

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS RESEARCH CENTER

The University of North Carolina at Asheville

Interview with Dr. Thomas Howald July 7, 1977
Frontier Nursing Service, Leslie County, Kentucky
(Medical Care) Interviewed by Dr. Louis Silveri

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Side 1,

Dr. Louis Silveri: You told me before that you were from Cincinnati. Born and raised?

Dr. Thomas Howald: I'm originally from Cleveland; I went to school in Cincinnati.

Dr. Silveri: Oh, I see. Did you go to the medical school *there*?

Dr. Howald: Went to the medical school there and---

Dr. Silveri: Where did you get your undergraduate training?

Dr. Howald: John Carroll University in Cleveland.

Dr. Silveri: Oh, yes. What year?

Dr. Howald: I graduated from Carroll in '65, and from Cincinnati in '69.

Dr. Silveri: Did you have any courses with George Perfect at John Carroll University in the History Department?

Dr. Howald: Never did. I knew who he was, but I never had any courses with him.

Dr. Silveri: He was a colleague of mine in Georgetown a long time ago.

Dr. Howald: Oh!

Dr. Silveri: He has a very interesting story, but that's another story there. Ok, you went down to where in Cincinnati?

Dr. Howald: I went to the University of Cincinnati to Medical School.

Dr. Silveri: Ok, and you were there for four years.

Dr. Howald: Yeah.

Dr. Silveri: Where did you do your internship?

Dr. Howald: Cincinnati General Hospital.

Dr. Silveri: Ok, then what?

Dr. Howald: While I was in Cincinnati in between my sophomore and my-- I guess it was my sophomore year in medical school, I became involved with a group of young people who worked in the "basin" area in Cincinnati.

Dr. Silveri: "Basin" area?

Dr. Howald: Which is the old part of town, the inner city ghetto-type neighborhood in Cincinnati, and the "basin" area in Cincinnati is populated primarily by Appalachian-whites that have moved to the city in search of better jobs and things. And the people that ended up in the "basin" were the ones that either had come to the city and never made it -- never got the jobs and never got out of the "basin", or it was made up of those people who had just come up from the mountains and were in the process of trying to get from there out into other jobs and out into the community.

Dr. Howald: (continued) And there was a fellow there by the name of Ernie Mynette who was originally from Harland County, and worked for the Council of Southern Mountains as a social worker. His official title was Detached Social Worker. He worked with the kids in the "basin" when they got into trouble, had problems. Ernie Mynette was sort of a liaison person that went to bat for these kids in the court system and with the police, in social services and things in Cincinnati. And it was *through* my work with Ernie Mynette and the others in the "basin" in Cincinnati that I decided working with people from the mountains.

In my senior year, the medical school had a program whereby you could take up to two months and do whatever you wanted as long as it was under the supervision of some other physician. And I wanted to do it in general practice because this was my primary area of interest, and I decided I would do it in a rural area. And because of my association with Ernie Mynette and the people from the Council of Southern Mountains, and the fact that Frontier Nursing Service had always traditionally sent their sick kids to Cincinnati General Hospital, I ended up at the Frontier Nursing Service Hospital for a total--it started out to be a---July, August, September. It started out to be a three-month program for me the way I had worked it out with vacation time plus the elective time. And I ended up spending four months as a medical student in my senior year.

Dr. Silveri: What year are we talking about?

Dr. Howald: In 1968.

Silveri: And you wrote the hospital and told them about the program, and they asked you to come?

Dr. Howald: I had made arrangements with Dr. Chu over in Clay County to work with him, and then I asked the head of the Pediatrics Department if he would be willing to sponsor my time with Dr. Chu in Oneida, Kentucky. And he said that since he didn't know Dr. Chu he couldn't sponsor the time that I would spend with him since Dr. Chu didn't have an affiliation with the University. But he knew of the Frontier Nursing Service, and knew the physician that was there at the time, and because of the fact he had even spent time there himself and had worked with Frontier Nursing Service, he would be willing to sponsor any time I wanted to spend with them. And then I wrote to Browning, and made arrangements for me to spend July, August, and September of my senior year in medical school there. And I actually spent July, August, September, October, and part of December in my senior year in '68 with the Frontier Nursing Service.

Silveri: (inaudible)... Mary Breckenridge still alive then? Did you meet--

Dr. Howald: No, I never met Mrs. Breckenridge; she was alive when my wife was there. But she had died one or two years before.

Dr. Silveri: What work did you do in those months?

Dr. Howald: At that time, I essentially functioned as a junior intern. When I would see patients in the hospital, I had my own little office "space". We didn't have any offices. I had my own little space where I would see patients, and then in the evening when Dr. Weiss would leave the hospital and go home, even though she was a hundred yards away from the hospital, I would be essentially the only one there with the nurses seeing patients, and if somebody would come in that was sick, needed to be hospitalized, had a fracture; if it was something that I could do, I would do it myself. If I had any problems, I would call Dr. Weiss, and got alot of experience and training working with Dr. Weiss in those months in '68 because she--

Dr. Silveri: [inaudible] It was a woman doctor?

Dr. Howald: It was a woman doctor. She was a former nun and missionary who had spent ten years in India, and was a general surgeon and who could do just about anything as far as surgery, or orthopedics, obstetrics, and she was a good teacher. I learned alot from the woman in the time I was there.

Silveri: Did she spend much time there? Is she still around?

Dr. Howald: She's in Pikeville in practice now.

Silveri: Well, you said you had to work with people from eastern Kentucky who had gone on to Cincinnati, so you pretty well had some contact with them. What is your reaction to them? Are they any different from anybody else?

Howald: I never noticed any. The lifestyle may be different to a degree, but, you know, we never considered them as being different, hillbillies, or anything of that type in that sense of the word.

