

# Alberta Doctors' Digest

## The doctors Parsons of Red Deer

Forty-two years ago, Dr. Bill Parsons asked me to take his position on the AMA's History of Medicine Committee. The AMA agreed. That eventually led to three decades of articles I wrote for the *Alberta Doctors' Digest*. This essay is a thank you to Bill and highlights his contributions (and those of his brother MacGregor and his father Richard) to medicine in Red Deer, Alberta, and beyond. They practiced in Red Deer from 1903-1974 and played a prominent role in its growth. Collectively, they were recognized as one of Alberta's 100 Physicians of the Century in 2005, alongside the Andersons and the Hatfields.

### **Dr. Richard Parsons (1875-1944)**

The Parsons era began when Dr. Richard Parsons chose Red Deer for his medical practice two years after graduating from the University of Toronto. He bought the practice of Drs. Etta (Alberta's first female physician) and Harold Denovan in 1903, just as Red Deer was opening its first hospital. Two years later, he bought Senator Michener's house – now a heritage home – dwarfed by the new nine-storey court house towering above it. In 1912, an east-wing addition allowed him to retain an assistant. The Parsons group moved to the Michener block in 1920 and remained there until the Parsons Clinic opened as the largest clinic in Red Deer. It ran from 1948-2012.



Dr. Richard Parsons memorial at the Red Deer Hospital (photo credit: Dr. Robert Lampard)

Devoted to his patients, Dr. Parsons performed his first cholecystostomy in 1904 without ever having seen one done. On another occasion, he abandoned an eastern vacation at Regina to return to treat the wife of pioneer Norman Stewart, who had developed pneumonia. When a friend required a colectomy, Dr. Parsons took him to the Mayo Clinic and stayed with him and covered all the costs. And he still had time to manage the 1906 medical contract to provide care for CPR employees, which lasted 67 years, the longest in CPR history.

Dr. Parsons enlisted in January 1916 and was sent overseas. When refused a surgical appointment to the #1 Canadian General Hospital surgical staff, he went to Edinburgh, studied day and night and passed the fellowship exam, thus securing the appointment. He was joined the next year by his family.



Discharged early from the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC), he returned to Red Deer shortly before all his family developed the 1918 flu. Despite having [Dr. L.S. Mackid](#) make a house call from Calgary, his wife Ella succumbed, leaving him with four children.

Elected to the AMA/CPSA Medical Council for Red Deer, he remained on it from 1924-1944. Although he suffered a heart attack in 1927 and would take nitroglycerin daily for the rest of his life, it did not curtail him from being elected president of the AMA/CPSA in 1929-30 and the CPSA again in 1940.

Receiving a FRCS(C) in 1930, his eldest son Macgregor joined his practice the next year. Frugal, he declined to buy a second BP cuff or otoscope, although he bought the first car in Red Deer in 1909, ending his horse and buggy days. In the community, he declined all commitments except from his church, where he became a self-taught scholar.

Richard died in 1944 while attending a medical meeting in Calgary, a date marked three days later by the arrival of penicillin in Red Deer. The Richard Parsons Auxiliary Hospital, built in 1964 adjacent to the Red Deer General Hospital, recognized him, but it was demolished to make way for the cancer clinic. It was replaced with a monument to him near the hospital entranceway.

Dr. Parsons was posthumously honoured on the 100th anniversary of his arrival in Red Deer when the *All Terrain* cast put on "The Art of Medicine," a dinner theatre highlighting his medical career and philosophy: "Where there is life, there is hope."



The Parsons group moved to the Michener block in 1920 and remained there until the Parsons Clinic opened as the largest clinic in Red Deer. It ran from 1948-2012.

## **Dr. MacGregor Parsons (1906-1974)**

After graduating from the U of T and interning, “Dr. Mac” joined his father in practice in 1931. He earned his Canadian fellowship in surgery in 1940 and his American fellowship in 1944. He was also a charter member of the College of General Practice.

