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THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS
OF A DIRT ROAD COUNTRY DOCTOR

by Mildred Boren Sentell

Dr. J. D. Davis, an early Fisher County doctor, wrote for his family and friends a recollection of his experiences in the early part of the century. He finished his narrative in August of 1935, when he was seventy-four, and it has been passed through the generations to his great-grandson, Gaza Seabolt, who has kindly allowed me to use it as a basis for this paper. His family were unreconstructed Confederates, and they carried on the traditions and views of those in the region of Georgia from which they drew their heritage.

Dr. Davis’ parents immigrated to Texas from Georgia in 1857, making the move with an ox wagon and team. “The day they landed in Winnsboro, Father had the total sum of $20 in money and a family of twenty.” Mr. Davis and the older boys worked in a saw-mill, hunted for meat and farmed for a living, and built a home on 269 acres of timbered land. On August 14, 1861 (the opening year of the War Between the States), J. D. Davis was born. He was named for Jefferson Davis.

After his mother’s death in 1868, Davis remained at home until his father re-married eighteen years later. During the years following the War, J. D. recalled many occasions of his father and older brothers being jailed, though never convicted or disarmed, for finding it “necessary to whip a negro. I was instructed as a little boy to immediately let Father or the older brothers know if any man ever came in sight riding a gray horse, for the reason that the Yankee police always rode a big gray horse.” He continues, “The Yankees usually had someone in each community to report to them
any violation of . . . rules which had been laid down by them. . . . In our neighborhood, this ‘spy’ was a man and his son by the name of Musgrove. . . . Both were later killed by a Southern sympathizer. . . .”

During Davis’ teenage years, he “would go to town on Saturdays and . . . swap horses and perhaps have two or three fights.” Once he “hooked up with one Bill Miller . . . who, although proving to be a hard customer at fisticuffs, I finally got the best of him in a hard and long-fought battle. . . . Some two or three months elapsed before I encountered a man named George Redding, George losing. . . . Later I hooked up with Bill Miller and his brother. In the ensuing fight Bill was shot. . . .” The bullet encircled his waist, burning a place between his clothing and skin. Davis was indicted for assault with intent to murder, tried for aggravated assault, convicted, and fined $25.

Deciding on a medical career in the spring of 1884, Davis took two courses in the Louisville Medical College at Lewisville, Kentucky. He finished a two-year course in eighteen months. Returning home, he was examined by a medical board, and granted a license to practice medicine on February 13, 1886, at the age of twenty-seven.

Davis’ first year of practicing medicine alternated with bronc busting, which he did for extra money. In November of 1887, Davis totaled his assets, counted $2300 in uncollected debts, and decided that he should re-locate. He began collecting his accounts, and “would accept anything I could get or anything one would offer, at his price, and if he had nothing, I would make him a gift of his account.” On the 28th, he bought a ticket for Abilene, Texas, and from there took a freight wagon to Jones County, Texas, where he had a sister and brother living.

Davis’ brother, “Uncle Dick” Davis, gave him “an old cow-pony with a big sore on his back about the size of a big red rose and with wind-galls on his legs about the size of hen eggs. With this dear old pony tied behind Uncle Dick’s buggy and team, we headed for Roby in Fisher County to begin the practice of my profession.”
Several passages from Dr. Davis’ narrative provide insight to his medical career. Here, he describes his first cases upon settling in his new home:

We found lodging at the Patterson Hotel on the night of our arrival. After we had retired for the night, I was aroused by a knock at the door and upon investigation, I met Mr. Sam Chalk who was a State surveyor employed by the state in surveying State school land in Fisher County. Mr. Chalk asked if there was a doctor in the house, and of course, I was not long in informing him that I would fill the bill. He stated that his wife would be confined at any time and we immediately left for his home. This was my first case in Fisher County. About the 3rd or 4th day from my arrival, I delivered a fine baby girl for Mrs. Chalk.

