

A long Ago Christmas

"It was the best of times --it was the worse of times" and while the rest of the nation was beginning to prosper, the rural South had not yet recovered from the depression. Until this time I was raised as a city boy; but that year my family moved to the country.

Here I started to school; a large wooden building painted a dark shade of red. The building housed both the lower and upper grades. On the way home the high school girls would gather around me and say "Howard, lets see how wide you can open your mouth" I wondered what this was all about until I heard one of them say "look there do you see he has metal in his teeth". Even at my tender age I realized they did not know what fillings were. Such was the state of dental care in a town without a dentist.

Within two weeks everyone in this village of about twelve hundred souls knew who I was. I was the grandson of the only doctor in town' and was addressed as Lil' Doc by one and all. He was more than the country doctor to these people, he was everything to them. The barter system was very much in use and those that could not pay would bring vegetables and fresh fish or crabs to the house. Office visits were two dollars; house calls three. He never sent a bill, everyone at that time could be trusted. Because most people did not own automobiles house calls were a brisk part of the practice and were made every afternoon. After school I was allowed to go along, which was a real treat for me.

He had agreed to set up a free clinic in a small fishing encampment if they would furnish him with a building for an office. This turned out to be a log cabin with a dirt floor and no heat, water or electricity.

This was my chance for a new adventure. I quickly set myself up in the "Doctor Business". It was my charge to bring clean sheets, two glass jugs of well water (there were no plastics at this time) and oil for the lamps and stove. I had to boil water to sterilize the instruments. After I was through I would go down to the bayou and stand in front of the Lacombe Indian's house. They had woven baskets and leather goods on display for sale. I would stand in the front yard and look at them and they would look back at me. After a long period of time I would wave goodbye to the Chief and he would return the same to me. I knew this had to be some kind of secret Indian sign that only he and I understood.

Back at home life was ruled by the telephone. The line had to be kept open for house calls. The phone was a large wooden box that hung on the wall with two large bells that rang quite loudly. In order to make a call you would have to turn a crank and talk to the operator. Our phone number was 67 however, people would just tell the operator they wanted to talk to the doctor. If the phone rang at two or three in the morning I knew my grandfather would have to go. Rain or cold it didn't matter, I wondered why he did this.

On Saturday night there were the regular bar room fights. They would come to the house bleeding and throwing up. After they left my grandmother would I would have to clean up the floor.

I knew Tabby was the best cook in the parish if not the whole state. At the evening meal, while she was serving, my dad and uncle would draw her into the discussion. This time it was about if there was a hell or not. They of course said there was not and therefore they could act anyway they wanted and it wouldn't matter. When Tabby found herself on the defense she would call for help "Doctor Van Zant ain't there a hell?" I

remembered he looked up from his plate and said "yes there is a hell and I see a little of it every day" and in those few words he summed up rural medicine in the South at that time.

That Christmas eve we went on a call about ten miles down the paved highway then turned off on a bumpy dirt road till it ended at the edge of the woods. There sat a man in a horse drawn wagon, he greeted us and we climbed aboard. We traveled through the woods for some time and pulled up along side a rough timber house. After about three quarters of an hour we left and made the return trip home. Before we arrived at the house he said "That's old man ---- and he's dying". I remember thinking, well if he's dying and you are a doctor why don't you save him. I was later to discover that things just don't work that way. At that time there were no miracle drugs.

Christmas morning I woke up to the sounds and smell of pine wood burning in the cast iron stove. Tabby's high pitched voice was calling for everyone to come and get her hot biscuits for breakfast.

That year in the ~~in the~~ 1930's the world was still at peace and for a six or seven year old boy it was "the best of times" and I still remember that Christmas day the telephone did not ring one time.

ASIDE: (Funny story) Many years later I ran into a woman that said my grandfather had treated her. She said she was a young girl at that time. She was walking down the dusty road and spoke to him. She showed him a wart on her finger and he struck a match and burned it off right there. She said in a high pitched voice "Can you imagine that?" I asked her if it hurt? ----No. Then I asked if she was cured---Yes. I said did you have to make an appointment three weeks in advance?---No. Did you have to sit in the waiting room for two hours?---No. Did you have to go to the surgery suit?---No. Did you have to go to intensive care after?---No. How much did he charge you?--- Nothing at all. Then I said "well what are you complaining about?--- I'm not complaining