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Interview no. 825

Robert Homan Jr. M.D.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Robert Homan, Jr., M.D.

INTERVIEWER: H.D. Garrett, M.D.

PROJECT: El Paso Medical Community

DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 18, 1990

TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO: 825

TRANSCRIPT NO: 825

TRANSCRIBER: Amy Bene

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Longtime El Paso thoracic surgeon; son of R.B. Homan, Sr., founder of Homan Sanitorium and co-founder of Southwestern General Hospital; born 1904, Colorado City, Texas; 1926 graduate of University of Texas at Austin; 1930 graduate of the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston; interned at San Francisco City-County Hospital; returned to El Paso in 1931 to enter into practice with father and uncle, Ralph Homan, M.D.; former president of El Paso County Medical Society; delegate from El Paso County Medical Society to Texas Medical Association; first Speaker of the House of Delegates to Texas Medical Association; Chairman of delegation from Texas Medical Association to House of Delegates of American Medical Association; Chairman of Kiwanis Club Selection Committee to choose football team to annually compete in Sun Bowl; President of Sun Carnival, 1940, 1941; died February 28, 1991.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Reminisces on opening of University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston; construction of tuberculosis sanitorium by father and John C. Crimmon, D.D.S.; enhancement of thoracic surgery and general surgical procedures during World War II; advances of anesthesiology; advent of sulfanilamides, penicillin, and broad spectrum of antibiotics; experience as first Speaker of the House of Delegates of Texas Medical Association; comments on U.S. government's interference in organized medicine; sentiments on changes in medical practice; recalls role played in efforts to build Thomason General Hospital.

Length of Interview: 30 minutes Length of Transcript 19 pages

This is H. D. Garrett, preparing to have an interview with Robert Homan, Jr., a distinguished physician of El Paso County Medical Society. In preparing for this discussion with Dr. Homan, I want to give a little background so that you would understand about the Homan family a little better.

Dr. Homan comes from a very distinguished family of professional people. His father, R. B. Homan, Sr., was the oldest of 12 children -- eight boys and four girls. He came to El Paso in 1907.

Before that, he had received his M.D. degree at Galveston at the University of Texas Medical Branch in 1897. He practiced first in Midland and later in Colorado City, where he developed tuberculosis. And for this reason he moved to El Paso to regain his health.

In 1910, Dr. Homan, Sr. leased an existing medical facility on Grandview Street, later known to El Pasoans as Saint Joseph's Sanatorium, and began operation of the Homan Sanatorium primarily for the care of tubercular patients. Joining in the management of the hospital to serve as administrator was John C. Crimmon, a dentist who had come to El Paso, also, because of tuberculosis. Together, doctors Homan and Crimmon maintained this hospital until 1925 at which time their new hospital, which we now know as Southwestern General Hospital, was opened, and their practice was

transferred.

In 1915, Willie Sirius Smith, M.D., became associated and practiced with R.B. Homan, Sr., and Smith married one of the Homan girls, Sally, and they became parents of a daughter, Nell, who later married James J. Garman, M.D., another prominent El Paso physician.

There are several Homan brothers, but I will only discuss the fellas who were in the medical profession, with the exception of Carlton, Sr. Carlton Homan, Sr. was a dentist who practiced here for many years and had a son, Carlton Homan, Jr., whom El Pasoans are quite familiar with.

Another brother of R. B. Homan, Sr. was Ralph. Ralph served as the -- in the infantry of the United States Army in World War I. He later graduated as an M.D. in 1924 from the University of Texas, Medical Branch. Ralph joined R. B. Homan, Sr. and practiced, primarily related to diseases of the chest. After serving in the U.S. Navy in World War II, Ralph took special training in cardiology and limited his practice to this specialty.

R. B., Sr. died in the early 1940's, leaving an extensive medical practice to be maintained by Ralph and R. B. Homan, Jr. This practice was carried on until Ralph's death in 1972 and Bob's retirement in 1979, due to poor health.

