ADVENTURES OF A MEDICAL HISTORIAN

(Introduction to a series of lectures given in the Fall of 2013 at LIU's Learning Collaborative in Orangetown.)

Today I'd like to describe my own evolution as a medical historian which began, almost by chance, some forty years ago, gradually evolved to an intellectual hobby -- and then to something more.

Let me start with a confession. Mia Culpa. I admit that during my school days I never enjoyed studying history. From my youthful perspective, learning history memorizing endless names and dates and events all of which seemed totally irrelevant to my world. By the time I changed my mind, I was already in my early thirties, the father of three and starting a medical practice near here in the Pascack Valley. When my medical partner and I arrived in Bergen County in 1968, as greenhorns fresh out of training at Mount Sinai, we knew nothing about the business side of practice and very little about the area.

One of the first local physicians to greet me was Dr. Stewart Alexander of Park Ridge who was a well-respected internist and civic leader. In time, I learned that he enjoyed encouraging young doctors and medical students – and, as it turned out, he was a positive influence several times during my career, and I came to think of him as a mentor. Dr. Alexander and I often ran into each other while making rounds at Pascack Valley Hospital and whenever we did, he always seemed to have a marvelous story to tell about the old days -- and I couldn't get enough of them. Some stories had to do with his unusual experiences as a medical officer on Gen. Eisenhower's staff in North Africa during World War II, but others concerned his father, Dr. Samuel Alexander, whose own illustrious career in Park Ridge began in 1910 when he took the baton – actually, it was the single bore wooden

stethoscope -- from the area's first doctor who was nearing the finish line after nearly a half century.

Dr. Henry Neer came to town the same year the Civil War ended and when the railroad was pushing up this way bringing new settlers who sometimes needed a doctor. Not only was he the area's first trained physician, he was the only dentist, pharmacist and veterinarian. In his spare time he twice served as president of the county medical society -- he was the town's first mayor -- he led the church choir and, in order to feed his large family, he sold pianos on the side.

By the time my friend Stewart Alexander retired during the 1980s, that three generation practice had spanned 117 years – and, it seemed to me, that they never threw anything out! Stewart sometimes showed me Dr. Neer's old medical records, or ancient equipment, or vintage photographs -- each with a story attached. My point in telling you all this is to illustrate that learning history actually can be great fun -- if there's a personal connection to enliven it that's relevant to one's own experience – that's far more interesting than memorizing names and dates -- and I learned that lesson over and over again in the years to come.

I once asked Dr. Alexander why he hadn't written a book about his medical roots and his own adventures? He laughed and said that he was just too busy – that I should do it! Well that sounded ridiculous. What did I know? And anyway who wrote books back in those days? Nowadays everyone seems to do it – it's easy -- but not back then. In truth, I'd published articles in medical journals and was an English major at Dartmouth, but writing books was for professionals – or so I thought. But curiously enough, that's exactly what happened. I did write a medical history book – and over the next three decades ten more.

The real breakthrough for me came in 1976 with America's bicentennial celebration. You'll remember, it was a time when most everyone got in the spirit of history -- especially in my hometown of River Vale where we had something special to remember. Not in 1776, but two years later, there was a minor skirmish in our town when British troops surprised and bayoneted several sleeping Colonial dragoons. It became known as the Baylor Massacre – in truth, it was known only to a few local historians and forgotten by almost everyone else. But because it was River Vale's sole claim to historical fame, a grand reenactment was planned. Community enthusiasm ran high – and it was infectious -- everyone wanted to get in on the act – some prepared costumes, my wife baked cookies from a colonial cookbook and, for reasons which I no longer remember, I decided that this was a good time to follow Dr. Alexander's suggestion – not necessarily to write a book, but at least to gather stories about local medical history.

So I collected whatever material I could find and, before long, had compiled a fair number of rather interesting vignettes. Then a friend who ran a small publishing company said that if I wrote the stories down, that he'd publish them. Well who could turn down an offer like that? So the outcome was my literary first-born. It appeared in 1979 with the exciting title, "Early Physicians of Northeastern Bergen County." With a title like that, small wonder that it attracted zero attention beyond northeastern Bergen County – if even there. But there's a back-story to all this.

