

3-28-1991

Interview no. 833

Maurice Spearman, M.D.

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Interview with Maurice Spearman, M.D. by H.D. Garrett, M.D., 1991, "Interview no. 833," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Maurice Spearman, M.D.

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

PROJECT: El Paso Medical Community

DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 28, 1991

TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO: 833

TRANSCRIPT NO: 833

TRANSCRIBER: Amy Bene

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Longtime El Paso ear, nose, throat surgeon; co-founder of El Paso Medical Center; born in Iowa, 1903; son of Canadian physician; graduate of University of Texas at Austin; 1934 graduate of Baylor University School of Medicine, Waco, Texas; attended graduate school at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana; flight surgeon and commander in U.S. Navy; former editor, Southwestern Journal of Medicine; former member of Board of Directors of El Paso Chamber of Commerce; served on boards of Radford School, Sun Carnival, El Paso Symphony, and Southwestern Children's home; died June 11, 1991.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Sketches medical education; recalls running track at University of Texas at Austin; mentions work as assistant editor for university's humor magazine and reporter for daily newspaper, the Austin American; recounts military duty with U.S. Navy; decision to practice in El Paso, Texas; changes in city's hospitals; recalls experience as editor of Southwestern Journal of Medicine; volunteer medical work with Southwestern Children's Home; sentiments on medical politics; creation of El Paso Medical Center with area physicians, including Lee Wilcox, M.D., and A.E. Lockett, M.D.; discusses collection of photographs of El Paso sunsets and other hobbies; Round Table meetings at Hilton Hotel with El Pooley, former editor of the El Paso Herald Post.

Length of Interview: 30 minutes Length of Transcript 16 pages

This is H.D. Garrett interviewing Maurice Spearman, M.D., in his home on March the 28th, 1991.

Q Where were you born, and when were you born?

A I was born in 1903 in Iowa. My dad had come down from Montreal, where he was practicing medicine as a graduate of McGill University, and he was spending some time in Chicago at the Cook County Hospital as a resident. And I got caught in the States. So I was born in the States.

Q According to my information, you're the oldest living member of the County Medical Society, which speaks well for your genes. How long did your father live? Did he live to a good --

A He was 62. Mother died early in the, following the birth of my sister, in what they called post partum septicemia in those days. That was back in 1905. So I didn't have a mother. My grandmother raised me mostly in Montreal -- a suburb, rather, of Montreal.

Q Were your people English or Canadian?

A English.

Q English?

A And then some of them migrated into Canada. Some of them are still teaching at McGill University and Toronto University -- head of the chemistry department -- still up yonder, yeah.

Q Give me a review of your education, other than your basic -- I mean, your pre-med process. Where did you --

A Well, I took academic at the University of Texas, Austin, and from there I went to medical school -- Baylor. I took a medical degree in 1934. Then I went, finally -- I went to Tulane University in New Orleans for graduate work. At that time I wanted to do neurosurgery. Well, I was offered a scholarship at Yale at \$150 a month, but I couldn't live on that. So in place of becoming a student of Cushing or Wilder-Penfield in Montreal, I went to Tulane and took ear, nose, and throat.

Q Let me ask you a little bit about Austin. I know that you ran track down there. Was Clide Littlefield your coach?

A Yes, for a time, yeah. I forget the names of some of the others, but that was -- well, Bible was a coach along about in there, too -- D. X. Bible.

Q Yeah.

A He came from A&M.

Q Well, now, did he coach track or just football?

A As I recall, by golly, both football and track.

Q Those fellas had to double up in those days, didn't they?

A Well, I was on the track squad. I never lettered, but -- so I remember him, yeah. I could run the 440 in a half a day, and that was about as good as I could be.

Q You've always been interested in writing and literature. Did you take some part in the school activities in the University of Texas? Were you part of a school magazine or anything down

there?

A Well, I was assistant editor of -- what was it -- a so-called humor magazine in those days. That was principally over there, but I got a job as a --

Q Was that in Texas?

A -- as a reporter on the Austin American, a daily newspaper.

Q Yeah.

A And there I was making at least a part of my living there, and the rest of it I was making as a house manager for my fraternity. And between the two, I managed to make it through.

Q Then you went to Baylor for your medical?

A Medical, yeah.

Q Uh-huh. Where did you take your internship?

A Well, City/County -- mostly here. And then part of it I spent also in Tulane before I got into the graduate school.

Q When did you come to practice in El Paso?

A Oh, let's see. That was -- I guess you'd call it 1935, 1936. Yeah, I came here to be with an older man, Vanderbear.

Q Yes.

