

SUM UFHC 21 Dr. Richard Penrose Schmidt

Interviewer: Samuel Proctor. January 16, 1992 and February 10, 1992

Sixty-one pages

Pp. 1-10

Richard Schmidt was born in Akron, Ohio, in 1921. The Depression years did not impact his family enough that they had to do without basic necessities. Schmidt believes his family was a major influence in his life. He describes his mother as an early women's rights activist who followed a career in music, but he was closer to his father, an organic chemist on the faculty at the University of Akron. An avid reader, he was drawn early on to a career in medicine by such books as *Arrowsmith* [written by Sinclair Lewis and awarded the Pulitzer prize, which Lewis refused to accept, that chronicles the life and career of a medical student] and enrolled in college as a pre-medical student. Schmidt describes himself as being an adequate student.

A salmonella infection kept him out of his first six weeks of college at Miami University [Oxford, Ohio], but at the urging of his parents, he moved to Kent State University, only four miles from home.

At Kent State he names several faculty members who influenced his career by giving encouragement and help. His parents helped support him in college, but he also worked about twenty hours per week as librarian working for the NYA [National Youth Administration].

At the onset of World War II he had ambitions of being an aviator, but could not pass the physical. As a medical student, he was deferred and allowed to finish his medical education at the University of Louisville. Schmidt remembers one consequence of the war was that they were pushed to complete medical school in three years rather than the normal four years.

Pp 11-20

In 1945 Schmidt received his medical degree. He was called into active duty during his nine-month internship and assigned to Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois from 1945 to 1947. He married Betty Heminger and they adopted two children. His position was general medical officer for internal medicine and later chief of the medical service. Schmidt remembers the types of illnesses being treated were of the type that affect young people, including outbreaks of influenza and meningococcal meningitis, and large outbreaks of rheumatic fever. The

war-wounded were routed to a different hospital, one of the developing veterans hospitals. He remarks that these veterans hospitals were being transformed into modern hospitals from antiquated “old soldiers homes.”

Schmidt describes new developments in medicine. He remembers with the advent of penicillin they thought they would finally control syphilis. Other dramatic improvements were better treatments of hypertension and reductions in the number of stroke victims and victims of heart disease. He talks about the impact of sulfa drugs on the treatment of bacterial infections and mentions he was even present at the first administration of penicillin in the state of Kentucky. Penicillin was reserved for the military and not available until after the war for civilians, and was so precious that the urine of patients given the drug was collected to recover penicillin for re-use. Schmidt talks about the person he describes as responsible for influencing his neurological career, Ephraim Roseman, whom he describes as very abrasive and a hard taskmaster. Schmidt left Louisville because he felt he could not progress any further with Roseman.

Neurology attracted Schmidt because it had the reputation of being difficult, although he notes he did not find this to be true, and says it was no difficult than any other area.

Schmidt decided he would benefit from experience in psychiatry and went to the University of Cincinnati for six months in 1951. He returned to Louisville on a post-residency fellowship from the National Institutes of Health making \$5,000 a year. Two years later he left Louisville for the University of Washington for more experience in research. There he was responsible for a seizure clinic in a clinical epilepsy program. He talks about his wife Betty and her activities.

Pp 21-30

Schmidt talks about other interests, including a strong interest in photography. He developed associations with Latin American neurologists and traveled in South America and Mexico. He discusses his family relationships, and overall describes his life as being happy. He mentions the people who influenced his professional life. He talks more about his epilepsy clinic in Seattle at the Harborview County Hospital and what he did as assistant professor and attending physician. Schmidt states he was always more attracted to the academic life rather than a more lucrative private practice. He has a sizable publications list and mentions the kinds of research he was involved in, such as microneurophysiology using micro electrodes. He remembers research grant money used to be easier to get and not as controlled as to purpose in those days. Schmidt believes his father’s influence oriented him more to being a teacher rather than amassing wealth. Enticed by the prospect of being in on the ground floor of the new medical center, and the challenges that would go along with it, he decided to leave Washington and come to Florida. His

title was Associate Professor and Chief of the Division of Neurology in the Department of Medicine. He remembers the contributions of many people he was associated with in the new medical center. References to other oral histories are included in this section. He mentions and discusses the contribution of George Harrell, Dean of the medical school at the time.

Pp31-40

When he first came to the new medical facility in Gainesville, neurologists were scarce in the region and he was flooded by immediate referrals. He talks about the hospital, just in the process of opening, and the compromises that had to be made as far as seeing patients, including off site x-rays, sharing clinic space, and lack of bed space.

Schmidt mentions his family's outside activities and describes himself as an academic physician. He talks about his research and his appointment by George Harrell as chairman of the Department of Medicine. After three years, he was looking at other positions in other medical colleges around the country for the chance of career advancement and opportunity. He remained for a time at the medical college in Gainesville as Associate Dean and Chief of staff of the hospital and discusses reasons for his decision. He describes the relationship between George Harrell and Sam Martin as tense and clashing.

Schmidt later accepted the position of Dean of the medical school at Syracuse, the State University of New York. He left Gainesville in September 1970 and talks about how his family accepted and adjusted to the move to Syracuse and mentions his salary was increased by five thousand dollars to \$45,000 from the move. He notes the medical college of Syracuse is different from the Gainesville medical college because Syracuse is independent of the University, a "stand-alone" medical college.

Pp 41-50

Schmidt describes various administrative functions of Syracuse and his role in the political aspects of administration. He talks about events that led him to become president of the Medical College of Syracuse, and problems he faced. Schmidt discusses the issues of the day and how the campus was affected. He talks about protests of the Viet Nam War and Kent State that occurred on the Syracuse campus, but he believes the degree of protesting was not as much as was at Stony Brook [State University of New York].

On the issue of segregation in the medical college in Gainesville, Schmidt talks about the first

black student, a woman, whom he describes as unsuccessful because she kept herself apart from the student body. He remembers Shands Hospital posting “white” and “colored” signs over restrooms and drinking fountains, and having separate dining facilities. He believes the medical students were instrumental in de-segregating Shands because they continually removed and ignored these signs.

He talks about his thirteen-month stay at Stony Brook in New York, 1970 and 1980. He believes he was selected as acting president by the chancellor to cope with the many troubles of the campus, such as vandalism, non-students loitering on campus, bomb threats, and small riots. Schmidt was at State University of New York [SUNY] for five years from 1970 to 1975. He talks about the college and his role. Administrative aspects of the college, then called the Upstate Medical Center, now State University of New York Health Science Center in Syracuse, and funding issues are discussed. He compares the two medical colleges, Gainesville and Syracuse, believing Gainesville to be the stronger in research and Syracuse to be more conservative.

Pp 51-61 [End]

Schmidt believes the original objectives of the University of Florida Health Science Center have been refined over time to a great extent. Schmidt believes students that are indoctrinated into an environment of high ethical standards with concern for the quality of life will likely develop humanitarian attitudes.

In 1984 Schmidt chose to relocate to Gainesville to take an honorific appointment, the VA Distinguished Physician, a five-year program with the Veterans Administration. At the time of the interview, he also teaches medical students and works in the clinical neurophysiology department interpreting electroencephalograms at Shands. He notes some of the attributes of the VA hospital in terms of patient care, as well as problems.

In conclusion, Schmidt looks back over his professional and personal life. He rates his life as being very satisfactory. He talks a little about his current life and interests. His philosophy of life is not to take yourself too seriously. Schmidt gives advice to beginning medical students about the profession of medicine, to take the opportunity to do good in our society.

He concludes the interview by remarking that never has he spoken about himself as much.