

FIRST ASSISTANT

Most of the time in 1948 there were no doctors in Hot Springs, North Carolina (population about 600, then and now), one of the small towns in mountainous Madison County. There were 2 doctors in Marshall, the county seat, and about 3 doctors in Mars Hill, a college town. These general practitioners served a rural county of about 16,000 people. General surgeons and any type of specialists were not within 40 miles of Hot Springs. As for other kinds of trained and licensed medical care providers, there was no emergency medical system, emergency facility, medical responder organization, emergency medical technician, or sources of medical transportation. From Hot Springs the nearest hospital was 45 miles away in Asheville. Even today Mission Hospital in Asheville has the only formal emergency department for people in the Hot Springs area, including those in the Bluff community where my father settled.

Dr. David Kimberly, Jr. had been the doctor in Hot Springs from 1927 to 1942. Upon the beginning of WWII he volunteered to join the U.S. Army Medical Corps. His first assignment, I think, was patient care in the Veterans Administration in Salem, Virginia. I was 10 years old and didn't ask enough questions. After 3 years he was promoted and transferred to the VA Headquarters in Washington, D.C. When I asked him what he did there, he responded, "Paperwork." Generally, most doctors don't like just sitting at a desk. After 3 years of not "doctoring" and enduring the stress of the "Big City" along with the inconvenience and discomfort of daily bus transportation, he decided to resign and return to Madison County far away from Washington.

When I was 15 years old we were living back in North Carolina, but not in Hot Springs. We moved to the Bluff Community 7 miles from town. At that time the address was just Bluff, N.C. – served by a small one-room U.S. Post Office. The building sat over a small stream called Charlie's Branch. The postmaster or sometimes his wife, the postmistress, sold stamps, soft

drinks, and snacks. When my brothers and I were home we would walk about half a mile to the USPO, pick up the mail and newspaper, get a soda and pack of Nabs, and sit awhile on old nail kegs that lined the porch. To this day our sister, Marguerite, lives very close to Charlie's Branch on up the road a ways, on Kimberly Drive, Hot Springs, NC.

Overlooking the Bluff community is a high mountain which is several feet less in height than Mount Mitchell. The Appalachian Trail crosses over the top of Bluff Mountain, then descends to the community of Bluff one mile from where Marguerite lives. From there it is downhill for about 6 miles to Hot Springs.

Obviously my father meant to remain in Bluff indefinitely (1948 - 1983). He bought an old log house on a steep hillside. Hard to find a flat place to build anything. Forty acres of land came with the purchase. Also included were 2 good springs, 2 privies in working order, an empty tobacco barn, a tool shed, and a chicken coop. The house had 4 medium-large rooms, each the same size. The front porch was deep, long, and high. For a year or 2 my father – let's call him "Daddy" from here on – would see patients in the front 2 rooms. At night the one on the left was a bedroom, and the one on the right was the living room. A lot of moving furniture and things back and forth. Patients would gather on the porch. They would help Willeene, my step-mom, string beans, peel apples, etc. while they waited to be seen.

Other inconveniences in the first 1 to 2 years included: no electricity, no telephone, no plumbing, no natural gas, no air conditioning, no television. Most of these were corrected in a few years. Daddy delayed having a telephone as long as he could...until the 4 boys and 1 girl insisted. I do not recall ever having a TV. Finally a large bedroom for the 4 boys was made in the attic, with a tiny bathroom at one end. Marguerite's realm was one of the 4 original rooms.

Traveling in those parts of Madison County was challenging. From Hot Springs to Waynesville through Bluff (about 40 miles), NC Hwy 209 was unpaved in 1948. It had many curves, rare straights, a bunch of cliffs, numerous elevation changes, and NO guard rails. The road is paved now, but otherwise, no significant difference.

