

TUALATIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY TAPE #14

Interview with Dr. Merle and Dorothea Pennington
By Alton Robbins

AR - Alton Robbins

MP - Merle Pennington

DP - Dorothea Pennington

AR Today, we are talking to Dr. Merle Pennington. Merle, as far as I know, was the first Tualatin person to become a doctor. So, Merle, you are a unique niche in Tualatin history as its first physician. We'd like to go into your history a little bit. When did your folks first come to Tualatin?

MP My dad bought the farm in Tualatin in 1929. It required a lot of work and they moved out there the tail end of that year or the first of the next year and started cleaning up the farm and building a house.

AR Where was your dad born?

MP He was born in Miller County, Missouri. At the age of 10 he moved to Pleasant Hill, Oregon, just south and east of Eugene, and grew up on a farm there, along with 11 siblings. He then went into farming on his own and finally moved to Portland and began building houses and small commercial structures and ran and operated a hardware store in Sunnyside in S.E. Portland.

AR What was your Mother's name and where was she born?

MP Her name was Ethel May Stroud and she, too, was 1 of 12 children. She was born to the best of my knowledge in Santa Clara, California. Her parents had a cattle ranch and then moved after she was a few years old to the Pleasant Hill area, where my father also grew up. That's where they met.

AR When were they married?

MP I'm not just sure I can tell you that. Just a second. They were married in 1902 and celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary at our house in 1952, the year before my mother died.

AR How old were you when you came here?

MP I was 9 years old.

AR Do you remember any of the neighbors?

MP Well, there really weren't any neighbors. The Holbrooks lived right across from us. Their's was the only house we could actually see when we moved out here. That was the only neighbor I got well acquainted with. However, very shortly after that I got acquainted with the Dickinson boys who lived with their grandparents, the Joe Byroms, the next adjacent farm to us.

AR Was Charlie Dickinson the old man?

MP I never knew C.D.; I don't recall him.

AR You know he and his wife were the ones who started Dickinson's Grape Juice and the Great Jam & Jelly Co. This was their son who lived down here...

MP Well, sure. I got mixed up on the generations. Sure, I stopped in there on my bicycle every day going to school and the Dickinson boys and I rode together. I usually had a roll at their breakfast table before I got to school. Then there were the Nyberg kids. It seems to me like there was a family that had a farm out here when I was a kid and the father used to yodel all the time. Do you remember that?

AR I don't recall that. That could have been Chehak.

MP Chehak has been the renter who lived for many, many years in the place we moved into. It's possible they were Polish or Bulgarian or something like that.

AR Do you have any children?

MP Yes, we have 3 children. The oldest is a girl, the second oldest is a boy, and then the youngest is a girl, and we have 6 grandchildren.

AR Do any of them live in this area?

MP Yes. Gay is our oldest daughter and she has a 12 yr. old daughter. They live about a mile from us, and Jan is a dentist in Corvallis and she has 2 boys. Paul is a physician in Goldendale, Washington, and he has 3 children.

AR You're lucky to have them so close.

MP Yeah, really.

AR As you recall then, there were not many children out here for you to play with.

MP No, the Dickinson kids were the only ones that were close. They were a good half mile away. Then there were the Lafkys---they were the next farm down, by Joe Byroms' place. The four of us ran around some on bikes.

