

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #460

Interviewee: Dennis & Barbara Smith

Interviewer: Matt Simek

Date: June 29, 2008

Place: Felt Recording Room, Harney County Library, Burns, Oregon

Subject: Medicine

MATT SIMEK: Alright, this is an interview of Dennis and Barbara Smith, local historians, from Canyon City on Sunday, June 29, 2008. Part of the Harney County --- I put HC and I can never remember then when I look at HC what I meant that to mean. It means the Harney County Oral History Project, and was recorded at the Harney County Library. The interviewer is Matt Simek of Newberg, Oregon, which is why I don't remember Harney County. That's not fair, of course I remember Harney County.

The topic this afternoon is Medicine in Central, Oregon. The History of Medicine Project has been collecting interviews since 2001, on the history of medicine in Oregon from prior to Lewis and Clark up to the present day. And looking for patterns and changes, and evolution of medical care in that time. So we have already had interviews from people like Ted Merrill and (Lowell) Euhus and Dutch Reinschmidt. We have access to an interview with Martha Van der Vlugt that she had recorded for OHSU a number of years ago. Not part of our project, but certainly it's available to us. And so we

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understand that there was quite an interesting mix of medical care in the Canyonville, John Day area.

DENNIS SMITH: Canyon City.

MATT: Canyonville is south on I-5, as I remember it. Yes. Canyon City, John Day area. From the early miners and the Chinese contingent and Kam Wah Chung with the Chinese herbalist there, and then up through the late 1800's, early 1900's. And then no medical care for long periods of time, resident there. And then into a lot of political controversy in the '60's, approximately '60's or '70's. And so I wonder if you could trace what you know about medical care in Canyon City, John Day area from whenever you know it. You were a school mate of Doc Hay's nephew's son for some time, Eddie Wah. And we interviewed Eddie Wah on his experience of living there. Am I hearing music?

DENNIS: Base.

MATT: I wonder where that is from?

BARBARA SMITH: Somebody on the street, and front of ---

DENNIS: You can hear them.

MATT: My goodness.

DENNIS: A quarter of a mile away and those boom boxes boom.

MATT: Well let's hope it fades soon. So tell me what you know about medicine in Canyon City.

DENNIS: Well I was doing a story on Mary St. Claire, who had been a bar girl in Yreka, California. Had a saloon, lived rather extravagantly, liked to dress well, jewelry. She

was very unconventional, she didn't fit the mold of the women folk of that period at all. She was independent, and courageous. When Yreka gold mining ceased or diminished, you know, you have the waxing and the waning of these mining camps. She made her way to The Dalles and was there for a year or two, and then to Canyon City where she lived out the rest of her life. About --- well she died in 1876, and prior to that time she was suffering from ill health. So in doing her story then I got involved with the medical practice of that time and started digging into what was going on with the local doctors. The practice, the medical profession, and their stories, and was amazed at a lot that went on, and the life of the medical doctors, and learning about homeopathy, a certain type of medicine, and I can't explain it. And the other one, the opposing was --- I'm not sure I can even pronounce it, oreopathy (sp.), opposing each other. And some doctors advertised as a homeopathic physician, and that seems to be favored over the other. But they were both going on.

And so as medicine crept along at a snails pace, until it just burst forth with a great deal of new technology, new ways of practice, medicines and instruments and so on about 1910. And I also learned about the Rockefeller Foundation, the vast, millions of dollars --- I guess you would say the effect of the Rockefeller money that really did in the sad state of medicine at the time. It was discredited, the diploma mills, the lack of real credentials that some of these doctors operated under, or claimed. So it was all, it just kind of snowballed from the Mary St. Claire story into the state of medicine. And what this money accomplished then, where I think John Hopkins was one of the premier schools, if not the premier school of medicine. The University of Chicago, another one.

Vanderbilt, maybe, I think was mentioned. But some of these doctors could even practice medicine who had no more than a high school, or maybe even not that education.

But ---

MATT: It was very often the case that medical training was on the job.

DENNIS: Yeah.

MATT: They tutored with another physician because there were no medical schools in vast areas of the country.