After the death of his father, Mac and Dr. Charles Bunn became the only two physicians in Red Deer providing medical care to the large army camp and the city. Being on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week drove Mac to excess until 1945, when the army released Dr. George Hancock, who then joined the clinic, followed by Drs. Johnny Weddell and Bill Parsons in 1946.

Dr. Mac believed that access to medical care should be available to everyone and strongly supported the efforts of Dr. A.E. Archer to start the very successful, doctor-initiated, medical insurance company Medical Services Incorporated (MSI) in 1949. He became its second president in 1950, while strongly promoting it despite the initial hesitancy of his colleagues. He remained on the board until Medicare was introduced in 1970.

Following his father's example, he became the AMA president in 1950 and then the CMA president in 1960-61. He participated in the sod turning for the Foothills Hospital in 1960, predicting it would be a future teaching and research centre. A close friend of Walter Mackenzie, he was honoured with an LLD by the U of A in 1971. Like his father, he had a significant heart attack, but it did not curtail his work. Although his community activities were limited to the school board in the 1930s, he organized the first Alcoholics Anonymous Association in Red Deer and was a provincial director for many years.

Dr. Mac died in 1974 of lung cancer, one month after attending his 28th consecutive CMA meeting where he shared his lifelong philosophy, “The first requisite in caring for the patient is caring about the patient.”

## **Dr. Bill Parsons (1909-1987)**

Dr. Bill Parsons was born in Red Deer and graduated in medicine from the U of T with honours. While there, he roomed with Dr. Walter Anderson. He returned to Red Deer in 1935, and he married Margaret Smith (1913-1984), a teacher, in 1938. Margaret would spend a term on city council before being elected to and then chairing the Public School Board. She was instrumental in securing approval for the Red Deer Junior College (now Red Deer Polytechnic), becoming its first chair. The name of the Performing Arts theatre recognizes her contributions, as did the U of A when she received her Hon LLD in 1970.

## **Radiology**

Bill joined the Canadian Army Medical Corps in 1942. After a training course in radiology at the U of T, he was appointed the army radiologist for Saskatchewan. Demobilized in 1946, he was appointed the first radiologist in Red Deer and read all the hospital x-rays, travelling as far away as Camrose to read more of them. As the workload grew, it overtook his general practice. In 1952, he limited his practice to only seeing patients with orthopedic problems, particularly ones with spinal pain.

## **Manipulation Therapy**

Bill's interest in spinal manipulation began circa 1936, when he solved one patient's pain problem by pressing on his spine, which gave immediate relief. He would find that 80% of the back pain patients he saw were improved in one week or less. After building his own heavy traction unit, he became well known for his back manipulation therapy. Writing of his success in the literature earned him speaking engagements as far away as Britain. He was elected the treasurer of the 1965-formed North American Academy of Manipulative Medicine.

A year after receiving his FRCP in radiology in 1968, he transferred his spinal pain work to cousin Dr. Ken Boake and formed Radiology Associates, a service that soon included six radiologists.

## Community Contributions

Unlike Richard and Mac, Bill accepted many community requests for his time and leadership. He was a charter member of the Kinsmen club (1937), then joined the Elks, Board of Trade, K40s, Masons, Rotary and the Red Deer River Naturalists. He was the District Scout Commissioner, a city council member (1949-55), and one of the founders of the postwar Athletic Association, and he chaired the local health unit, library and planning commission boards.