- AR Do you remember the first car in the family---What kind it was or anything about it?
- MP I don't recall exactly. I know that the first I remember was an old Oldsmobile and it had vases for flowers between the two doors on each side. We put a fresh flower in them every Sunday when we went to church.
- AR Did it have ising glass curtains?
- MP No, it had real glass. It was a pretty late model, actually. I think it was new at the time so it was a pretty recent car.
- AR You had radios when you first came out here?
- MP Yes, I think we had radios. We didn't have a refrigerator for a good many years. Certainly, no television. We didn't have electricity in the barn until I was 15 or 16 years old when we first wired the barn for electricity.
- AR What did you raise on the farm? Was it a general farm ranch?
- MP Yes, it was a general farm ranch, and we had cattle and hogs, and sheep. We raised hay and grain and then gradually my father began putting in more and more orchards. He finally ended up with a lot of peaches, filberts, walnuts and prunes and for 25 years he supplied peaches to a lot of families in Tualatin and Wilsonville area.
- AR I must have known your Dad when he first came here because I remember him in the late 20's and early 30's in the Grange.
- MP My folks were very interested in the Grange and my Dad had a lot to do with the construction of it and actually felled the timbers, made the logs and peeled them. They cut the 2' x 4's out of the timber that was on our place, in a local rough sawmill. The post and beam construction of that 2-story Grange Hall will last almost forever.
- AR When I was in the Grange, we used to meet in the gymnasium down at school. Is there anything else about your childhood --- pleasant or unpleasant?
- MP Two things that I can recall quite vividly. One was before I owned a bicycle. I was riding on the frame of another kid's bicycle and I allowed my heel to get into the spokes. We went tail end over teakettle. Neither of us sustained any serious damage, but it certainly hurt our pride. The other time was peddling watermelons and Herb Lafky and I did most of that together on our bikes on Saturdays in the fall. We sold our watermelons for a nickel a piece. They weren't tremendously big watermelons, but they were good, and we made a fortune, in those days.
- AR One thing I was always curious about your Dad when I knew him. If he lived today, they'd call him a "Shaker and a Maker" because he was so active in everything and I

wondered when he was building houses, did he have any other interests, besides the farm, either professional or....?

MP No, his job in life and interest in life was a farmer and a builder and starting at about the age of 60 he built probably at least one house every year. So an awful lot of people in the Tualatin area live in houses that he had a lot to do with their construction. He was very interested in the Grange, and very interested in the Church, the Tualatin Church --- primarily a Methodist. We attended there for years. My mother was Grange Master for a number of years and along with my parents, I was interested in the Grange for at least a time. I grew up with the Nybergs and they usually helped along with the Sagerts and the Ibachs and the Lafkys in harvesting our hay and grain, and we helped in harvesting their hay and grain. The first job I ever had for money was weeding onions in Nyberg's onion swamp, and the hardest work I ever did in my life for 10¢ an hour.

AR Do you remember any of your teachers in school? Were any of them outstanding?

MP Well, I don't have a very good memory and it's getting worse as time goes on. No, I don't recall any of them specifically. I remember my first grade teacher, but that was not in this area and I think everyone remembers his first grade teacher. No, I don't recall...oh, yes I do remember one teacher we had who had a bad habit of slapping your hands with a ruler, and we went through a good deal of that during the course of two or three years, and I can't recall who that was. Three classes were in one room then.

AR Was her name Joint? Had 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades?

MP It could have been. It could have been.

AR I had her and that was the way she operated.

MP Well, I don't recall who it was now.

AR Did you graduate from Tualatin High School?

MP No, I graduated from Tualatin Grade School and then went the first two years to Tualatin High School. After that, I went one year to Franklin High School in Portland and then at that time our area went into the Sherwood School District and that was their first year, and where I graduated.

AR Was that 1940?

MP 1937.

AR When you were in school, did you participate in any of the athletic activities?

MP Sand-lot baseball, football, soccer. I wasn't very good at any of them, but the kids who were good let me play anyway, so we got along fine. They had to have somebody to make up the crew.

AR I'd like to ask you a personal question. When were you married?

MP We were married in March, 1944.

AR Here, or in Portland?

MP In Portland. She was a graduate of the Nursing School at St. Vincent's Hospital and I was in my last year of medical school at the time.

AR Was it your choice to go into medicine or did your folks persuade you into doing it?