At just about the same time, a pathologist at Hackensack Hospital by the name of William Ober also published a book -- which I jealously noted was favorably reviewed in Time Magazine. To my prejudiced mind, his was written in the rather dry clinical prose that one would expect from a pathologist (my apologies Howard) -- but I had to admit that Ober's book had one enormous advantage over mine – its title: "Boswell's Clap" !!! Do I need to explain what clap means? Dr. Ober's book described the venereal

diseases of various Victorian personalities -- including James Boswell who had a particularly active sex life and proudly recorded 19 episodes of the "clap" in his diaries.

From that I learned an important lesson – always try to lead with a provocative title, if possible a sexy one -- and although I've never fully mastered the art, I keep trying. So that explains why the title of today's talk is "Adventures" of a medical historian. I admit that it's a deliberate distortion -- unless you understand adventure to mean what's unexpected, rather than thrilling. But to catch attention it seems helpful to suggest something exciting.

In fact, what's driven me to pursue this intellectual hobby for so many years has neither been a desire for fame or fortune, but the sheer fun of learning new things -- each project has led to something else that was unforeseen. I'll share an example or two in a few moments, and many more in the talks next spring --
But there was another instructive lesson that I learned from that first book.

A few years ago -- and some three decades after Early Physicians of Northeastern Bergen County was published, I was invited to speak to a library group about local medical history -- and since I still had a few copies of the book left, I decided to bring them along on the chance that someone actually might want to buy one. But if they did, how much should I charge? I don't recall for sure, but we may have charged as much as five dollars back in 1979. So in order to get a sense of the book's current value, I went to my favorite website, Amazon.com where I often buy used books, some for a penny or at most a few dollars.

Sure enough, I found three pre-owned copies of my book for sale – one for $25, another for $50, and a third – listed as a "collectible" – for $75. Wow! I

was impressed. The last seller reported that the condition of their copy was "Like New" and it contained an inscription – and this is what it said: "Dear Larry. Best Wishes. Happy Passover. Michael. 1980." Well Larry happens to be my cousin and, naturally, as a first-time author, when my family gathered for the next Seder, I proudly gave everyone signed copies. Obviously my cousin never opened his -- which accounts for why it still was "like new." A few weeks ago I checked Amazon.com again and found that the same autographed copy still is available -- but now the price has shrunk to $35. So hurry up and grab it while you can – after all, it's a "collectible" -- unless you prefer to hold out until it's down to a penny.

I promised to give an example of some of my so-called "adventures" and, as I've said, much of what I've written about began with something unexpected – serendipity. About ten years ago I was invited to curate a medical history exhibition at the Hermitage museum in HoHoKus. During the Revolutionary War, George Washington and his staff stayed at the mansion and it had a fascinating history. In 1799 the estate was bought by a physician by the name of Elijah Rosencrantz and it remained in his family's possession until the last descendant died in 1970.

In preparing for the exhibition, I discovered a trove of letters in the museum's archive that were sent by the former owner Dr. Rosencrantz to his son John who in 1826 was studying at the Rutgers Medical College which was briefly located in lower Manhattan. John was more interested in hunting and dancing then the hard life of a country doctor and although he did join his father's practice, he hated it and as soon as the old man died, John married a rich girl and went to work for her father who owned textile mills in Pennsylvania -- and never looked back. Well I had a lot of fun with the letters between father and son and, in time, this led to more research about the chaotic medical scene in olde New York during the early 19th century.

But getting back to the exhibition that I curated at The Hermitage back in 2002, on opening night I had a chance to talk about Bergen County's medical history. Naturally, I discussed the two Drs. Rosencrantz, but in addition, since HoHoKus is adjacent to Ridgewood, I also spent some time describing one of that town's pioneers – Dr. William Vroom.