## Writing

Bill wrote sporadically of his own experiences – fishing, Mother Nature, hunting and archery, gardening and horticulture, and interesting medical cases. His articles were published in:

- *Rotarian* magazine (archery, 1956)
- *Sask. Blue Jay* (starlings, 1968)
- *Red Deer Advocate* (pioneers and old timers of Central Alberta, 1967)
- *U of A's Folio* (1971)
- *Red Deer Advocate* (horse and buggy days, 1971)
- *CMAJ* (medical transcription errors, 1969)
- *Outdoor Canada* (time wasted, 1976)
- *Red Deer Surgical Society* (retirement, 1976)
- his fraternity (1978),
- *Red Deer River Naturalists*

## Retirement

Sidelined with a lingering illness for six months in 1974, he decided to retire and turned to full time writing, his fourth chosen field. *The Canadian Doctor* became his preferred publication, sending various articles to them:

- *Are Doctors x-ray happy*
- *Getting rich quick*
- *Pearls and old socks*
- *A remarkable breakthrough (mulching in the garden)*
- *A glass of mild sedation*
- *The day Sulphanilamide came to town."*

He also secured the local *Red Deer Advocate's* approval to serialize articles he sent back from his extended holidays to South America, Cuba, Africa and New Zealand. More colourful articles followed from 1975-80:

- *Aerial attackers (birds)*
- *Memories*
- *Getting around*
- *Summers at Sylvan Lake*
- *Shaggy manes*
- *Coincidences*
- *Magpies as an enemy*
- *Medical cases I have known*
- *Preparing to be a doctor the hard way*
- *Slug armies*
- *The pleasure of summer visitors (birds)*
- *The garden mulch*
- *Mother Nature's afternoon show*
- another 17 on fishing, and many more.

In 1977, he initiated his major writing project on 40 years in medical practice. Titled *Sideroads to Medicine*, he completed it in six months. Each chapter was abridged and published weekly in the *Red Deer Advocate*. The chapters are alive, written as if you were there, and reflect his remarkable memory, sprinkled with vivid recollections, experiences and observations. The book was never published. Is another one coming?

Dr. Parsons was also responsive to more extensive writing requests like the community history book *Reflections of Sylvan Lake* (1984), *The 50th anniversary of the Rotary Club to 1973*, *The history of radiology in Alberta* (1976) published in *A New Kind of Ray* (1995).

An unexpected find was a collection of a dozen 500 - 3,500 word essays which have no record of being published either, including one of 20 pages relating to his experiences with steers! It seems that he never put down his pen or was short of topics. The articles just flowed.

Dr. Parsons did receive confirmation of the quality of his writing when his article *Tortured travels* won the prize for fiction at the Red Deer Exhibition in 1976 and *His own man* won the award for non-fiction from the *Edmonton Journal* in 1977. Being able to spin a good yarn made him a sought-after speaker with his interesting, informative and humorous presentations.

## **Medicine in Alberta**

Dr. Parsons's writing focus took a major turn in 1980 when, on the AMA History of Medicine Committee, he and Dr. D.R. Wilson accepted the challenge of updating Dr. Heber Jamieson's 1947 book on early medicine in Alberta. Articles for it were solicited, but too many promises were not fulfilled or of adequate quality. It left the two authors writing 13 of the eventual 25 chapters. Many were first-person experiences. Dr. Parsons wrote on public health in Alberta, prepaid medical care to 1969, medicine in WWII, and formal initiatives in public relations 1957-1979. Surprisingly, his article on the history of radiology in Alberta does not appear in the final product, which was published by the Alberta Medical Foundation in 1995 as *Medicine in Alberta: Historical Reflections*.

## **Awards**

Recognition came when Bill was made a Life Member of the CPSA (1976) and Senior Member of the AMA (1978). He received the Canadian Centennial Medal (1967), the Alberta Achievement Award for Excellence in Medicine (1981), and the President's Award from the North American Academy of Manipulative Medicine for his pioneering work (1985).

## **Legacy**

The doctors Parsons have left a lasting mark on medicine in Red Deer – practicing for a combined 123 years and providing leadership for over 70 years. They also occupied senior positions in the AMA/CPSA and CMA, improved access to medical care through MSI, and opened the field of radiology in Red Deer and the medical specialty of manipulative or spinal medicine in North America. There are few medical family parallels in the history of the province.