A And I stayed with him for a bit and then signed up in the navy as a reserve medical officer. And then I went into the navy and spent about 10 years as a flight surgeon -- finally as a commander in the U.S. Navy.

Q Well, those were good years as far as the war was concerned. You had a good occupation there.

A Well, made good money. I had my boards -- you know,

specialty boards, and the navy paid extra for that and then extra on your flight duties. So I was doing all right financially -- very well.

Q How did you chose El Paso to practice?

A Well, partly I'd known a good many people from here I'd met at the university -- boys and girls -- and made friends with maybe 10 or 12 of them. I liked the people. I had been invited down here several times to spend weekends or vacations with people like -- well, Walter Howell. He was one of them -- and several others that I spent, you know, time with. I liked the people. I thought, "Hell, I'll just go out there. I know them; they know me."

Q Good choice. Those were the good years of El Paso, back in there?

A Yeah. very much so.

Q Things have changed a lot. When you first came in practice here, which of the hospitals accepted surgery, or where did you do surgery -- which ones?

A Mostly at Hotel Dieu, some at Masonic. Now, Masonic Hospital -- at that time in Five Points -- on the site which is now occupied by that huge old Sears building. The police have it now.

Q Now, Southwestern had not become a general hospital at that time, had it? When you first came here, Southwestern was not a general hospital, was it?

A No it was used as a tuberculosis then.

Q Yes.

A Yeah. And then they decided to change to a general hospital, so I suppose I did among the first operations there when they opened up.

Q I know when I first came here, you were doing most of your work there at Southwestern, then.

A Southwestern, yeah.

Q So, by that time it was --

A Well, I got fed up with some of the practices a Hotel Dieu. They were charging their own people, you know. That wasn't right. And Southwestern would take the nuns and not charge them a cent. And I thought, "Well, now, that's what Christianity ought to be about." So I just abandoned Hotel Dieu.

Q I know that you are interested the Journal of Southwestern Medicine. You were the editor and so forth.

A Ten years of it.

Q Tell me about this Journal. How did it get started and so forth?

A It had been in existence -- Southwestern Medicine had been in existence, oh, 10, 15 years but edited by a man from Phoenix, yeah. Well, it may -- it became a sorry outfit. So I figured, "Well, let's make a bid here." So one day I made a bid to take over as editor., and they nominated me. I took from this bird in Phoenix and developed it. I was editor about ten years -- wrote the editorials. They paid me \$50 a month.

Q It was an excellent journal. What geographical area did

it -- was it distributed in?

A Now, please, again.

Q How large an area was the Journal distributed in?

A We covered Arizona, New Mexico, and West Texas.

Q Pretty much like the --

A Part of Colorado.

Q Pretty much like the Southwestern Medical Association does?

A Area journal.

Q Yes. Was that -- did Mott have something to do with that -- the printer here -- I mean, the public relations man? Who sponsored the thing? Was it put out by Southwestern Medical Association or --

A That was it. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q Now, you mentioned World War II. Where you stationed mostly during World War II?

A Well, most of it was on the West Coast. I was a member of a small, supposedly secret group -- troubleshooters, and I commanded several small hospitals. The navy furnishes hospitalization for the marines, so I was with the marines in a sense. But I was commanding hospitals and getting on a ship to places where there'd been some trouble. And I was nominated to take over and straighten them out.

Q Was this mostly administrative, or were you practicing medicine?

A No. Mostly -- I rarely saw a patient, as such.

Q Yeah?

A I had made friends -- Forrestall, Secretary of the navy -- because of some work that I did for him that he rather liked. And I can't tell about it even today. But, at any rate, he's real nice to me -- saw to it I got some pretty good assignments.

Q Well, the navy has always been a great branch of the service. The rivalry goes on between the various branches -- navy, army, air force.

A Yes.

Q But I suppose you still carry the banner for the navy, do you?

A You bet I do, very much so. One of the reasons -- they were sort of exclusive. They just didn't take anyone, you had to come forth -- and a number of little requirements that the army didn't have. For instance, at that time you had to be an American-born person to get nominated as an officer in the navy.

Jerry Jordan, M.D., who was born in Canada and tried to get nominated as an officer in the U.S. Navy -- and was turned down for that reason. He was not born in the States. Silly little things, but there it was. I liked that.

Q Well, that was supposed to be a patriotic carry-over?

A Well, all the navy officers had -- most of them had high degrees -- well educated -- just -- of course, the army, you can understand, they had to meet anything because of the bulk requirements.

Q I know you have participated a lot in various community activities. What about the Chamber of Commerce? Did you -- were

you active in the Chamber of Commerce?

