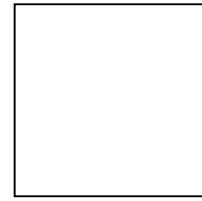


A Remembrance of My Father, Walter Wallace Stevens, D.D.S.



What follows are my memories of my father apart from his professional activities. His many accomplishments as a dentist are enumerated elsewhere courtesy of the Dutchess County Dental Society.

Origins

My father was born and raised in Windham, New York, a hamlet in the Catskill Mountains. His father, Ward Emory Stevens, D.D.S., was a native of New York and a graduate of the University of the State of New York. My grandfather received his license to practice dentistry on July 26, 1897 at the age of twenty-four. He soon moved to Windham, where he was the only dentist for miles around and where he could pursue his love for fishing and hunting.

My father had two younger sisters, Helen and Alice. The entire family fished for brook trout and hunted partridges. A bird dog or two were always part of the family. The school system had so few pupils that, if you were bright—and my father was, you could jump ahead a grade. My father did so twice and graduated from high school at the age of sixteen. He served briefly in the military in World War I, but was not sent overseas. He then entered the Baltimore College of Dental Surgery, which later became part of the University of Maryland.

College and a Surreptitious Baseball Career

In those days dental training took three years, and my father entered with the class of 1921. He told an amusing story from his freshman year. During class recitation one day, he needed to say the word “tuberculosis,” but did not know how to pronounce it. Instead, he said “tubercu LO sis”, and the professor reprimanded him. He never forgot.

When he went off to dental college his Uncle Wal gave him a Bible. He did read the entire book while in college, but it was not until the second year that he found the \$20.00 bill placed there by his uncle—that was serious money in those days.

By his third year my father’s natural leadership was becoming evident, and he was chosen president of Xi Psi Phi. He was associate editor of the yearbook, secretary of the senior class, and a member of the Theta Nu Epsilon Society. At graduation he stood first among the eleven awarded honorable mention, the group ranking just after the two medal winners.

During the first two summers my father played professional baseball for Hagerstown, Maryland. Because ballplayers in those days were considered to be such ruffians, he assumed the name “Smith” and was probably known as Steve Smith. He must have been good, too, because he played center field and batted lead-off. He used a bottle bat (since outlawed), which had a fat cross-section its entire length except for the handle. Those were the days of the spitball (also later outlawed), and so batters needed a thick bat to have a better chance to hit the ball.

Pitchers chewed slippery elm, loaded the ball with their saliva, and threw the ball. The spitball was a fast pitch given to sudden and unpredictable movement.

At that time baseball shoes had leather uppers with metal cleats, called spikes, attached to the soles. Players would ostentatiously file their spikes in hopes of intimidating the other team's basemen. My father proudly said that he batted against the young Lefty Grove before the latter reached the Major Leagues. Lefty was very fast and wild too, and so, one did not dig in against him.

By the third summer my father was a graduate dentist and became at age twenty-one the youngest licensed dentist in the State of New York.

Early Years

Establishing a dental practice is not easy. My father slept in his office at first. By 1924 he was doing well enough that he could afford marriage. He wed my mother, Lucile Case Stevens, and their marriage lasted into its fiftieth year, when my father died.

The 1920's were a decade of strong economic growth, which helped my father prosper. My parents rented an apartment for a while and by 1932 could afford to buy a house. I came along in 1933. By then the Great Depression had hit, and no one had much money. As a result, my father sometimes took payment in kind. We acquired a pet Dachshund in this way.

By the mid-1930's my father desired new professional challenges. He was already active in dental politics, for his natural leadership was beginning to flower, and he decided to study oral surgery. He bought a used Packard Phaeton, a four-door convertible touring car. Every Wednesday at noon, he set off from Poughkeepsie for the Columbia-Presbyterian Dental Clinic via the Taconic State Parkway. The state troopers knew the car, and they and my father would wave to each other. It was a good thing that my father was on good terms with the troopers because he said that he could make the trip in an hour and twenty minutes.

