

## When a Doctor's Visit Was a Phone Call Away

Family doctors kept Lorton healthy

By Irma Clifton

Sniffles, running a fever, sore throat? You waited it out while Mom doused you with tried and true home remedies. Break an arm, cut your hand? Then you made your way down to the local doctor's office, which was more than likely in his home. Or, if you were lucky, the doctor would make a house call, bag in hand. When you consider that for over half of the 20th century the nearest hospital was in Alexandria, Lorton folks depended on country doctors to handle just about any medical emergency, as well as regular run of the mill illnesses. There was no calling 911 and waiting for an ambulance to whisk you to the nearest emergency care facility, so people learned to rely on their own resources and the services of the good doctor.

Just one of the many services performed by local doctors was delivering babies. Although several midwives were available, many mothers-to-be put their trust in the country doctor. During the 1920s and 1930s. Dr. Starkweather saw to the medical needs of many local families and occasionally their naming issues. In 1930 he delivered a baby girl to a family in Gunston. After the delivery, when the new mother was comfortable, Dr. Starkweather began filling out the birth certificate information. When he asked what name the baby would have, the mother replied, Dolores Fairfax Grimsley. Dr. Starkweather threw up his hands and said, "Indeed you will not give this child a foreign name like that," and left the first name blank on the state certificate application. It was only months later that the poor mother was able to get a corrected copy of the certificate so that her little girl would not forever be known as Fairfax Grimsley.

My own mother had given birth to three babies at home by the time I was born. It was the early 1940s and my mother considered herself to be a modern, enlightened woman so she was determined that her fourth child would be born in a hospital, the nearest one being in Alexandria. The time came and mother hustled off to Alexandria Hospital where I made my entrance into the world welcomed by a foot of snow from an early spring storm, March 28, 1942. In those days new mothers stayed in the hospital for several days on bed rest so there was no thought of going home in the snow.

Many of the local doctors over the years came to the community to serve as physicians at the D.C. prison. They were allowed to have offices in their homes on the prison grounds. They also made house calls. When I was about three years old I ran my arm through the wringer of our washing machine and did considerable damage to my arm and shoulder. The prison doctor at the time, Dr. Frank Klune, was called by my frantic mother and he came right away. After recommending that I be hospitalized, a recommendation rejected by my mother, Dr. Klune set forth a plan of treatment and instructed my mother in how to carry it out. Since we only lived about a mile and a half from Dr. Klune's residence he would come by each day to check on my progress. I'm glad to say I made a speedy recovery with only some scarring and a wee bit of limited mobility.

Another physician from the prison who built up quite a country practice was Dr. William Orsinger. But not only did he treat people, he occasionally cared for animals as well. Dr.

Orsinger told how, when he first came to work at the prison, he was touring the farm area and came upon some inmates who were putting down some baby piglets. Dr. Orsinger asked why they were doing this and was told that the area around the umbilical cord did not heal and as the pig grew this would cause a hernia and the pig would die. Thinking back to his surgical training he told the inmates, "I can fix that." With a whiff of ether and a couple of stitches the area was closed and the pig could now grow to normal size. Numbers of porkers were saved that way until the prison superintendent got wind of the operation and told Dr. Orsinger he was there to treat inmates, not pigs!

In his book titled "My Family Practice Journey: A Prescription for Happiness" Dr. Orsinger writes, "I had been in practice only a year and we sorely needed furniture. Patients who couldn't pay were delighted when I offered to take an old wash stand, a water bench, a cast iron pot, and even a spinning wheel as payment." This was a common practice with many rural doctors; an effective barter system. Many pieces of castoff furniture from Lorton families, after being "spruced up", made their way into his home. When I visited him several years ago he proudly showed me some of those treasured pieces.

Dr. Orsinger's home and office were located near the Workhouse and was marked with a sign on a lamppost made by the Workhouse blacksmith, Jimmy Dove, of a cutout of a doctor walking toward a patient's bed. The sign shop painted the sign to hang below. It read, "Bedside Manor."

Many other doctors ministered to the needs of Lorton residents over the years. In earlier years, in addition to Dr. Starkweather there was Dr. Caton and Dr. Phillips. Later came Doctors Foster and Opal. As the community grew some people went into Alexandria for treatment and many added to the practice of Dr. Nafzinger in Woodbridge.

Today, of course, Lorton is a virtual mecca of urgent care facilities and medical offices to treat almost any malady. Coming within the next few years will be Lorton's own Inova Healthplex. The physician's black bag has long since been replaced by 21st century technology. In the words of a nationally known lifestyle guru, "Now, that's a good thing."



Built as a residence for the prison physician in 1920, this house also served as an office where local patients came to be treated for illness and injury. It was here in the office of Dr. Klune that the author received her smallpox vaccination in 1948 prior to entering Lorton School. The structure still stands today. Credit Photo courtesy Fairfax County Department of Planning and Zoning.



This was the home and office of Dr. William Orsinger, who served as the prison physician in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It served as residence to other physicians before later being verted into offices. The structure is on the property of the Occoquan Regional Park. Credit P from the Orsinger Collection at the Workhouse Museum.



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