A I was a member of the Board of Directors for a term down there, and I was a Member of the Board at Radford, Sun Carnival -- a number of other things in the city.

Q What about the Symphony? Was that one of your interests?

A Yes. I was a member of the Board of the Symphony, Orchestra, too, for about 30 years.

Q Radford School was a very fine school -- is a very fine school. Did your girls go to Radford?

A One of my daughters, Jackie, graduated from there with honors and obtained a scholarship -- region scholarship -- to the university at Austin. Donna spent about two years and then wanted to go to Austin High. So we let her transfer to Austin High.

Q I'm glad she's not going to Austin High today.

A Oh, it's a shame what's happened. At that time it was a very fine, fine school.

Q Southwestern Children's Home was one of your interests, wasn't it?

A I was also on the Board there. Did medical work for them -- surgery, that sort of thing, yeah.

Q I know that a lot of the good ranching families down in the country -- the Menes family and people like that helped to support Southwestern Children's. It began -- did it begin in the 1930's?

A I can't be sure. I just can't be sure. But I remember when

they first began. Victor Moore, an attorney -- he and his wife took one or two orphan children in a home they had down on Arizona Street across from the -- what's -- no -- the First Christian Church. Just a little home there, and they gradually built up public subscription and so forth to where they built a fine institution and took over a number of children.

Q Mission 73. Was that part of the Chamber of Commerce?

A No. The Board of Regents of the University appointed a group headed by Jud Williams, who in turn appointed -- I forget how many, but maybe 20 of us. They wrote a book finally -- I have it up here -- about recommendations for the University.

Q Well, that was for the University?

A Yeah.

Q Okay. Now, in medical organizations -- I know that you have worked in the County Medical Society some. Have you been a part of any of your specialty groups across the country? Have you been interested in participation?

A Only as a member. I've long been a bit, well, askance at medical politics. It can be rough, and there's no sense in some of it. So I never got into medical politics.

Q Probably that's why you've lived as long as you have.

A Oh, probably so.

Q Saved your blood vessels.

A I never felt an ego that had to be bolstered by an officer's name.

Q Well, that's a bad disease, all right.

A Yeah.

Q Now, it has always been my feeling that you were the fellow who had the first idea about the El Paso Medical Center. Give us a rundown on how that got started and where you got the idea and so forth.

A Well, coming home from the war, I set up practice in a very small office in the First National Building. Let's see. Space was scarce. Doctors were coming home -- couldn't find space to practice. What there was, the rents were increasing, so it was a situation that was uncomfortable. Well, a number of us used to eat lunch at the Hilton Hotel, and at one time one of the men there who made frequent trips to Albuquerque mentioned that he had seen an entity built up by some Albuquerque doctors.

Q Is that Herman Lee Bright?

A Yeah, Herman Lee Bright -- Lippy, we called him. A nice guy. At any rate, he said, "Why don't you fellas think about it?" Well, the thing got working on my mind. I talked, then, to Lee Wilcox. He decided that it was a good idea, let's see what we could do about building a corporation. We finally got enough people interested, talking and selling to set up a corporation, and sold stock in it to one another. Then we bought a piece of land up there on Golden Hill Terrace. Now, at that time that hill was about twenty-some feet above where it is now. We got -- we made a contract with a company. Dig it up; straiten it out. It went on from there where we got, oh, twenty-some people to buy stock -- get interested. Then we hired an architect from the

west coast -- from Los Angeles who had done some of this work out there. They set up the plans, took over, and in a year or two, we had our buildings. We moved in one afternoon -- I think it was in 1952. A bunch of us moved in and started practice there. We got us a drugstore and a restaurant, and we then began to add on. Other people thought it was going to be successful, so they bought stock. We put up buildings for them, and that was it. So --

Q I remember that you had a pretty hard sell to begin with on it.

A We did.

Q I remember some of those meetings that we held, where Mr. McKee came and --

A Yeah.

Q -- and so many of the dissenters were speaking. But I remember how firm and strong you were about supporting the thing. Was -- did you have any feeling that it was not going to make?

A No. I guess the optimism of youth may have been speaking. No. I felt that he had put it across, and by mobilizing any -- well, thoughts, ideas, facts because any objection we could answer, we found we could answer with facts. And it's hard to get around a fact. You finally succumb, by golly. That guy knows what he's talking about.

Q I always admired the fact that you were able to sell this because you and I know that within our profession so many jealousies exist that will not allow a good idea to be carried

forth sometimes, just purely as a means of blocking it. But I thought you did a real good job in selling the thing.