MP My folks always said I could do anything I wanted to do and they'd be happy with it as long as it was honest and I stayed out of jail. No, it was my decision to go into Medical School. I had been interested in Chemistry and thought that I would probably become a Chemical Engineer, but in that particular time, it was hard times for any kind of engineers, and there were hardly any jobs available and it looked as though some deviation from that would be warranted and I made the choice to go into medicine.

AR Where did you take your training....here in Portland....?

MP I went to Reed College for three years and then I went to the Medical School for their four-year course.

AR What year did you graduate from Medical School?

MP 1944. September of 1944.

AR Where was your first practice...in a hospital, or...?

MP I interned and had a residency at San Bernardino County Hospital in San Bernardino, California, and then went into the Army and was there about two years and got out in December, 1947, and opened an office in Sherwood in February, 1948.

AR Most of your general practice has been in Sherwood then?

MP All my general practice was. The first 24 years of my general practice were in Sherwood in a small office; there were some partners. After that, I went to the Navajo tribe and took a job to put together a Family Practice Clinic for them in Shiprock, New Mexico, and spent three years doing that. After the three years, I came back to Portland and was volunteering at the Medical School in the Family Practice Dept. They needed someone to do their Clinical Work, and I took over that job and spent the next eight years training Residents in Family Practice.

AR You acted as a teacher then?

MP Yes, I was a teacher. Since my retirement in 1985, I have been volunteering up there one day a week.

AR You still have that at the Medical School?

MP Yes.

AR Was there any particular highlight in your career you like to remember or any you would like to forget?

MP Probably a number I'd like to forget, but I loved every minute of it. Well, almost every minute of it.

AR Well, one thing I want to ask you. These tapes are going to the Tualatin Historical Society and they'll probably find some place to store them as reference tapes. Now, if in the future if anybody should, I don't know if this will happen or not, in writing the history of Tualatin, or refer to any of the remarks made on any of these tapes, do we have your permission to use it if this should happen? I don't know if it will or not but....?

MP Yes, I'm sure that there's nothing here that I would delete if I had the opportunity to do so, so, yes, it may be used for historical purposes.

AR How many babies do you think you've delivered during your practice?

MP Well, I did a General Practice for many years and kept track of them until I reached a thousand and at that point I no longer kept track of them, so I really don't know, but that was coming close to the end of my career in delivery babies----about a thousand----a little over.

AR After a thousand, they all look alike----?

MP They all look pretty much alike.

AR Do you have any particular hobbies besides working in your yard?

MP That's the biggest one. Another hobby that I can say that I really enjoy is teaching residents at the medical school, which I do on a volunteer basis. I'm active on the hospital board.

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MP Unfortunately, Meridian Park didn't get started until I had stopped practicing in Sherwood, and, so, it would have been very convenient, but I never did get a chance to use it.

AR Did you ever do any surgery?

MP Oh, I did a lot of surgery, yes. In those days, general practitioners, if they had some training, and supervision, could do a lot of surgery, and I did.

AR Did you enjoy that aspect?

MP Oh, yes, sure. It was fun. I enjoyed it. Um, I'm glad not to be doing it now, though. It's a different climate now.

AR Must be a different world out there now, with all the insurance and everything required and the liabilities involved.

MP Yeah.

AR When you were in the Indian reservation practicing, did you ever have any experience with the local medicine men?

MP Well, when I went to work for the Navajo tribe, among other things, we built, or had built for us, a clinic building and we had the clinic building treated and dedicated by one of the local medicine men. Very frequently, the medicine men were treating the patients psyche and general overall health at the same time we were doing specific procedures in getting the individual well from whatever else other type of disease they had. Yes, there is a very close relationship between the doctor, the white doctor and the Indian medicine man.

AR Are these medicine men trained in any way or they just take it up on their own?

MP They have a system whereby they are taught by their elders. Primarily, it's handed down from one generation to another within the family line. And, yes, they learn a lot about the psychology of how people function and about some other, other activities, but primarily they deal with, with the problems of the mind, that are a big part of whatever is ailing one at the time.