DENNIS: About the turn of the century there was two doctors there who had never performed an appendectomy. And somebody suggested, well there was a jail bird that had committed suicide. And so he suggested they go cut open this cadaver, the body, and take a look. Because they had never performed it, they had only heard about the operation. And they were pretty sure it was an appendix that had burst, or was causing the problem. And so they opened him up and they conferred, and back and forth, and decided they had better operate on this man in Silvie's Valley, a pioneer rancher. They did it in their kitchen. And their children watched through the kitchen window, as these two doctors performed --- they set up a door in the kitchen, on sawhorses. And they operated on this guy, and he lived to a ripe old age. That's one of the ---

MATT: So it was an appendix?

DENNIS: It was, yeah. And another story is about an earlier, this would be in the '60's in which ---

MATT: 1860's.

DENNIS: 1860's, in which there probably was a lot more experience, because of the amputations that the surgeons did during the Civil War. Well this was an Indian that had tried to steal a horse, or horses there, and was shot in the leg, broke the leg. And they caught him and they did --- this Dr. Orr, I think his name, O R R, did a amputation on his leg, and he recovered. And there --- believe it or not there is some good actual, accurate stories on that one. But there is a whole lot of them that were far out, that maybe bits and pieces of the story are accurate. And there is a lot of fabrication that is just nonsense about that same story. And that seems to be true with a lot of pioneer stories. You got to sift through and try to determine what is logical, what is the truth here, and what is not. And that's part of the fun that I have with history.

MATT: Who built the first hospital in John Day?

DENNIS: I think Prairie City, the community. And the buildings ---

BARBARA: It wasn't in John Day, it was in Prairie City.

MATT: Alright.

DENNIS: No building exists of that first one. I think they had taken over a school building. And I think Dr. Merrill Moore knows more about that history of that building. Then it was rebuilt into a modern building. But Prairie had a great deal of trouble keeping it open, sustaining it. When Dr. Merrill showed up it was vacant. And he and his partner --- was it Newton?

BARBARA: Uh huh.

DENNIS: --- agreed with Prairie to go in and operate the hospital. Or rather the practice of the --- give it some kind of credibility. If you haven't got doctors, you can't operate a

hospital very well. And that's where part of the friction with the Van der Vlugt's, because they were operating their private hospital in John Day.

BARBARA: Which, it was referred to as a hospital by many of the locals, but it truly was not a licensed hospital.

DENNIS: More of a clinic.

MATT: It was a home, wasn't it?

BARBARA: It was, yes, it was a home and they had a very large home with a wing. Right now it is a residential care facility, and has been off and on for years. It's called Country Spice right now. But they operate ---

MATT: That's the old Van der Vlugt Hospital.

BARBARA: That's the old Van der Vlugt Hospital. And because it was not licensed there was a lot of things that were done, or not done, that other accredited or licensed facilities weren't allowed to do. People typically called it a hospital, they did have people overnight. In fact stay for, I'm sure a length of time while they were being treated. But it wasn't to the same standard as what we have. I know their records, we have people come and want records, and thinking that our hospital, Blue Mountain Hospital District was a continuation of that facility. And it is not, and it never was. But Blue Mountain Hospital was in Prairie City. Like Dennis said it, for a time, was not open. It re-opened and then moved to John Day.

Our hospital there was built in 1959, and I think it was, I used to know for sure, but I think it was December of 1961 it became occupied. And what was the hospital in Prairie City became a nursing home, still is a nursing home, part of Blue Mountain

Hospital district. And then we rebuilt the hospital, remodel and rebuilt. It will be five years, I think, coming up pretty soon. But there was a period of time, there has been historically periods of time where we have had very few physicians, if any. And in the history that I have with Blue Mountain Hospital since 1976, there have been times that we pretty much had to rely on rent-a-docs, or locum tenants to keep us going while we recruit physicians.

MATT: There was a period when HMO's, Health Maintenance Organizations, saw a dramatic rise in their impact on medicine. How did that affect the John Day, Canyon City area?

BARBARA: I guess I need to have you explain a little more of what you mean. What kind of impact were you ---

MATT: HMO ---

BARBARA: In John Day and Canyon City, something, we are just on the outlying edge of something so ---

MATT: And it may not have had an effect then. But in approximately the 70's or 80's the HMO concept started gaining a lot of momentum. And where the insurance companies would pretty much dictate what the medical care was.

BARBARA: Uh huh.

MATT: And I'm not sure that it did have an impact on John Day, but did it?