Robert B. Homan, Jr. was born in 1904 in Colorado City, Texas. In 1930 he graduated as an M.D. from the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, after having attended the

University of Texas in Austin where he was a member of the varsity football team. Bob, as we all know him, interned at the City/County Hospital in San Francisco and returned in 1931 to join his father and Uncle Ralph in practice.

Later, in 1938, Bob took special surgical training in thoracic surgery at Cook County Hospital in Chicago.

Having served primarily as a sanatorium for the care of tubercular patients since its opening in 1925, Southwestern General Hospital was converted later to a general hospital for care of all types of patients. Later on, a fourth floor of the hospital was completed to house obstetrical patients and newborn babies. This medical institution operated under the ownership of the Homan/Crimmon family until its sale in 1972 to Medenco.

In addition to their unnumbered activities, the family members in the professions excelled in practice and in professional societies. Each of the Homan M.D.s has served as president of the El Paso County Medical Society, and Carlton, Sr. served as president of El Paso Dental Society.

The Homan family looked out for each other. As one succeeded, he helped those that came along behind him, seeing to it that they got their maximum of education that they desired to have, and this is responsible for so many professional and well-educated people in their family.

Notable among Homan contributions are those made by Robert B. Homan, Jr. As a person endowed by birth and education with the necessary qualities, he became one of the most prominent

leaders of organized medicine. After having served many years as delegate from the local medical society to the Texas Medical Association, he was elected the first Speaker of the House of Delegates to the Texas Medical Association. He served so admirably in this task that he was re-elected for five years until he relinquished this job at his own request to allow others to share the responsibility. His outstanding ability to speak and carry the ball so well placed him in the role of chairman of the delegation from the Texas Medical Association to the House of Delegates of the American Medical Association, again contributing greatly to the advancement of organized medicine. Due to ill health in 1954, he was forced to resign this position. As a member of the Kiwanis Club and as one intently interested in athletics, in 1937 Bob assumed chairmanship of the Selection committee to chose the football teams to compete annually in the Sun Bowl. He served in this task 10 years, as well as serving as the president of the Sun Carnival in 1940 and 1941.

So this is a brief review of this outstanding family, and I have reviewed only the professional people. But the other members of the family are equally outstanding in their capacity of family people and other businesses. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to know all or part of this family have indeed been privileged.

Before I talk to Dr. Homan, I want to tell a story relating to Dr. Homan's past. In 1942 I joined the El Paso County Medical Society, having just finished my internship at the old El Paso

City/County Hospital, and came into the Society all bright-eyed and ready to meet fine professional people and to see the people that I'd been told about in medical school who were so outstanding in their work.

The first Medical Society meeting which I attended was one at which Dr. Bob Homan presented a paper on several surgical cases -- thoracic surgical cases that he had performed. And after he had finished giving his paper, the chairman called for discussion, and Dr. Jesson Stowe, who was Bob's closest friend -- and I did not know Dr. Stowe at this time -- Dr. Stole got up and said, yes, he would like to discuss the case. He went on to tell about how modest Dr. Homan was, that he didn't really want to brag about how well his patient had done following the work that he'd done on him, and that he had taken the liberty, himself, of asking one of the patients of Dr. Homan to come and give a personal testimonial as to how well the surgery had turned out.

At this time Dr. Stowe asked permission from the chairman for this person to be brought in, and the chairman granted permission. And Dr. Stowe signalled to someone in the back who opened the door back there, and two people from the local funeral home wheeled in a casket.

Well, of course, this created quite a bit of chaos and laughter. But I, as a fledgling M.D. and one who expected great things of these great doctors with whom I was becoming associated, was actually set way back. And I just wondered what kind of an outfit I'd really gotten into. Well, I've enjoyed

being in this outfit, but it certainly was an initial surprise, to begin with, anyway.

