

MY FATHER

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It was the early 1950s and I was about thirteen or fourteen years old. I rode with my dad to a modest house in the San Fernando Valley. He got out of the car and went to the door. Soon he motioned me to join him and we met a former Hollywood silent screen actress, an elderly Hungarian woman. She invited us to her table, set with luscious pastries, and poured me a cup of coffee topped with a large dollop of whipped cream. While I enjoyed the coffee and pastry, my dad met with her in another room. My dad was a doctor and made house calls. He had a contract with the Hollywood Screen Actors Guild to provide medical care to their retirees.

After we left the actress, we drove to St. Joseph Hospital in Burbank where he did his hospital rounds. I sat in the nurse's station while he visited his patients. Growing up as a doctor's son, I didn't have too much time with my dad – he was always busy with his practice. For example, I remember sitting down for a Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner when the phone rang – he grabbed his black bag and left to see a sick patient. House calls were common then for doctors, and most practiced solo medicine – group practice was frowned upon by the AMA as leading to socialized medicine and ultimately Communism. He went out of his way to do special things with me as much as he could.

My dad grew up in rural Western Wisconsin, the oldest of nine kids in his family – he was born in 1901 in Taylor, Wisconsin, just outside of Black River Falls. His first language was Norwegian – he later learned English in school. He wanted a better life than what was available in a poor farming community and managed to go to college – first to Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, and then to the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He worked part-time and received some help from family friends. He took off a year while in college to earn money by teaching school in rural Montana where he had to come early to start a fire and warm up the schoolroom in the winter.

He started his first two years of medical school in Madison – they only had a two-year medical school then – and finished medical school at the University of Illinois in Chicago. He interned at Los Angeles County Hospital in 1930. He then married my mother after a seven-year engagement – her father would only consent to letting his daughter marry when my dad could afford to properly support her. Later, when my dad was making some money, he helped two of his brothers through medical school to become doctors and helped a sister through nursing school.

His first job was as a company physician for the Rand Mining Company in Randsburg, a mining town in the Mojave Desert. He traveled in a Model A Ford a radius of fifty miles in the desert to treat miners. My mother didn't much like living in the desert, so after a year they moved back to Hollywood where he started his medical practice. My sister and I were born there, but when I was about a year old we moved out to the San Fernando Valley where he continued his practice in North Hollywood.

We lived a year in Van Nuys and then moved to a small tract house in North Hollywood. These were the war years when the economy was not doing well. After the war, when the economy in Southern California began to boom, we bought a nice house in Studio City on the north edge of the Hollywood Hills, just off Laurel Canyon Blvd. My dad still maintained his office at 5000 Lankershim Blvd. in North Hollywood. In the early 1950s,

he charged \$5 for an office visit. I remember my mother arguing with him about raising his fee – he said “if I raise my fee, many of my patients won’t be able to pay.” He eventually did, but imagine a doctor now reluctant to raise his fees because his patients couldn’t afford it.

My dad was active in the San Fernando Valley Council of the Boy Scouts of America and encouraged me to become a Boy Scout, and later a Sea Scout. In the late 1940s, we drove out to a Boy Scout camp near Kernville. As we drove back through the Mojave Desert he let me drive the car. Those were my first driving lessons. By the time I was old enough for my driver’s license. I already knew how to drive – a stick shift no less.

My dad was a teller of tall tales. He told of mosquitos in Wisconsin that were so big and fierce that people hid under a cast-iron kettle to avoid them. The mosquitos tried to bite through and soon flew away with the kettle. He also told me of walking five miles to school every day, through snow in the winter. Later, when I visited his home town of Taylor and the house where he grew up, I noticed that the school was only a few blocks away.

My dad had contracted rheumatic fever as a teenager. This was before the time of antibiotics, and his heart valve was damaged. He tired easily and knew his limitations. About the time I left for college in 1955, he thought about slowing down and quitting his active medical practice. In 1956, when Goodwin Knight was Governor of California – my dad was a good Republican – and in anticipation of the Kerr-Mills Medical Act, he took a position as Medical Advisor to the State of California. He closed his medical practice and moved to Sacramento. He was there for four years and then retired to Solvang, a Danish community north of Santa Barbara. He and my mother lived there until he died in 1975 (age of seventy-four) when his heart valve gave out. I was able to sing at his memorial service but wept uncontrollably afterward. My mother continued to live in Solvang until she died in 1993 at the age of ninety-three.

He grew up poor in rural Wisconsin but managed to get a good education and rise out of poverty. He was a life-long Republican, but was always very caring and generous – I don’t know what he would make of the current party, he would disown it I’m sure. He would be the first to give a hand to someone in need. He was religious, but not overtly, he kept his religious ideas to himself. As Norwegian Lutherans, we always went to church on Sunday. I think he was a little shocked when I later became a Unitarian. He was very even-tempered and rarely got mad, but when he did he was very stern.

He had a “rags-to-riches” mentality. He used the term “shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves.” That is, in two or three generations there was a real danger of declining family wealth. He was proud that I went on from college to graduate school and a Ph.D. Education was important.

My dad lived in an era totally different from now. I’m not sure he would enjoy medical practice now where most doctors work for a salary in corporate medical clinics. And I don’t know what he would think of the current politics and polarization in this country. Now my sister and I are senior members of our extended families. What does the future hold for our children and grandchildren?

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