A Well, there was a bit of a scheme in there. Several wanted me as president of the corporation. I decided in my own notion, no, to give it to Wilcox. He was here during the war, he knows a lot of these people; he doesn't have any potential -- well, crossfire from various people, and I might engender -- because sometimes I could get a little bit overbearing. I know that. So, I figured, well, he'd just do better as president. I backed away from it, and I did that deliberately and let him take most of the credit for it. As I said to myself one day, "I don't give a hoot who has the credit. Let's get the thing done." So after that a lot of people decided, "Oh, we put it across." That's all right. I don't care.

Q You and I both like Al Lockett. You sort of put yourself in Al Lockett's category by saying this. Al Lockett had good ideas, but he could get a little bit overbearing at times. Well, I just think that the Medical Center Corporation was a great thing, I'll say this, and I commend you for having worked so hard on it.

A Well, thank you.

Q And I think that it did a awful lot for El Paso --

A Well, I'm sure it --

Q -- and for medicine, too.

A -- it helped develop El Paso as a kind of medical center, and there's every reason it should be.

Q I wanted to talk a minute about your hobbies. You used to

be a gardener when you were feeling up to it.

A Yeah.

Q Has it been some time since you felt like that?

A Well, I used to work gardening, photography. I at one time made a number of slides of different things -- eye diseases, and strangely enough, sunsets in El Paso. I had a full library of the most beautiful slides.

Q Beautiful, yes.

A So, it got to where it was demanding too much time, and I just quit a lot of it.

Q Sunset in El Paso is one of the great, wonderful things about El Paso.

Q Oh, beautiful.

Q I know that you have always been interested in reading and in writing. Do you still read a good deal?

A Yeah. That's my principle work now. See, with this leg -- and I just don't get around very well. So I do a lot of reading, paperbacks I pick up here and there. I like biography and history and books about the war I was in. Those are the things I like. The fast-talking novels with a lot of short four-letter words I don't care about. That's trash. Waste time with it.

Q You and I agree perfectly on that.

A Oh, yeah.

Q I wanted to talk to you a little bit about the Round Table that you used to go to at the Hilton with Ed Pooley and Herman Liebright. You must have had some pretty lively discussions at

the Round Table then.

A Yeah. Ed Pooley, editor of the Herald Post, was another, and Dave Camron and Tuffy von Briesen, and Leo Douglas, an insurance man --

Q Leo Douglas.

A -- who, incidentally, got us the money on a loan to build the Medical Center, yeah. We used to have some pretty good arguments.

Q Well, you sort of gave Ed Pooley reason for some of his editorials, I imagine.

A Yeah. He got to quoting Latin a couple of times. I guess he thought no one knew it. It just happened. He used some phrases that I was acquainted with, so he was a little astonished when I threw it back at him one time. Anyone was smart enough -- he'd been trained as a priest in the episcopal church, but he got into the war -- first war -- as an air pilot, and stayed with it, and never went back to the church. So he got into the newspaper business after the war.

Q He deviated a little bit from some of his teachings, I think.

A Well, he was quite a man. Now, he had a lot of brain power.

Q I agree.

A A lot of people didn't like him. But, like him or not, he at least stimulated people to do some thinking now and then.

Q In contrast to the other newspaper at that time, he was quite a shining light, wasn't he?

A Oh, very much, very much so. He did very well.

Q That covers the notes that I had. What else would you like to add about living in El Paso or any of things that I haven't covered?

A Nothing. I don't know much about anything. I just don't know what to say on that. I really don't.

Q Have you had some interesting travel that you'd like to talk about, anything in particular?

A Oh, yes. I've done a lot of travel. I've been to Europe four or five times, Canada God knows how many times --

Q Wonderful country.

A -- and all that, but that's not any particular -- well, achievement, let's say, you know.

Q Did -- I know that you said that your father live to be 82. Did your grandparents have a long life?

A Yeah, they did. Yeah.

Q You must come from pretty good stock.

A The whole family, except as I've said, mother. And, of course, that was something that had nothing to do with longevity -- the genes. No.

Q Were your people Canadians, that is, your grandparents?

A Yeah. Yeah, but they were English first. They were English. They migrated from there to two places -- part of them in Ontario, near Toronto, and part of them near Montreal -- a suburb of Montreal. So it's kind of two branches.

Q Well, I thank you for giving me the time and the energy for

this interview.

A Well, thank you for your interest.

Q This will be part of the archives of the County Medical Society. We're trying to get as many of our --

A Well, I hope it contributes a little interest.

Q Well, I think it does indeed. Thank you very much.

Dr. Spearman died June 11, 1991. He was 87 years old.

He contributed a number of items to the El Paso Medical Heritage Foundation.