BARBARA: It wasn't the HMO's so much as that type of management of Medicare patients that had the impact. Because I started in the field of medicine, and health information which is medical records, in the late '60's in Nampa, Idaho. It was actually

when Medicare first started, and we had people that could stay a couple of years at a hospital level of care. Well obviously somebody recognized the fact that you couldn't have a Medicare program and cover patients that were staying that length of time. So they hired organizations, which are now called PRO's, or were called PRO's, that managed the resources of Medicare patients only. And then eventually that concept caught on to individual insurance companies where patients had to have certain things wrong before they were, their stay was authorized. We still go through that process. There are very few insurances, Medicare included, that will say a patient can stay if they don't really need to stay. There are certain criteria that they have to meet, as far as how ill they are, what you do for them. But that has had an impact, I would say. It has caused a lot of paper work. As far as the way physicians treat patients, not being a physician I couldn't tell you. Just looking at it from my point of view, it doesn't affect a whole lot. Except there are things like maybe somebody used to have cataract surgery before their vision was as bad as it has to be now before Medicare will pay for cataract surgery, or something like that. But I really don't have any other experience with that.

MATT: How about the malpractice crisis, is that affected?

BARBARA: Oh, that had a huge impact. We were looking at not being able to do any obstetrical care, and through some political things we were able to secure malpractice insurance so that we could continue obstetrical care. But it impacted obstetrical care more than just general care of patients. But there was a huge medical malpractice crisis as far as fees to get medical malpractice insurance. And I can't even remember how many

years ago it has been now, maybe ten, maybe more. You know how time goes by.

(Laughter)

MATT: And this is essentially because of the cost of malpractice in certain specialties was increasing so fast that the patients, the number of patients that would come would not cover the cost, even of the medical insurance premium.

BARBARA: Oh yeah. Yeah there were some huge medical liability settlements. I mean settlements that you wonder where did they come up with the figure. Whose life had that kind of value. I mean how can you place a value on somebody's life. But how can you say that millions and millions of dollars is the value that somebody should be paid for something that has happened, whether it was neglect, or just one of the thing that happens. But I think that actually liability insurance has gone down a little bit in the last couple of years.

MATT: Any comment?

DENNIS: It seems like there is an awfully lot of people in Grant County that have the clear choice of plan, or there are several plans that they offer, myself included. They do a good job of marketing.

MATT: This is a Medicare supplement?

DENNIS: She knows exactly what type of ---

BARBARA: It's a Medicare Advantage Program they're called, it's in place of your Medicare.

DENNIS: Medicare money goes to them, and then like I pay \$285 for the traditional plan every quarter. They get what I would pay ---

BARBARA: For part B Medicare.

DENNIS: Yeah.

BARBARA: ...

DENNIS: I never get to see it, but it's on paper. It comes ---

MATT: Let's go back a little bit and tell me about Kam Wah Chung.

DENNIS: When I was a kid I would go down to the Chinese compound there and really there wasn't that many buildings left. I remember one time that the door was open and I could see Doc Hay sitting in there. And the place had a certain smell to it, and it was dark. And I probably wasn't looking in there any farther than ten or twelve feet. But you couldn't have gotten me in there a kicking and screaming. It just looked sinister. And I was probably 11 to 13 years old, or something like that, but I'd go down there once in awhile.

Dad had served three years in China with the Army, and he would like to get together with Doc Bob (Wah) on occasion. And I don't know how much Chinese he had picked up over there, or even if they came from the same part of China, because southern didn't speak northern, and he was, as far as I can tell, he served at Tientsin, which is up near Beijing. And, but Eddie and I are classmates, small class, there was only 17 in our graduating class. And on some things we chummed around. He was a very good athlete, as well as smart, very smart.

MATT: Now when you say Eddie, you mean Eddie Wah?

DENNIS: Right.

MATT: And he was the son of Doc Bob (Wah)?

DENNIS: Right.

MATT: And Doc Bob was Doc Hay's nephew.

DENNIS: Don't take it from me. This is --- what you read, the stories I guess they were --- he had been, came from Walla Walla I think. I think they, we came to John Day in 1943, and I don't think they had lived there that much longer. Certainly Leon (Lung On) and Doc Hay had been there since the 1870's or whenever. But Doc Bob, I think, was up in Walla Walla. I think there were some other relatives, but --- And now their home is a Bed and Breakfast. And then Doc Bob built, as far as I know, the building right next to it, to the south, is a clinic for Eddie. And then he left and went to Portland.