Silveri: You mentioned they lived in a kind of enclave, you could call it a ghetto in Cincinnati, in that they were either on their way up on the economic ladder or hadn't made it, and were there and didn't know whether they should stay there or go back home or whatever. But they definitely had difficulties when they did go outside of the region. There's an old story that on Friday afternoon or evening you can watch the parade of cars going down into the state in Cincinnati back into eastern Tennessee.

Howald: On a Friday evening you can't cross the bridge in Cincinnati for all the traffic going home. It's just bumper to bumper until you get to Lexington, and by the time you get to Lexington, you've gone past the Mountain Parkway, and you've funneled some cars off in that direction, and then on down below Lexington, you put them on the Daniel Boone Parkway. But the number of Ohio license plates that you see on Friday evening on the roads, and the number you used to see in Hyden on Saturday morning was considerable.

Silveri: They had a strong sense of place that they wanted to come back to their home.

Howald: No matter where they lived, Kentucky was always still home!

Silveri: What did you do when you finished those few months at the *FNS*?

You went back and finished your medical--?

Howald: Well, I married a Frontier Nursing Service nurse.

Silveri: Before you went back?

Howald: Before I went back and finished my senior year; yeah. And then we went back to Cincinnati, and I interned at Cincinnati General, and then I went back to work in the "basin" in the Twelfth Street Family Health Care Center which was the Cincinnati Health Department Clinic set up to service that particular area in Cincinnati. Since I had worked there and knew everybody there in that area, I sort of felt a need or an obligation to spend a little more time with the people in that area. My wife and I worked together at the Twelfth Street Clinic from July of '71 I guess, until March of '72. It's either--no, it's from July of '70, excuse me. From July of '70 to spring of '71 at the Twelfth Street Clinic, and then we left there and went to Frontier Nursing Service.

Silveri: It was a clinic in 1970, and the clinic was conducted by the city?

Howald: It was a city-run, a city-sponsored clinic.

Silveri: What made you decide to go back then, to that... [inaudible]?

Howald: I guess it was basically a strong desire on my part to go back to doing general practice, a more broader general practice, and also a very strong desire to go back to the hills of eastern Kentucky after, you know--Based on the experience I'd had there previously as a medical student, I just felt, you know, very strong ^{urge} to go back into that area.

Silveri: That's very unusual to say the least! The area doesn't attract many physicians. Why not set up a nice, lucrative practice in Cincinnati instead of going to eastern Kentucky?

Howald: I don't know. Why did we go there in the first place? I--you know--it was something that we found satisfaction in doing. I don't think either one of us ever started out, you know, intent on making a lot of money in any one particular thing. I got a lot of satisfaction out of what I was doing in eastern Kentucky as a medical student, and I felt that it was an area where there was really a definite need for physicians. And I guess it was something in my blood that I had, you know, that I had to get out of it. That was basically what it was. It was just something that I had to do.

Silveri: When you went back there, what were your duties there?

Howald: Everything!

Silveri: Everything. Your--

Howald: At the time that I went back, Rogers Beasley was still there, and Ann Watson was there as a physician, also. Ann Watson was retired from practice in New Hampshire and had joined the Frontier Nursing Service staff primarily to teach. She did not want to do any clinical medicine; she didn't want to have to see patients, take care of patients, and things of that sort. She'd been in practice for thirty years, and was--she had bad arthritis, and she just couldn't. So she was tired, and she wanted to rest, and she wanted

Howald: (continued) to teach. So she'd come with the Frontier Nursing Service to teach in their nurse practitioner program in the Nurse Midwifery Program, and so most of the clinical load I shared with Dr. Beasley, and then Dr. Beasley left Frontier Nursing Service to go back to New York to do some further training and take over as the head of the Family Planning Program at NYU down-state, I guess.

And so that left most of the clinical load with me, and I saw all of the patients in the patients in the general medical and pediatrics clinic. I provided the backup for the nurses and the midwives on OB and in the OB clinics. I provided the backup for the psychiatric nurse who worked out of the mental health clinic in town, made weekly rounds to all of the nursing outposts and held clinics at the outposts, and was responsible for all of the patient care in the hospital which worked out to some--I saw the figures the other day. Going through my files, I came across a sheet of paper. I think it was something like four hundred and sixty or four hundred and seventy patients that I had had in the hospital in one quarter which represents twelve or thirteen hundred people a year in the hospital that I used to take care of in addition to the ones I would see either in the hospital clinicary in the outpost's clinics.

Silveri: I suppose you were on call anytime in emergencies.

Howald: Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week! Dr. Watson used to take every other weekend which meant from five o'clock Saturday night until eight o'clock Monday morning that she would cover and see patients for me. But often times if she'd have a problem patient and she knew I was home--when you lived in Hyden, you didn't have too many places to go on weekends. And if she had a problem patient, it wouldn't be unusual for me to be up there even on my weekend off. If she'd got multiple gunshot wounds or if she had somebody that needed to have surgery, it wasn't something ^{that} she couldn't do herself, and so I'd have to assist, you know, and things of that sort.

Silveri: It was really total commitment, wasn't it?

Howald: It really was! I learned an awful lot of medicine; I practiced an awful lot of medicine. I would never want to practice that kind of medicine again because there was a lot of times ^{you} did a lot of things. You were flying by the seat of your pants, and what you read in the book, and you know a couple of prayers, too. Because you didn't have anybody else around, the nearest major medical center was Lexington, and any of the kids that got sick had to go to Cincinnati.

Fortunately, we had a very good relationship with the University of Kentucky, and they sent people from their medical school down on weekends to lecture to our nurses, and if I knew that Tom Newsome a Gastro-neurologist who was going to be coming on one particular Saturday, I would save all of my

