in premed courses."

"I had taken two years of Latin in high school and that gave me a good basis for my language study and I've always been interested in language."

Dr. Peters graduated from the University of Alabama at the age of 20 with a 3.8 grade point average. She then enrolled at the Medical College of Alabama in Birmingham. There were nine women in Dr. Peters' medical school class. Only seven, including Dr. Peters, completed the program, in 1949.

In search of an internship program, a friend suggested she visit Wesley Hospital in Oklahoma City. She completed a one-year internship there and then a year of Residency in General Surgery.

Upon recommendations and letters from Drs. Robert Holt and Don O'Donoghue, she was granted an interview at the Mayo Clinic where she had

dreamed of taking a residency in orthopedic surgery. "I thought that I had the mechanical ability and growing up with a father and six brothers I could hammer and saw just about everything they could."

Following an exhaustive interview process and a few weeks wait, she received word that she had been accepted as one of the seven orthopedic residents and the Mayo Clinic's first female orthopedic resident.

"All my life I thought the Mayo Clinic was the Mecca and I was just in awe that I was finally there," she said. At the Mayo Clinic, Dr. Peters had many wonderful experiences and met many famous personalities including an older lady from a town near her hometown of Sheffield. The lady was Helen Keller.

Dr. Peters completed her residency at the Mayo Clinic in 1954 and, through a series of events, ended up in Tulsa.

"When I was in the eighth grade we were supposed to write a thesis on some subject. I had taken botany and was interested in that subject. So, I wrote about trees in the United States and put together an album with leaves. I came across one from Tulsa, Oklahoma. So, after that, I would tell my mother and father that, 'I'm going to run away from home someday,' and they would say, 'where are you going,?' and I would say, 'Tulsa, Oklahoma.' I just liked the sound of that name. You can imagine their surprise when years later I really did move to Tulsa, Oklahoma."

At the Mayo Clinic, Dr. Peters had also made friends with prominent Tulsans Mr. and Mrs. John Dunkin. "I operated on their ranch foreman. I did a spinal fusion on him. I got to talking with the Dunkins and they asked me to come to Tulsa for a visit which I did. They took me to all the fancy places like Southern Hills and downtown for lunch. They were really trying to impress me, which they did. So I decided that I would come to Tulsa."

Although Dr. Peters was never a "socialite," she felt warmly welcomed in Tulsa. "I think there was only one orthopedist that didn't like me because I was a woman. However, later we became good friends."

There were only a few other female physicians in town at that time and certainly no other female orthopedic surgeons. There was a total of nine orthopedic surgeons. She received privileges at both Saint John and Hillcrest hospitals.

Dr. Peters' office was on the tenth floor of the Medical Arts Building downtown. "So many doctors helped me get started. At that time we only had the

two hospitals," she said. "A couple of the doctors did not want to take call any longer so I was able to help them out."

One thing that did bother Dr. Peters was the number of general surgeons doing orthopedic surgery. "That did bother me and I had a few battles. That's why I thought we should have an orthopedic department. So I helped develop sections at both St. John and Hillcrest. I wrote the bylaws for Hillcrest and Norm Dunitz asked me to help with the bylaws at St. John."

Dr. Peters was a charter member of the Tulsa Orthopedic Society and also kept the minutes of all the meetings. "I guess since I was the only girl and the only one that looked like a secretary I had to do it," she said with a laugh.

From the beginning of her career in Tulsa, Dr. Peters was a member of the Tulsa County Medical Society. Little did she know that her involvement with the medical society would have historical consequences.

"I was always interested in the politics of the association. I served on committees and was a delegate to the Oklahoma State Medical Association from Tulsa."

Soon Dr. Peters was serving on the TCMS Board of Directors and then, in 1968, she was elected as the first female president of the Tulsa County Medical Society. "That was really a very proud moment for me - to think that my fellow doctors would vote for me because they felt that I was an asset to the association and the community."

She still sees the importance of county medical societies today. "The county medical society serves a local brotherhood. It is important for physicians to belong and participate. The young doctors need to become involved - they need to be taught the importance of working together for the good of medicine. The county society must provide an interface between physicians and the community."

Other responsibilities followed including president of the Hillcrest staff and chief of the orthopedic department. She remembers with pride working with her fellow physicians, "back in those days we loved one another and looked after one another. You didn't have trouble getting coverage - you just called up one of the other orthopedists and if they weren't busy they would be happy to help you out. We did care about one another."

Dr. Peters' best memories however are of her patients. "I always had a feeling for my patients and I think because of that my patients knew I really cared for them, even to the point that we could tease each other. Even to this day, 11 years after my retirement, hardly a week goes by when a former patient doesn't call asking for advice."

Today Dr. Peters is impressed with the technology and procedures that Orthopedists are able to do that just were not possible when she practiced, like total joint replacements. "I don't think some of the doctors practicing today can appreciate the changes

and the things we just didn't have then. 80% of the procedures done now weren't done when I started," she said.

In addition to medicine, Dr. Peters passion was flying and farming. She had a Cessna Skyline 182. "I pretty much flew all around the country by myself. Sometimes I would have one or two passengers. I really loved that and I used to have a farm down in Cherokee County and I used to go down and cut the hay and bail it and do all that. I learned that growing up on a farm."

Dr. Peters is clear about her position on nurses. "I had a sister who was a nurse and Marie, who worked for me, they were all diploma nurses not degree nurses. There is too much paperwork placed on nurses which doesn't allow them the time to take care of patients. They have a tremendous responsibility and physically hard job and they certainly don't pay them enough."

Another strong opinion of Dr. Peters is the reliance of doctors today on technology, sometimes at the expense of simply listening to their patients. "One of the most important courses we had in medical school was 'physical diagnosis.' Today it seems that some doctors, if they can't have an MRI or an X-ray or a blood test, can't physically diagnose the patient. You have to listen to the patient. One thing they taught us in medical school was to listen to your patient and they will tell you what's wrong with them."

Dr. Peters is enjoying her retirement. "I love to cook. Since I have retired I have cooked some of the best things. I never had the time before. I have even made up some of my own recipes and they're delicious."

She does have some advice for doctors thinking about retiring. "Be sure to have something to do. Have something you are going to do, either work or play, and not just sit around on your duff. Do something that will keep your mind alive."

As one acquaintance of Dr. Peters described her, "she was meant to be a doctor. She used her gifts to provide the highest quality of care. She also understood that a great many people simply had no money, would not have any money and just couldn't pay. These people could come to her for healing and kindness and know they wouldn't be charged. As with most of our truly fine people, Dr. Peters believes that if someone is aware of your good works - they don't really count."

The quiet but strong and determined little girl from rural Alabama who dreamed of becoming a doctor and traveling to Tulsa, Oklahoma achieved both and much more.