MATT: As I understand it ---

DENNIS: And married a Portland girl.

MATT: Yeah, as I understand it Bob came to John Day to take care of Doc Hay who was in his waning years.

DENNIS: He was blind.

MATT: And he was blind.

DENNIS: I think the park service is trying to buy all this now.

MATT: Uh huh.

DENNIS: The surrounding property to make a big facility there, state park.

MATT: I think they just opened the state park, and they just opened Kan Wah Chung.

DENNIS: And I think it was one of Eddie --- I don't think he came for the ceremony. As far as I know it was a son that came and spoke. If Eddie came, or Henry, it wasn't

reported in the papers. And I didn't attend. But I did give the park service an hour of oral history a couple years earlier. And I was going to let you borrow that. Oh ---

MATT: Oh good. Anything else on medicine that comes to mind?

DENNIS: Well what it comes back to, it seems like those early years in Canyon City, the doctors in a rare case or two they might have had a little place for a hospital, one or two beds, or something like that. But normally the doctor went to you, you didn't go to the doctor. And you didn't go unless it was serious. And the doctors, relative to today, were not wealthy people. As often as not they went bust. (Laughter) A couple of amusing stories about one in particular, in which he was reported twice as going broke. Another one wasn't doing very well, peddling pills. But I've seen photographs of drug stores and the walls of them lined.

And that was another thing that came about as part of this research for this Mary St. Claire story, was the vast amount of medicines that were available, some of which were toxic. And that's what finally did her in, on a medicine called aconite, which was more toxic than it was beneficial.

MATT: What was it, do you know?

DENNIS: Aconite --- I have a --- do you remember?

BARBARA: I don't remember.

DENNIS: What it was supposed to do.

MATT: Of course you hear all these stories of treating syphilis with mercury chloride ...

DENNIS: ... all the heavy metals, and cocaine and strychnine. But they did have a beneficial aspect to them, but they were ---

BARBARA: Didn't it affect her central nervous system?

DENNIS: Yeah, yeah, she had a terrible time.

BARBARA: Mary St. Claire ...

DENNIS: She died after a few days. But she was convinced that she was being poisoned.

BARBARA: Well she probably was.

DENNIS: Yeah.

BARBARA: Not intentionally.

MATT: Not intentionally.

DENNIS: They were dangerous because it was so easy to over-prescribe, and cross the line.

BARBARA: From therapeutic to toxin.

DENNIS: I had Dr. Merrill review this whole file before I gave this talk. I said what is your opinion as a medical doctor, about her death. We finally found the coroner's inquest, and it was quite revealing, this primary doctor, and what his statement was. But he didn't really --- it's hard to say because it wasn't really all that much information. But he said I am inclined to believe that she was poisoned.

BARBARA: Of course that is based on his knowledge of current days.

DENNIS: Not that it was deliberate, but it --- he was doing what he thought was right. I don't think --- but it was just a lousy state of medicine.

MATT: The arsenal was very small in those days. There was just not a lot of knowledge.

BARBARA: You're right. There was the medications, but the knowledge was what was lacking. That's what you get from years of use.

DENNIS: That's why it is practice.

BARBARA: That's why it is practice.

DENNIS: In the research on the Rockefeller Foundation they found that they always thought that the southern boys were kind of dopey and laid back and dull, and perhaps even ignorant, you know, throughout the south. And then they determined that they were sapped of their energy and their vitality because of a worm. They determined that the worm was coming in through their bare feet. To put it as soon as they got them shod they got rid of the problem. And they were just as intelligent and as vital as anybody else in the northern states. It was the worms. (Laughter)

MATT: I remember reading about that, coming in through the skin. Yeah. Well, let's call it quits for today. And we'll come back to this, I'm sure, in a different form.

We've been interviewing Dennis and Barbara Smith, local historians from Canyon City, Oregon, on Sunday June 29th, 2008, as part of the Harney County Oral History Program. It was recorded at Harney County Library, interviewer Matt Simek of Newberg. Thank you very much, and I'll get you a copy of all of this.

(End of DVD)

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