As I begin to talk to Dr. Homan, I want to tell you that this will be a brief interview because Dr. Homan, who used to have lots of wind in his compressor, has developed a leak in his compression in the last few years and doesn't have much pizzazz left. So he doesn't feel like talking at great lengths about anything. We're going to discuss, briefly, a few aspects of his service to organized medicine. And I want to repeat before we begin, what a great service he has rendered to his patients, both as friend and physician. And he is loved by many, many people in this city and is most highly respected by his fellow physicians.

This recording is made on September the 18th, 1990, in the home of Dr. Homan.

Q In the brief review that I gave of the Homan family, I did not mention that Dr. Homan married Cecil in 1933 -- that's correct, isn't it -- and that their daughter, Alice Jane, was born in 1934. A. J., as everybody calls her, is Bob's arms and legs and brain and wind and voice and everything else these days. Without A. J., he'd be pretty much of a loner, as it is. What we're going to talk about here a little bit -- Dr. Homan and his father both attended the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston -- of course, at different times. But interestingly enough, you had some of the same teachers -- both of you had the

same teachers, and I'd like you to tell us a little bit about some of the teachers you had -- that your father shared -- and also other instruction down there.

A You want me to talk now? The University of Texas Medical Branch was opened, and that was built in 1891. And my father graduated there in 1897. The University was started by some doctors who didn't know what they were doing. But in the years, it came along. Some Canadian doctors from England would come to Canada for visits and come to the Port of Galveston, and they kind of fell in love with the place. And they took over the school. Dr. Thompson was a surgeon -- an extremely fine surgeon who did a great deal of work on harelip. And his compadre was Dr. Kieller. Kieller was an anatomist and was particularly interested in the anatomy of the brain and the spinal column and did great drawings and was one of the men who made psychiatry something good. The school, of course, became extremely fine and he used to teach there a number of years.

In 1926 I graduated at the University and came -- and was accepted at the Medical Branch and graduated in 1930. Both of these doctors were still alive, and both of them died the last year that I was in the University. They were extremely interesting and dedicated to medicine and all of its facets.

Q Did Dr. Singleton -- did he come with Dr. Thompson? That is, did he study some work with him?

A Yes. Dr. Singleton was the chief assistant at the time of his death and was an extremely interesting man, too. He was very

well thought of.

Q The legacy of Kieller in anatomy is unsurpassed in the memory of anyone who ever went to the University of Texas Medical Branch. After Kieller, Dr. Knight came along. And Dr. Knight had been an assistant to Dr. Kieller when I was a student -- that was beginning of 1937 -- Dr. Knight had taken over. And the building in which -- which was a relatively new building in 1937 -- the building was named for Dr. Kieller, interestingly enough, because he was so revered -- his memory was so revered there. Of course, there were many other teachers of -- was Dr. Schwab in cardiology -- was he a classmate of yours or come along about --

A He was in my fraternity and he was a year -- he was a junior when I was a freshman.

Q I got to know Dr. Schwab very well in 1940 when I was a extern over at Saint Mary's Hospital. He was one of finest instructors and finest gentleman that I knew in Galveston.

A Yes, sir. He certainly was. He was a fine fellow.

Q And I think that he represented the caliber of physicians that you and I knew as teachers. We'll get a little further on, here. We'll get to one fellow who didn't quite fit up into the mold. But we'll put that aside for the moment. As I understand it, after you had been in practice in El Paso for -- say from 1932 -- that you decided to take some post graduate studies about -- was it 1939 that you --

A Yes.

Q Tell us about your post graduate studies.

