

Early Pittsboro Medicine Studied

by Milburn Gibbs

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A non-Chathamite has taken an interest in early medicine as practiced In Pittsboro.

Fred Vatter came to this area from New York's Hudson Valley twelve years ago but he has come to have a keen interest and appreciation of Chatham's people and their history. He recently served as Chatham Historical Association President.

"During the first half of the 20th century, doctors had to do everything," Vatter said at the Association's museum at the county courthouse, "Hospitals were relatively inaccessible over poor roads. There were small hospitals in Apex, Siler City, Sanford and Moore County.

"People needing major surgery went to Watts Hospital in Durham if they were white, and Lincoln Hospital in Durham if they were black."

Vatter said ambulance services were non-existent. What transportation there was came from the funeral home's hearse.

"Doctors had to perform minor surgery, prepare prescriptions and deliver babies in very small clinics," Vatter continued, "and of course they had to make house calls."

From conversations with several local residents, Vatter became interested in Dr. K. M. Mathiesen, who came to Pittsboro in 1938. By 1940, he had purchased a small hospital from Dr. Camp's widow, near the present-day Social Services Building. For a time, Mathiesen had an office where the Scoreboard Cafe is located today, in downtown Pittsboro.

In 1948, Mathiesen built a small clinic/hospital, which is today an office building just south of where the Pittsboro General Store Cafe is now located on West Street, just a few doors west of the traffic circle.

"Dr. Mathiesen used a Dr. Pomfrey, a Board Certified Surgeon from Elizabethtown, for major operations," Vatter explained. "His hospital had 20 beds and five basinets."

Mathiesen was famous for his "Asthma Cocktail," which had a large following. Even the motion picture star, the Cisco Kid (Duncan Reynoldo from Hollywood) came to take the healing elixir.

The cocktail contained arsenic, digitalis and Phenobarbital," as described to Vatter by Dr. Robert Jacques, a former colleague of Mathiesen.

Mathiesen's hands were severely burned over time by radiation from handling his portable X-ray machine. "At one point Mathiesen was told by Duke Hospital that he would not live much longer than a year because of radiation burns," Vatter said. "He lived to be 87 years old."

The good doctor also got burned by many patients--those who could not pay him. The South was still recovering from the Depression and money was not readily available. Some paid the doctor in chickens, eggs or other commodities. Some could not pay at all, but they were not turned away.

Helen M. Gibbs of Bear Creek remembers going to Dr. Mathiesen in the late 1940's.

"He was a wonderful man and I thought better than any doctor in Raleigh at that time," Gibbs said. "He kept a patient with dementia in one of his office rooms where he could watch her, instead of sending her to a rest home. He did things like that free, out of the goodness of his heart. He knew a lot of his patients couldn't pay but that never mattered to him"

So many not paying meant the doctor had little capital to make improvements.

"Dr. Mathiesen could not afford to update his clinic as the state required, and he left Pittsboro in 1966-67," Vatter said. "Dr. Jacques estimated Mathiesen was owed about \$2 million when he closed his practice."

There is an exhibit of early 20th century medical tools and medicines on display at the museum, which is open on Wednesdays from 12 noon until 3 p.m.

Materials on display are on loan from Ravon King of J.R. Moore & Sons Gulf General Store and Pam Smith of Beggars and Choosers in Pittsboro. The exhibit will be on display through the summer.



Early Chatham apothecary relics...

Fred Vatter, of the Chatham Historical Association has gathered together some medicines, medical tools and diagnostic material from the town's doctors from 60 or so years ago. They are shown above. An exhibition of early Pittsboro medical supplies and its history have been gathered for display at the museum through the summer.

Photo by Milburn Gibbs