He studied diligently and grew to love wiring fractured jaws. He said that every case was unique and therefore required a novel solution. Many of his patients were indigent, but he liked the work so much that he seemed not to mind much not getting paid. Eventually, he became Lecturer in Oral Surgery at Columbia Dental School.

The Family Man and a Lesson for Parents

My father took his family responsibilities seriously. I was lucky to have such good parents. I have fond memories of activities enjoyed together such as Thanksgiving dinner with relatives and trips to New York for major league baseball games, to Vermont and Canada for skiing and also once to Canada for fishing. One year we vacationed at a dude ranch, and for several years we shared a cottage on Cape Cod with friends in the summer.

My father took up golf in his late twenties and was able to shoot in the eighties without ever practicing much. I was an early golfer, and so I accompanied him several times as his guest

to the annual Ninth District Dental Society's day of golf. There was always a dinner and business meeting after the golf with three door prizes too. One time, when I was about fourteen and the youngest there, I was chosen to draw the names from a hat for the door prizes. The first name I drew was my own and the second my father's. He was so embarrassed that I think we returned home with just one prize.

He also participated in the larger family of the Poughkeepsie community. He was a long-time member of the First Congregational Church. He was a member of Rotary and was a Freemason.

My moral development was not neglected. My father did his best to teach me to be honest in all ways: socially (do not lie), commercially (do not cheat), and intellectually (do not "kid" yourself). A good example of his teaching occurred in 1945 just after the end of hostilities in Europe in World War II. News films of the German concentration camps were released showing skeletons both living and dead. It was springtime and I was twelve. My father viewed the films alone first. The next night we went together, and he warned me about the subject. I still remember the ghastly images.

Probably the most difficult—and ultimately the wisest—decision my father made as a parent was not to push me to be a dentist. Although I built model airplanes as a child and early adolescent, I was not interested in making scale models with jewel-like detailing, but rather just in seeing if the darn thing would fly. In other words, I did not have the "right stuff" with my hands to be a third-generation dentist. I also had inherited my mother's less-than-perfect depth perception. By contrast, from an early age I showed a strong aptitude for language, which my father levered by staking me to an excellent liberal arts education. I went on to a career in the financial services industry as analyst, writer and money manager.

Later Years

Good dentists like using their hands, and my father was no exception. For about five years after World War II (and before television reached Poughkeepsie) my father joined a neighbor in the latter's garage workshop to do woodworking. They had a great time together and made all sorts of things, including a captain's table with four chairs. However, my father would not touch the circular saw—his friend made all of the cuts.

With the advent of television the woodworking diminished in favor of one of my father's great loves, the romantic saga of the opening of the old west. In his younger years he read western pulp fiction in the evenings (and also the complete set of Harvard Classics). Now a program called Gun Smoke became his favorite.

As his professional activities became less he had more time for his avocations of fishing and hunting. In 1956 he bought a Chevrolet Corvette and soon after acquired a Weimaraner dog raised by his elder sister. They had a fine time going on hunting trips in the Corvette.

Later still, in his sixties and seventies, he shortened his practice to four days a week and then to three. He was still practicing in his seventy-fourth year when he died from a "coronary."

His heart never completely left the mountains where he grew up, and his final resting place is the family plot in the Pleasant Valley Cemetery outside Windham.

At his funeral the church was full of people paying their respects. Some spoke in tribute to him. Our minister read my father's favorite passage from the Bible, the Twenty-third Psalm:

PSALM 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

A Final Thought

In life my father possessed a moral gyroscope formed by our religious heritage and the canons of professional practice. He did what he thought was right, not what the crowd found fashionable. He thereby carried the torch for the highest ethical standards for dentistry.

KEEP THAT FLAME BRIGHTLY LIT.

Peter von S. Stevens
May 2007