AR How do some of their practices compare to, do any of the modern medicine people accept their practices, or...?

MP Well, I think you have trouble with it because you don't have a big enough following of believers. Actually, the treatment is often a matter of having a dance or a ceremony

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in which case you have to have several fat sheep killed, and cooked so that all the neighbors who are participating will have enough to eat for a couple of days. It doesn't work very well in Western civilization because you'd have to take out too much time from your daily routine in order to make it work.

AR Do they ever use herbs or plants?

MP They do some, yes. Oh, yes, although this is kind of going out of style now. They use peyote, a mushroom that causes the mind to deviate the normal track, and this is often used as a cleansing ceremony as part of their religious practices.

AR What does it do, make them forget their problems?

MP Oh, it sure does, right, yeah.

AR Was there much drinking involved among the Indians when you were there?

MP Lots of drinking, lots of drinking and a lot of self-destructive behavior of various kinds, including suicides. There was seemingly a very poor belief in the value of life among the Navajo.

AR May I ask you, Mrs. Pennington, a personal question? What was your maiden name?

DP Drake.

AR Drake? Whereabouts were you born?

DP Idaho Falls.

AR Idaho Falls. You never went to the school in the Tualatin area?

DP I never did.

AR Well, Merle, I want to thank you for your time and your cooperation in this. I'm sure it will be quite valuable to our collection, and I'll let you go now and finish your lawn work.

MP Okay. Thank you. It was a good idea. This is a tremendously good idea to get some stuff on tapes while people are still able to remember what they did.

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SUMMARY BY INTERVIEWER — Alton Robbins

This is a biography of Merle Westwood Pennington compiled by Dr. Pennington and his wife. He was born in 1876, 100 years after the Declaration of Independence. He died in 1966, 90 years old. He was born and lived in Missouri until he was ten years old when they moved to Pleasant Hill, Oregon. He was the oldest child of twelve siblings. He met his wife, Ethel Stroud, and they were married for fifty years.

He moved to Eugene. He had five children. Two boys died in infancy, a daughter died at the age of 21 of pneumonia. This is pre-antibiotic time. The second daughter died at 40 years old. Son, Dr. Merle Pennington, is still alive and kicking.

He moved to southeast Portland, was a carpenter, building commercial and residential properties. Also owned and operated the Sunnyside Hardware Store. He bought sixty acres in Tualatin with a dilapidated farm house, 13 doors leading to the kitchen and two tumbled-down barns.

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A corduroy wooden road ran through the front yard, the remains of the original Boones Ferry Road. Drilled a well to replace the shallow well, and built up the crop land. Cut down a large, neglected orchard and cleared thirty acres of old-growth timber. Built a new home and planted orchard -- filberts, walnut, prunes and peach trees. For twenty-five years, the surrounding area relied on Pennington peaches. This area is now part of the Tigard School District and will be the new high school site.

At that time, all tree spraying was done with a hand pump, no power spray. He belonged to the Winona Grange and had passed through all of his degrees. His wife was a Master of the Grange for some time.

He was very active in building the Grange hall. During the depression years, there was not much money available for expansion, so they felled the fir trees, peeled them, and used them for post and beam construction for the two-story grange hall.

Around age 60, he started building approximately one house per year. Many still in use in the Tualatin area. He assisted in raising the roof of the old Tualatin School to convert it into the first apartment building in Tualatin. Once settled in the area, he was a staunch supporter of a community church. During a big flood, he rowed to the Tualatin General Store in a row boat down Boones Ferry Road. He loved trees and did a lot of grafting for himself as well as the neighbors. He celebrated his 50th wedding anniversary in 1952. His wife died the next year. He refused to be an invalid. Plowed with a horse and raised cattle. He did heavy construction well

into his 80's. He sold his farm and built a small home next to his son, Dr. Merle Pennington. He survived a coronary for 20 years and died at the age of 90 from a stroke. He is survived by one son, three grandchildren, and six great grandchildren.