

# TULSA MEDICINE HISTORY

**Worth M. Gross, M.D.**

*This is an excerpt from an interview with Dr. Gross conducted by Gerald E. Gustafson, M.D., Robert M. Shepard, M.D., and C.T. Thompson, M.D., on July 15, 2002, as part of a project to collect and maintain an archive of the history of medicine in Tulsa.*

In 1900, Dr. Worth Gross's father rode a horse into Indian Territory before it became part of the new state of Oklahoma. He had come from the Hiawasee area of East Tennessee, the same area that gave Sam Houston to Texas.

"Dad was from a big family. He was the only one that left the hard scrabble farm. I've been back there and I don't see how any of them survived."

His father had completed working his way through two years of medical school in Chattanooga driving a horse car, which was a streetcar pulled by a horse before electricity. He set up practice in a town with the unfortunate name of "Butcher Knife."

"It didn't take long for him to realize he needed more education, so he went back to Chattanooga for another year of medical school. When he returned to Oklahoma he set up practice in Orr, in Love County where I was born. It's still on the map but there's nothing there."

"Dad was a general practitioner. He would ride his horse and sometimes take the buggy and make circles through the communities of 10 or 15 people out in the country. If he took the buggy and came to a creek that was flooded, he would just get on his saddle horse and turn the other horse loose with the buggy and it would go back home.

"He carried his own medications in his saddlebags. He made his own papers and ground his own medications. He carried Calomel, a diuretic, opium, laudanum and quinine. Malaria was endemic then in Southern Oklahoma. Practically everybody that got out in the woods got malaria then. I even had malaria when I was a kid."

In 1921, Dr. Gross's family moved to Lindsey, just north of the Washita River in Garvin County. "Dad practiced there till I moved to Tulsa and then he retired and moved here too. He said he had to get out of Lindsey because they wouldn't let him retire."

Dr. Gross received his undergraduate degree from the University of Oklahoma in 1938. He then earned his medical degree from Northwestern University in Chicago, in 1942. "While a medical student, I was working in an industrial building in downtown Chicago on nights, weekends and holidays. The day after Pearl Harbor, I wrote a letter to volunteer in the Navy. They told me to wait till I graduated. So, it was the next spring, after graduation, I joined up. I served two years in the Southwest Pacific with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division as Battalion Surgeon."

Dr. Gross completed his internship at the U.S. Naval Hospital in San Diego. He then completed residency programs in orthopedics at the U.S. Naval Hospital in



Houston, the McBride Clinic and the University Hospitals in Oklahoma City.

Following five years of military service he practiced for one year in Sioux City, Iowa and then moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas for three years.

"I kept passing through Tulsa and decided that this was as good a looking place as I'd seen, so I decided to come here."

"There were a number of Orthopods practicing here at that time and they all advised against me setting up practice here," he said with a smile. "Wade Sisler was here and John McDonald and Frank Stuart. John Dague and Jack Richardson were also in town then. Everybody was very busy."

"When I first got to St. John, I introduced myself to Sister Alfreda. She said, 'why don't you go back where you came from. We have enough orthopedists here.' I said, 'be that as it may, I'm here and I'm going to stay.' She said, 'alright, you have to furnish your own blades, sutures, needles, and all your own instruments.' I said, 'alright, where do I put them.' She said, 'we don't have anyplace to keep them. Just bring them along when you are going to use them.'"

Despite the chilly reception, Dr. Gross took the advice of Dr. Earl McBride. "He was a good friend of my Dad. He said, 'if you want to go to Tulsa, go ahead and take care of your patients and you won't have any problems.'"

"For the first few months I lived in a rooming house across the street from the park by Hillcrest. Almost everybody was in the medical arts building downtown. A doctor died and I rented his office two months ahead just to get office space. I didn't leave till they were tearing the building down behind me. I then took Carl

Lindstrom's office in Utica Square when he moved down the hall."

Dr. Gross arrived in Tulsa following the last polio epidemic in 1952. "I arrived in 1953. Ian McKenzie was the only orthopedist at Hillcrest and he had died in a car accident the year before. When I got there, the building across the street from Hillcrest was turned into a Polio clinic. It was full of iron lungs and other supportive measures for acute polio patients."

"There were numerous residual paralytics. Orthopedic procedures included muscle and tendon transfers, joint stabilizations, leg equalizations combined with bracing and rehabilitation. I remember that people were afraid of Polio patients. I could understand. They closed the swimming pools and everything else for children."

