
NEARBY HISTORY: Life of a country doctor

House calls and filling your own prescriptions were the norm. But running over a patient?

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In a 1940 speech to a Gastonia Rotary Club, Dr. Thomas Newton Dulin of York County's Bethel community described the life of a country doctor as he knew it when he began practicing in the 1892.

He had finished his medical course of studies at the Atlanta Medical College. Dulin began practice before automobiles and paved roads in a time when most doctors visited the patient's



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home rather than having an office. It was then customary for a doctor to carry his medicines with him and to fill his own prescriptions.

Dulin's first act was to visit a Gastonia druggist and fill his saddlebags with various medicines. Even then, he could not always get the medicines he needed.

He recalled the amputation of a African American tenant farmer's leg. Dulin had the assistance of Drs. Ben Miller and J.W. Campbell and operated with a sterilized hand saw. The surgeon's fee was 200 bales of fodder (after all, he had to feed his horse). Dulin proudly told his audience that his patient was still living and is "hale and hearty."

In another case, with the assistance of Dr. Leon Campbell, he "amputated a hand in a cabin lighted only by two dim lanterns. We had a few pots and pans in which to sterilize our instruments."

In the late 1930s, Dulin was driving his car in Clover when a woman, who happened to be one of his patients, "stepped in front of my car and the wheels ran over her chest. She was badly injured and I thought surely she would be dead when we got her up and into an office. She had several ribs broken and her chest was laid open, exposing her heart and lungs. She had suffered from heart trouble a long time. I got Dr. L.N. Glenn to come and sew her up. I assisted him. She is still living and strange to say has never been troubled with her heart since. I believe she thinks more of me now than she did before I ran over her."

Another one of Dulin's tales was about delivering triplets, a boy and two girls. He sent the fa-

ther to the well, which was some distance from the house, for a bucket of water. When he came back, Dulin showed him a baby and the father said, "Uh, huh." Dulin sent the man back to the well for another bucket of water and when he returned Dulin showed him another baby, and he said, "Laws a-massy." Dulin sent the father back to the well and when he came back, Dulin showed him the third baby. Dulin reported the father was dumbfounded and all he could say was "My Gawd!"

Dulin remembered that there were many cases where families were in real need and people expected the doctor to tell them who needed help. After all, the doctor had been inside the homes of the needy and seen their problems. Doctors were trusted to tell the facts. When they were informed, neighbors were quick to respond.

Dulin's memories of the 1890s make medical practice look very primitive, but in reality, there were many advances beyond that of the experiences of young Dr. J. Marion Sims of Lancaster when he began practicing medicine in 1835. Sims lost his first two patients, both infants. He was so upset that he left Lancaster for Alabama. Eventually, Sims became a great doctor and is credited with being the father of gynecology.

In Sims' autobiography, he recalls a Dr. Childers who had an "enormous reputation as a doctor. He bled and purged, and gave medicine from the time he was called to the patient until the patient was called away. If the patient survived Dr. Childers and the disease together, he had a lease on life that would carry him up to an old age. ... He believed in the lancet, and it was rarely that he didn't bleed his patient; it made no difference what the disease was."

In those times and earlier, many doctors bled the patient, believing that they were ridding the body of the cause of the sickness. (George Washington is probably the most famous American who died following a physician-induced bleeding session).

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