The next morning I secured permanent board and lodging at the home of Mrs. W.W. Anderson, who was at that time post-mistress of the town. Being favorably impressed with the country and its fine people, I decided definitely I had found a permanent home. An inventory of my estate at that time consisted of $19.85 in cash of which $15.00 went for a month’s board in advance. This left me with $4.85 in cash and my dear and trusted old horse, Bob. I spent 85 cents for a stake-rope and $1.50 for a sack of corn. My clothes were in good shape; I had a nice black broadcloth suit, and black derby hat. I also had a pair of square toed alligator shoes and they were long ones. I remember being accosted one day by Allen Chalk, an old cow puncher, who came up to me and sized me up from head to foot, taking into account my Derby hat and swell broadcloth suit. He had been partaking of plenty of strong “refreshments” and his breath was loud with “barrel licker.” He took special
note of my long squared-toed alligator shoes, as I sat there astride my old horse, Bob, and he wanted to know what I charged in breaking in a horse with shafts, indicating that my alligator shoes were long enough to resemble buggy shafts.

My next case of importance was that of Mrs. Alax Shipp, of whom I delivered a fine baby boy. This was about 10 miles northwest of Roby on the old Crowley Ranch. These two cases that I have mentioned were the first girl and boy born in Fisher County.

Dr. Davis’ practice grew in numbers and area, and he became a leader of his expanding community, imparting on his clients and neighbors his high morals and forceful nature:

In the next few years my practice extended to a large section of West Texas. To Aspermont in Stonewall County, Anson in Jones County, Sweetwater in Nolan County, Colorado City in Mitchell County, and Snyder in Scurry County, and Jayton and Clairmont in Kent County. This was accomplished on horseback or in a double buggy.

During the early days of my practice, I came in contact with all of the character and class of its people. I remember the first incident in Roby, one M. K. Kendall attempted to force me to take a drink of whiskey from his bottle. Being a young man that had not participated in any form of dissipation I was big and strong. I simply grabbed him by the hand and turned it so the bottle was emptied. That was the last time any one tried to force a drink on me.

It wasn’t always easy to balance his personal, political, and ethical beliefs:

During the Clark and Hogg campaign for Governor, which was one of the hottest Texas ever saw, the inter-
est waxed as warm in Roby as in any other section. The County Convention was held at Roby about June that summer. There was a big crowd in the court house and it was soon in an up-roar and a general free-for-all fight ensued. One John Peter Goggin and myself ran together. I had John bent back across the table and someone pulled me off him. John immediately grabbed the water bucket on the Judge’s desk and struck me across the forehead cutting a “Fourth-of-July” about six inches long. Friends interfered and we were separated. It was necessary for me to get another doctor to stitch me up. For about two years after that we carried guns for each other. It seemed to me that we would have to fight or shoot it out most any day. One cold February morning John was severely injured in a gun fight. He received a pistol ball behind his shoulder blade and it passed out just to the left of his left nipple, penetrating close to the heart region, and leaving old John nigh unto death. Notwithstanding that we had been at each other’s throat for several years, he sent for me to come. Not realizing the serious nature of his wounds and being somewhat doubtful of the sincerity of his message, I was at first loath to go. Upon second thought the ethics of my profession made me decide to go to his aid. I had my wife to load my pistol with fresh greased cartridges, I saddled old Brownie and rode up to the door of the house in which he lay. Having my pistol in my belt with the two lower buttons of my vest unbuttoned, I walked around in front of him. Every breath he took, he spat out blood.

He looked at me for a moment and asked if I would kill him. I said, “John, did you ever know me to take the advantage of any man?” He said, “No.” I said, “Did you send for me?” He said, “Yes.” I got right down beside him after placing my pistol on the mantle piece directly in front of him, and immediately gave
him two doses of medicine. Staying with him for the next ten days, both day and night, with close attention, he finally pulled through to a complete recovery. After getting on his feet and able to ride his famous little old chestnut mare, called Kid, and going southwest across the street, he met me astride Brownie, going northeast. He motioned me by, and said, “Doc, what do I owe you?” I told him and he turned to the horn of his saddle and wrote me a check and handed it over and I thanked him kindly. He continued to look at me with tears rolling down his weather-beaten cheeks saying “what are we going to do?” I said, “By God, it is solely up to you.” He reached over with his right hand and returned, “By God, I want to be your friend and I want you to be mine.” I returned his hearty handshake and accepted the sincerity of his voice. Just here I want to say that I am satisfied that tears as large as a pecan or an apple passed down the cheeks of both of us. The simple fact was that my mind was made up that if our trouble was renewed, I intended to kill or be killed. I continued to be his friend from that day until July 2, 1935, when he was buried at the mouth of Duck Creek where it empties into Salt Fork, some fifty miles away.