A Well, my father built a -- and specialized in the treatment of tuberculosis and built a sanatorium. He started in 1910, and in 1924 he tried to buy the old Saint Joseph's Sanatorium, but the price was ridiculous. He had added on to it and added about 70 beds himself. So he and Dr. Crimmon -- they had -- a dentist -- Dr. John C. Crimmon from New Orleans -- the son of the federal judge in New Orleans -- came out with tuberculosis and recovered very shortly and married his nurse -- a nurse who worked at the hospital. They returned to New Orleans and didn't like it and came back and bought the interest of a man whose dad had been employed as an assistant -- he was not a doctor. He was a manager. Dr. Crimmon and Dr. Homan shook hands, and that was their connection until Dr. Crimmon died in -- I'll have to think about that a while. Anyway, he died suddenly and after he had converted the institution into a general hospital. That would be in 1938, he died -- maybe 1939. The hospital was converted in 1937 and operated as Southwestern General Hospital.

I took a course in surgery in Cook County in surgical technique and so forth, since I hadn't been doing it except as an assistant to various doctors in El Paso. And I continued at the hospital until 1972 when we sold it to Medenco Incorporated. Is that enough?

Q As I understand it, your thoracic surgery -- in addition to general surgical procedures -- was enhanced so much during World War II with the advances of anesthesiology and with the advent of

sulfanilamides, penicillin and later a broad spectrum of antibiotics that had changed the picture completely; is that correct?

A That certainly is.

Q You could do things later that you would never have thought of doing -- say, when you took your training?

A That's right. You ran into infection every time, and you could not open the chest or even -- great success without getting infection.

Q Well, this is one of the spin-offs of war that -- of course, medicine profits from war where other people don't. We don't enjoy profiting from war, but many, many advances have been learned -- were learned in World War II. And then after these improvements in procedures that you could do -- of course your morbidity and mortality was greatly changed in the -- by this time tuberculosis wasn't anywhere near as feared a customer as it had been before; is that correct?

A [In] 1952, a couple of drug companies came out with a pill -- which was a very cheap pill -- INH, isoniazidanic hydroxide.

Q And I enjoyed those pretty good.

A I *nearly broke my tongue. It was a very cheap drug, and it's now the basis with other drugs that have been discovered and with certain antibiotics. But mostly that little old pill, which you took three times a day, would make a patient noninfective in about a month's time.

Q Isn't it remarkable that something inexpensive would be so effective?

A That's right.

Q That's rather unusual.

A It certainly was.

Q And it had practically no side effects, if I remember correctly.

A None at all.

Q That's most unusual. After so much of your surgical work and so forth, you became dedicated -- or always had been, of course -- to helping organized medicine. One of the things that we have known you best for in the County Medical Society is your diligent attendance to Texas Medical Association and to your serving as first Speaker of the House of Delegates of Texas Medical Association. And I believe you held that job for five years until you voluntarily relinquished it; is that correct?

A That's correct. I had the job for five years, and at the time of my retirement, I told them that I didn't believe that any doctor should hold the office more than five years. In that length of time, you could take charge of everybody, and I thought it was ridiculous. So, since then, as I understand it, the limitation has been five years for the speaker of the house.

Q I wish we could get some of our politician friends in Washington, D.C. to adhere to such restrictions as that. The -- one of the things that I remember that happened when you were speaker of the house of the Texas Medical Association was that

the fella who signed my M.D. degree, a John Spies, came before you in a rather unpleasant situation. Would you like to discuss that a little bit?

A Well, I had not been down to Galveston for some time. When I got to the medical meeting there at that time, which was -- I forget what year -- I was told by a number of doctors -- including Dr. Schwab -- very vehemently that the man was crazy and the other things he had done since his -- putting a recorder under his vest, you know, and calling doctors in and getting them to talk about other doctors. And all of a sudden, he just seemed to take over and wanted to take the whole damn thing with him. He had -- without the knowledge of the faculty -- gone to the Board of Trustees of the Medical Society -- the Texas Medical Society and had presented his case and gotten their endorsement to get rid of all the faculty and so forth, as I understood it. Dr. L. O. Dutton of El Paso was another delegate of the Texas Medical Association, and he did a good deal of work with the other people that I did not know. Most of the men in the House were Texas men that graduated from Galveston. So I got busy and presented the resolution condemning the Board of Trustees and presented it to Dr. Homan Taylor, who was a secretary, and he said, "Don't do that." And I told him I was going to do it whatever anybody said and if I failed, I'd be ridiculous, but I wanted to get it over with. So I presented it, and it carried. Mostly the Board of Trustees took a tremendous dislike to me for a number of years, and then after a while they realized what had