In March 1888, having just completed his medical studies at NYU, the fledgling doctor took a train to Ridgewood to visit his father, who was recently installed as pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church. The next day it began to snow – and blow – 21 inches on the ground, 40 to 50 inch drifts. It was the famous "Blizzard of '88." Dr. Vroom was stranded and, according to legend, he was approached by a local doctor who hadn't had a day or night off in 16 years. He needed a rest and asked the young man to cover him for a few days. He agreed but apparently, the old man couldn't tolerate the leisure and died within a few days. Vroom took over the practice and continued in Ridgewood for the next 76 years!!!! He continued to see patients into his 90s and was hailed as the nation's oldest active physician. He died in 1966, just a few months after his 100th birthday and, as you might expect, Dr. Vroom had many adventures during those 76 years.

In 1916 he was sent to Mexico by his friend President Woodrow Wilson to deliver a personal message to the bandit Pancho Villa to stop raiding towns along the Texas border. Although he found the outlaw and even treated his kidney stones, he wasn't successful in his mission so Wilson sent Black Jack Pershing to be more forceful. The General was no more effective but then World War I intervened.

When Dr. Vroom set up his first office in Ridgewood, he strung his own electric wires and lights and built his telephone from cigar boxes and odds and ends. In 1899, after wearing out 28 horses, he got permission to

operate the first horseless carriage in Bergen County – but first he had to pass a steam-boiler engineer's exam. An item in a local newspaper acknowledged that although Dr. Vroom was "progressive," they predicted that someday "when the machine gives out five miles from nowhere the Doctor will wish it was somewhere else." (Perhaps the same will be written about tomorrow's electric cars).

Six months later, another newspaper article reported that a local woman's horse, frightened by the strange machine, had bucked and threw her out of the carriage. She never recovered from her injuries and the doctor was sued for $5,000 on the grounds that he was "careless and incompetent to manage his automobile." And the next year, Dr. Vroom broke his wrist while vigorously cranking his new "roundabout" -- so maybe he should have stuck to natural horsepower.

Well I enjoyed telling these stories in my opening night talk at the Hermitage exhibition, but then something unexpected happened. Unknown to me, in the audience was a reporter from a local newspaper and a day or two later, an article about the event noted that the speaker had discussed the local hero Dr. Vroom.

A day or so after that, a woman called my office to say that she'd read the newspaper account and wondered whether I'd be interested in her story since she had been Dr. Vroom's last patient – some 35 years earlier. Of course, I was interested and this is what she told me.

I'll call the woman Mary and, as best I could tell, when she was a teenager she suffered from severe anxiety – probably what today we'd call "panic disorder." In those days there were no tranquilizers yet and Mary was so disabled that she was hospitalized several times at Bergen Pines and Graystone – ghastly care without any benefit. Her mother was desperate

and somehow she heard about this old doctor who everyone raved about – what did they have to lose? So she called the office. Dr. Vroom answered the phone, listened briefly and told them to come right over.

When they arrived at Vroom's home-office, they found the 90+ year old doctor to be UP A TREE –LITERALLY! He was perched on a ladder pruning some trees in his yard. He climbed down and asked Mary to hand him a garden tool. She did and then he asked whether she'd give him a hand for a few minutes while he finished tending his garden? She couldn't say no and he waved to the mother to leave. They worked for a while and then he asked her to return the next week. This became a regular event - every week Mary would help the old doc in his garden – and, in effect, they'd reversed roles – she was helping him.

From this, a bond of trust developed and Mary gradually gained self-confidence. After a few months, Dr. Vroom found her a job helping a local veterinarian and eventually she emerged as a poised health professional – in fact, in later years she even counseled other people who had anxiety disorders. The young woman and the old doctor became fast friends – in time, he attended her wedding and wouldn't leave until he "got a snootful." And when she brought her baby to his 100th birthday party, he proudly pointed to them and said, "That's the best thing I ever did."

In this story, Dr. Vroom displayed traits which too often are lacking in today's impersonal high tech medical system. In those less sophisticated times, empathy and dedication to the patient as an individual sometimes was all that overworked doctors could provide -- but persistence and common sense often can accomplish a great deal.