The “road” from downtown Bluff to Daddy’s house was also an adventure. Not dangerous unless one meets another vehicle – someone would have a tough backing-up job to do. This road was not a driveway or a street. There was no street department. We didn’t know if anyone owned it. We called it “Rabbit Den Road”; often saw rabbits hanging out there. A traveler gets the challenge of several curves you aren’t able to see around, hilly terrain, no pavement, a lot of mud holes, no gravel, plenty of big rocks, no shoulders, and a branch to ford. Five years ago I drove to the log house. The road was the same as in 1948 except for a little bridge across Steve’s Branch.

Daddy served about one third of the area of Madison County from the top of Hot Springs mountain to Betsy’s Gap. A large area but not densely populated. He made a lot of house calls – sometimes within a specific time span more home visits than office visits. That included home deliveries and long-term care. (No nursing homes in the area he served.) Also he was the coroner and the doctor for children’s clinic at the county health department.

It was common for the 3 younger brothers to be at home at the same time during part of the summer, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Oldest brother, David III, was about 23 years old and away at colleges and jobs. Charles, Johnny and I were home at the time of the following event, summertime, 1948.

Daddy's office had not been completed. Home activities on this particular evening were going along about as usual. We had supper. Willene prepared a home-cooked meal 3 times a day, using all the pots and pans and making a mighty mess. Why not? The duty of the boys was to clean all of that up after each meal. That included carrying buckets of water from the nearest spring and heating it on the woodfired stove. Dishes, pans and pots washed, dried and put away; floor swept and mopped. We were settling in on the porch, telling stories, reading the newspaper, enjoying the rest. Eventually the sun set, dropping over and beyond Bluff Mountain. Too dark to read. Nearly bedtime.

About 10 p.m. the "peace and quiet" that Daddy often mentioned abruptly came to an end. Coming from up Rabbit Den Road we heard the roaring engine of an old pickup truck with the horn blowing as it sped across Steve's Branch in a loud splash. A man in the truck was yelling, "Hey, Doc! Hey, Doc!" The truck slid to a stop at the base of the porch steps. A man, the passenger, was holding upward his left hand and wrist copiously wrapped in bloody cloth. He was able to climb the long high steps to the porch, the boys standing ready to help him into the front room which was soon to become a make-do surgical suite.

Willeene found the vital signs to be normal. Daddy examined the wound: a dangling mess of bleeding tissue across the left first carpal metacarpal joint – his thumb. A lot of skin, muscles, tendons, and blood vessels. He had been chopping kindling in the dark. Immediately Daddy and Willeene went into action. Make room! Get things out of the way! Bring in the kitchen table! Lay the man on it! Light the kerosene lamps! Get the flashlights! Daddy began cleaning the wound with ST-37, an antiseptic, using several bottle of it. Willeene gave the man some sedative. My brothers said it was "moonshine". Charles and Johnny held the lamps and flashlights directing the lights wherever needed.

I had been going after equipment and supplies for Daddy; sort of like a circulating nurse in a real operating room. As Daddy was about to begin local anesthesia, he turned to me and said, “George, now don’t get sick on me. I need your help HERE.” Willeene nodded in my direction, “That’s an order!” She told me to wash and dry my hands “real good”, then put on sterile gloves. Then, her look of command changed to reassurance, “You’re going to be okay; he will tell you what to do.”

All of a sudden, there I was, at 15 years of age, becoming an instrument nurse and surgical first assistant simultaneously: my first time.

My father was known for being very meticulous about such things, so I am sure fixing the thumb took a long time. I didn’t know. I didn’t care. I didn’t think of anything else. I was having fun: handing instruments, sponging, retracting, holding, positioning, and cutting ties. The only voice I heard was Daddy’s voice directing me and explaining procedures, and Willeene asking the man if he needed any more “pain medicine”.

When it was over, Daddy quietly thanked everyone and went to bed. Willeene gave me one pat on the shoulder and a quick little smile, then went to bed. The man was feeling good; the numbing and “oral anesthesia” had not worn off yet. He left in the truck with a bandage over wrist and hand as big as a boxing glove.

As I was still at home during the man’s post-operative visits, Daddy would send for me to see the wound: healing well with full range of motion without any dysfunction.

When summer came to an end I returned to school and never saw the patient again.

Twelve years later I returned to the mountains of North Carolina as a family doctor.