happened. Their reaction was -- they were very nice to him, and I don't want to talk about them. They were -- the House -- the President of the Association was then instructed by the House on this resolution to go to the Board of Regents and demand a release of -- of resignation of Dr. Spies. And this was carried out.

Q Those of us that have only had professional competition such as exists in the practice are not aware of the wars of academia, but the wars that go on with the intramural wars of academia can be pretty vicious at times and reflect themselves in -- as you mentioned here -- in the training that's given to young physicians. I don't suppose you would have been worried about the doctors snitching on each other so much if you had been in a teaching institution in which your obligation was to turn out good young physicians. That's correct, isn't it?

A Yes.

Q Well, Dr. Spies surely didn't bring any great honor to our institution about which we've been bragging so on this tape.

(end of side one)

After you had completed your term as speaker, you went on -- or maybe you had already begun to go as delegate to the AMA, but tell us about serving in the House of Delegates in the AMA.

A The Texas Medical Association had been represented at the AMA by various delegates, most of whom were quite elderly, and gradually they became younger when Dr. Blasingame -- a very fine gentleman. The young doctor and I were elected to the board --

to the House of Delegates of the AMA. Very rapidly that grew into a group of fine gentlemen like Dr. Stowe, representing -- not Texas, but representing the medical end of medicine -- elected by the division of medicine of AMA. We gradually changed to a very active group of younger doctors who at least could get up and make a speech and have some sense to it. And we became rather prominent in the workings of the AMA.

Dr. Blasingame was elected by the House as a trustee. And while as a trustee, he finally took the job of general manager of the AMA. He was an extremely good man and very efficient. But he ran into trouble like everybody else does, and he resigned and went into -- opened an office in Chicago and published a journal and so forth. And he was a man that I called upon to sell Southwestern, and he did it. I became quite ill in 1961, and I damn near died. So I had to quit all the activities I was doing, and I got completely out of it except by my smaller connections with the Medical Society of Texas.

Q One of the things that I remember as an uninformed physician was the revelations that you brought to the local society about what kind of turmoil we were facing as we competed with those in government who were trying to take over medicine, both in your service in the Texas Medical Association and in the AMA. You brought us information locally which was not only surprising, but some of it was almost unbelievable. But by reemphasis and by being supported by things that we read in the Journal of the American Medical Association, as well as the Texas Medical

Association Journal, we began to realize that there was more involved in the practice of medicine in those days than just worrying about what patients had. We not only -- we were fixing to get caught up in a situation that -- some of which we had no control [over]. And the only control we had was through the function of organized medicine. I have always appreciated those things. And in connection with that, I remember very well that every month you contributed an editorial -- a very timely editorial-- to the Southwestern Medicine -- the Journal which was circulated in west -- among physicians in West Texas, all of New Mexico, and all of Arizona and adjacent territories, Colorado, and other states. Those editorials which you furnished reflected so much of the material that you had brought verbally to our local society. I thought that -- I was disappointed when you physically felt that you had to give up writing those editorials, but -- I don't want to blow too much smoke in your sail, but you were and excellent speaker and also turned out to be a very good writer, which is not always the case. Did you enjoy writing editorials?

A Mr. Reed -- who was this?

Q Bob Reed.

A Bob Reed? Who was the other guy with him?

Q Dr. Homan and I have reached the point were we can't remember, but that we need to go to the bathroom.

A Dr. Reed -- Mr. Reed was a -- one of the --

Q Mott and Reed?