While most cases were the usual sort any doctor might expect to see, some were more dramatic:

For the next three or four years, my practice increased steadily but was uneventful. The next case of importance was the amputation of a limb for a Miss Ellen Kelly. In the spring of 1892, Miss Ellen, a beautiful 12-year-old daughter of A.P. Kelly, was bitten by a rattlesnake. I was called in and did not arrive until rather late. They had scarified the wound and bandaged the lower leg in such a manner that the lower part of the limb was in a paralyzed condition, making amputation
necessary after three or four days of a futile effort to save it. I called in to consultation, old Doctor Davidson, an old Army surgeon and a noble old fellow, who has now gone on to his reward, and R. C. Crane, . . . the postmaster, . . . to accompany me. I had no instruments except sharp knives and a tourniquet and artery forceps, and used a common saw to cut the bone. I cut a half-circle in the middle third of the thigh . . . pulled the flesh back as far as possible, and sawed the bone in two. I tied up all the arteries, sewed up the wound, plastered it with a starch solution. . . . Mr. Crane gave the anesthetic. I am writing this from memory and may have gotten some little of it wrong, but to say the least of it, the young lady completely recovered and developed into a fine and useful life, serving as a school teacher and later District Clerk of this county.

Other cases of importance were cases of rattlesnake bites to old Grandmaw Foster and another woman about a mile down the road. In both cases, Davis applied tourniquets and the women set their respective feet in buckets of coal oil for four or five days. Later, Davis was called to doctor a case of a child with diphtheria, whose family lived in a dug-out, the walls of which were lined with skunk hides, one of which was hanging over the fire, dripping skunk grease into a pan. Every hour the family gave the child a tablespoon of skunk grease. Davis diagnosed the ailment as spasmodic croup and purged the child night and morning with a purgative followed by oil. The next morning the child was making “rapid recovery,” and Davis departed for home.

Often Davis faced floods, lobo wolves, panthers, irate relatives bound on vengeance after a shooting, and sometimes mischievous children. On one occasion, Davis was called to treat one Dixon English, who was waylaid and shot while going to court to be tried for shooting the sheriff of Nolan County. English had been carried to a home near Roby and Davis feared that his assailants, if they
were hanging around, would shoot the doctor by mistake. Davis had always been known for his whistling, and he said that he “whistled plenty of familiar tunes so that he could be recognized. . . . I have whistled more since that time than I ever did before, as I had plenty of practice attending English.”

It was not all work for Dr. Davis. He also recalls some of the social events and customs of the times:

During the period of development, there were lots of hardships for all, but it was spiced with some amusements and pleasures. I remember one instance during the year, 1890, one Victor Anderson and Layton Wood gave an ice cream supper in the old wooden court house. I was asked by the old ladies sponsoring same to escort a Miss Jose Foster to this entertainment. The custom then was to purchase said ice cream by the saucer, for 15 cents straight, the revenue, of course, accruing to the sponsors. On this occasion Miss Foster and myself had one saucer. I asked her to have another, which she did. Then the third, then the fourth, and by the time she had consumed this, I was left way behind. The boys giving the supper would come back each time and ask her to have another saucer, which she did until she had consumed eight big saucers at 15 cents each, becoming the center of attraction, and incidentally, costing me a lot of money for those days. I secretly thought that during the consuming process, that I would get that money back before daylight, treating her for “Ice Cream-Itis” or something, but strange to say, she was not the least bit affected or upset.