"Myra Peters and Norman Dunitz came to Tulsa the next year. I called Al Bungardt, who was head of Children's Hospital in Oklahoma City and told him I was overwhelmed and he came to Tulsa in 1954."

Dr. Gross experienced many changes in the way orthopedics was practiced then. "The biggest change was that after the war, as a result of the training and experiences, the increase in quality of surgery was just tremendous. There were plenty of well-trained surgeons to go around."

Dr. Gross became well known for his surgical procedures on the spine. "At that time we had a backlog of scoliosis patients and for some reason many of them came to me and I had to learn about it. I spent time with Dr. Paul Harrington in Houston, an engineer and orthopedist. He helped me avoid a lot of pitfalls. I was the first in Oklahoma to do a Harrington procedure for scoliosis. Tulsa is, in many ways, still a hinterland. You need to get the hell out of here and talk to groups and other doctors. You go where the best people are to keep up with things. If you don't for a couple of years you're behind. It's time consuming and expensive but necessary."

He traveled all over the world perfecting his surgical skills. "I went to England, Hong Kong, Australia, Paris and Stockholm and, I hate to say it, I even went to California to work with talented surgeons."

In 1972, Dr. Gross closed his office and paid his own way to spend a month in Kabul, Afghanistan with Orthopedics Overseas. "The Afghan people were wonderful people and physically the toughest. If they lived to be 21 years old they had enough antibodies to fight World War II. It was unique to treat a woman. The woman would talk to the husband and the husband would talk to me and then it would go back the other way. You couldn't touch the woman and you had to come to some kind of conclusion. It was worse than being a Veterinarian."

Dr. Gross is certain that one of the most important developments in surgery was in anesthesia. "When I first got here, St. John and Hillcrest were still using drip ether and there were many problems associated with that. When the anesthesiologists started coming in with better training like endotracheal anesthesia, that allowed the surgeons to do more and better procedures.

It was real interdepartmental support. When Carl Morgan and his crew came here we were able to do things they were doing in Minneapolis and Orthopedic Centers."

He also remembers using open reductions of fractures on patients and metal fixation procedures, particularly in joint restorations. Early mobilizations reduced hospital time and lessened disabilities.

Because of his interest in continued medical education, Dr. Gross was instrumental in organizing regional orthopedic associations such as the Mid-American Orthopedic Association and the Mid-Central States Orthopedic Society. He belonged to the prestigious American Orthopedic Association, the Clinical Orthopedic Society and was an active member of the Scoliosis Research Society. The American Association of Orthopedic Surgeons was his first love and served as his principal motivation to increasing his knowledge and competency as an orthopedic surgeon.

"I do not really understand the attitude of physicians who will not see indigent patients. I worked on polio patients and at crippled children's clinics for many years after the last epidemic. Some of them I operated on 10 or 12 times. Now we have guys who won't go to the emergency room." He smiled and said, with great satisfaction, "I was compensated by just being a physician and an orthopedic surgeon."

Dr. Gross was also active in the political side of medicine. He served as president of the Tulsa County Medical Society in 1962. "When I was president, I was very interested in the fact that Tulsa did not have a charity hospital. After all these years they have just recently passed a law to pay the hospitals in Tulsa something for charity care. I was so imbued with the idea of charity care for Tulsa that doctors would cross the street rather than having to listen to me talk about it."

Meetings of the medical society were held downtown in the Pompeii Room in the Mayo Hotel. Later, the meetings were moved to the Blue Cross/Blue Shield building on Boulder.

Another political issue for Dr. Gross was the growing concern about malpractice claims. "About 1960, malpractice claims started blooming. There were a couple of signal cases here and plaintiffs attorneys brought doctors in from outside to testify and I was appalled by the testimony."

Dr. Gross also worked hard developing relationships with elected officials and trying to get doctors involved in the political process. "Sam Turner and I helped organize OMPAC. At that time Page Belcher was our congressman. We worked hard to get some rapport with him and he was a good friend of the doctors and medicine."

Dr. Gross has enjoyed his retirement fishing and hunting and playing golf twice a week. It is clear that he is proud of his work as a physician and the lives he touched. "Although it's nothing compared to what they can do now, I like to think I knew what I was doing and helped make things better for some people," he said.

He expresses his satisfaction and perhaps his philosophy of life by saying, "I had a great party."