A Yeah, Mr. Mott. Mr. Mott would publish the thing, and we did most of the work. And Mott would run me crazy every month for an editorial. It was a pleasure for me to do what I could. Oh, I'm not bragging at all. I think we're in worse shape than we would have been if the government had taken over. The practice of medicine to me today is a -- I just don't understand it at all, and I've given up. I can't understand how doctors can charge as much as they charge, and then they go home and sleep by themselves or with their wives, I imagine. I just don't understand it. I feel that my efforts at that time were of some value, but it got entirely out of line. And the things that have happened since then have made that little effort of little consequence to me.

Q I thoroughly agree with that, and it brings the comment that, unfortunately, those of us who had 50 or 60 or even sometimes 70 years in the practice -- or the association with medicine -- cannot have anything but fond memories of the years that we were enjoying -- it very difficult to reap any satisfaction out of what we see going on now, even those of us -- I have an M.D. son in family practice. But the kinds of problems that he discusses with me don't have anything to do with the kinds of problems that I discussed with my own father, who was a M.D. My father and I were talking about illness and patients, and my son is talking to me about illness in the financial world and in the political world. And we have very little time to discuss the things that I would like to talk about that relate to

disease. Well, that's a philosophical discussion that could go on and on, but Dr. Homan did give us a very strong leg up on understanding what was going on. And even though organized medicine has been overrun by the government, at least a strong attempt was made by those who understood the enemy -- the enemy being the government in this case -- and we do appreciate that very much. Do you have any other items that you would like to discuss that I did not cover?

A One of them is the County Hospital in El Paso --

Q Yes.

A -- known as Thomason general. The local society was contributing all the doctors, with the exception of interns, who were paid by the County and were doing a fair job. The hospital that they were working -- it was very run-down and could not be resurrected in any way. So we banded and got an election for a bond issue with a taxation of at least -- at most, 75 cents on the dollar to build a new hospital. The battle was very rough, and the County Society and the two newspapers, and the county and the city got together with a committee. And I was elected as the presiding officer. And we met and met and met for several weeks and drew up a -- with the help of a Mr. McKee of the McKee Company Contractors, who afterwards build the institution. And we appeared -- at least I appeared before most of the businesses and organizations -- that is, the Rotary and Kiwanis and so forth -- and got people to go down to the hospital and take a look at the mess that was down there, which was being held together by

bailing wire. And we finally got a hospital. It is now being occupied by Texas State University, which has its headquarters in Lubbock, which did not have a hospital or even a population that would support a medical branch, but spread out all over West Texas, most of which is in El Paso.

Q That's a real tribute to you and the others who worked so diligently on that commission.

A I tell you, you might mention all those fellas -- Palafox -- I lost them. I'll write them down for you sometime.

Q Okay. I can splice them in on this tape. I, like you, have forgotten, although I was quite aware of the people who served. But it's a very worthwhile thing. And, of course, those of us who've been associated with it -- with the old City/County Hospital, and later El Paso General, and then Thomason General through the years have had a deep, warm feeling about its service to the community. And anything that could be done to improve, of course, sat very well with every member of the profession, as well as the community, even though there was a strong resistance to paying for it, as there always is when you have to cough up some money. I think we've covered most of the things that I know. Of course, Dr. Homan has been a strong contributor to medicine in many ways, but I don't want to wear him out too much with this. I want to thank him for giving the energy and the time to give me this interview because I know he doesn't feel too good at the present time, physically. But his service to the community, both in the profession and as a citizen, is certainly

exemplary, and we do appreciate it very much. Thank you, Dr. Homan, very much.

A Thank you.

Post script

Even though Dr. Homan spelled Dr. Kieller's name, it is wrong and is spelled as above.

Dr. Homan's daughter, A. J., gave Dr. Homan's neuro anatomy chart from Dr. Kieller's class to the El Paso Medical Heritage Foundation. It is signed by Dr. Kieller.

Dr. Bob Homan died 2-28-91. He was 87 years old.