This Layton Wood referred to above was about 12 years of age, and about this time I was sparking his widowed mother. I remember one night I called on Mrs. Wood, and we were unable to enjoy each other’s company for being pestered by her son Layton, who
insisted on hanging around. I hinted several times for him to leave and also mentioned to her that “two was company and three was a crowd,” but Layton, being a petted and pampered only-child, paid no attention to either his mother or me. At last I hinted that I or Layton would have to go. This aroused her ire and in vexation she jerked off her slipper and threw it at the boy. And when she saw it was going to hit him, she hollered, “Dodge, Layton, Dodge.”

The same winter of this year, we had a big dance about 13 miles southwest of Roby above the old 18 Ranch at a Mr. Willbanks’. There was some 150 people present and one in particular named George Cochran, a cow-puncher who lived near Hobbs. George had a good case of the measles, which was contracted by some 100 of the guests. In fact, he scattered it all over this section of the country. I had some 100 cases on my books at one time. One case in particular was that of a little man in Roby, named Fesuire, who operated a little furniture store. “Fes” as we called him was in love with a pretty little girl named Nina Roberts. Fes had a pretty good case of measles and thought he was going to die. There was nothing unusual about his case and I was not concerned about his mental attitude. He would call about two or three times each day, and as I was very busy, I told him to leave me alone. He called me one evening after I had had a hard day, and told me he was going to die. I told him to go right ahead and make a good job of it and die. With tears running down his cheeks he said he would “not mind dying if it were not for leaving Miss Nina for some other fellow to get.” Of course he did not die, and he and Miss Nina eventually married.

In addition to practicing medicine, Davis continued to be involved in fisticuffs and “run-ins.” In a battle with a certain
character named E. P. Boyce, Boyce pulled a long knife and in the ensuing fight, cut Davis in the side and on the arm. Although indicted for assault and tried in Fisher County, Boyce was not convicted. Davis said, “Two years later he contracted typhoid fever. His wife and two grown sons tried to get him to agree to call me to treat him. He was too stubborn to do this and he died soon after.”

An old cowpuncher off the DE Ranch in New Mexico, named Tom Polk, also picked an apparently unprovoked fight with Dr. Davis in about 1902. A pretty tough customer in and around those parts, Polk attempted to give Davis a good whipping with a walking cane. In that altercation, Davis had to treat only his badly bitten thumb, and later, on at least four occasions, Polk pointed a gun at Davis, though he didn’t shoot. Davis refused to take legal action against Polk, and later two very dear friends finally effected a truce between the two. The two gentlemen and Davis “talked our trouble over. They then conferred with Polk and reached an agreement for us to let the matter rest, with Polk and I agreeing to pass each other with friendly greetings, and that neither of us would ever mention the matter again. Polk is now dead and his brothers who live in this section of the country are good friends of mine.”

Davis concludes “Trials and Tribulations” with a catalogue of the progress of Fisher County and his part in its ranching, printing press, banking, railroading, and civic activities. In his conclusion he states, “I have been a life long Democrat . . . I have practiced prohibition, but have also voted an anti-prohibition ticket. I have never taken a chew of tobacco, smoked a cigarette or cigar, nor have I ever tasted coffee, Home-brew, Iced-tea, or old fashioned Beer or ‘3-2.’ I have drunk enough sweetmilk to run Palo Duro Canyon. If all the cactus along the Rio Grande was good corn bread pones and the old Rio Grande was honest-to-God Sweetmilk, I would eat my way from El Paso to the Gulf of Mexico in three days.”
The last page of Davis’ hand-typed narrative ends with this partial reference to Robert Burns’ poem, “A Grace Before Dinner”:

‘Tis Oh, Thou who kindly dost provide,
For every creature’s wants,
We bless Thee God of nature’s wide
For all Thy goodness lent,
And if it please the heavenly guide,
May never worse be sent.

I hope the incidents I have related will give you some idea of the trials and tribulations of the life of a West Texas dirt-road doctor of the early days. J. D. Davis’ narrative of his experiences provide valuable insight to his life and profession, as well as to the lives and ways of other folk in and around Fisher County.
Joseph Edwin Fitzgerald speaking to a convention of nursery-men at the Ross Wolfe nursery in Stephenville, circa 1936