

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Dr. R. E. Leidigh

Conducted by Carolyn Wellso
June 24, 1985
Marion, Iowa

Transcribed by Sue Daugherty

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Dr. R.E.Leidigh has lived most all of his life in Marion, Iowa. Born on October 11, 1890, he attended the University of Iowa in 1914, went into the service during WWI and set-up practice in Springville, Iowa after the service. He and his wife remained there about two years before setting up practice in Marion in 1921 and retiring on December 30, 1972.

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Leidigh: This is Dr. R. E. Leidigh, born in Marion, Iowa, October 11, 1890 and went to Marion High School from the lower grades through high school, graduated in 1909.

CW: What was it like in Marion growing up?

Leidigh: Marion was a very small town when I was here first. It was a town of about 3,000 people, all mud roads. I carried the Gazette for about 6 years, when I was going to lower grades, had the whole second ward as where I carried the papers. While I was in high school, I worked at Schumack and Seeburn's Department store, started out as a window-washer and sweeping the floors and finally clerking. After I finished high school, I worked for the Milwaukee railroad here in Marion, just as a helper around for everything and then when my father was sent to Davenport, Iowa, I started working for the railroad there as a yard clerk. Then I went firing on the railroad to get money enough to go to college. I spent two years at Cornell College to find out what college was like and learn to take notes. Then I fired for five years while on the Milwaukee railroad and the longest run I had was from Milwaukee to Davenport, 480 miles. I went to University of Iowa in 1914, entered the Dental school and when I was given the notice of what my grades had to be there, I had to have two C's my first year, one C my second year and have a straight B average my third year. I never

year and have a straight B average my third year. I never received a C in all the time I was in school.

CW: Or you would be out. If you received the two C's, you'd be out of college.

Leidigh: You'd have to take another year or two.

CW: Tell them all about Dental school. You were telling about the courses, the lectures, and so forth.

Leidigh: About all the courses in Dental school were lectures. We had to take notes on them. We had a few reference books and in our senior year we spent about two hours a day the whole year in the dissecting room of the hospital where we had to do a complete dissection of the body. Know every blood vessel, nerve, muscle, and organ in the body and take a final examination on that. I often wondered why we had to do that but I found out after I was out in practice for a little while that it came in very handy when physicians would bring a patient in and describe something they had wrong and want'd us to check their teeth to see if that was causing part of it.

[There follows some dialogue about making a set of teeth, but transcriptionist was unable to pick up all of it. This is Dr. Leidigh's answer]

Leidigh: During our freshman year at Iowa, we had to carve a half a set of teeth out of bone. They couldn't have more than 1/2000" off in size or they'd throw them away. After we'd finished those, we set them into plaster of paris as they would be set in the mouth, then we had to cut cavities in them and fill them with the different materials before we went into the clinic

to do work on patients. It was quite a job standing and cutting cavities in those bone teeth with the foot drills that we had to use at that time. You didn't have electric motors to do it with. Then we went into the clinic and worked on patients for the balance of our junior year and the senior year and were given credit for every piece of work we did to be able to get enough credits to graduate.

[Dialogue with interviewer, transcriptionist unable to hear it]

Leidigh: In our senior year. my roommate and I decided we would rather have an electric engine to run the drills, so we asked if we could have one and they allowed us to put in an electric drill. I used that drill till I closed my office in December of 1972. I paid \$140 for it at the time I bought it at the University.

CW: The same drill? For how many years?

Leidigh: I used it from the time I got it in 1916--I bought it when school started--and I used it until I finished practice.

CW: That's remarkable. (Laughter) Talk about your early dental practice. How you got started. Who were your first patients? Who were the other dentists when you came to Marion?

Leidigh: We, I started in Springville first. I opened my first dental office in Springville, Iowa, in 1919. They had no dentist there. I stayed there in Springville for almost two years when I moved to Marion. I was in Marion from 1921 until I closed my practice in December 30, 1972. The day I closed my office, I had no collectable accounts on my books. Nobody owed me anything for the dental work I had done.

CW: My gosh. Everybody had paid.

Leidigh: Well, I saw to it they did. (Laughter) To be able to close my office without having any collectable accounts, I picked my patients very carefully. So that I knew that they would pay me when they got their work done and not make me wait three or four years for it.

CW: Talk about dental meetings, the Association, tell about about dental fraternity you belonged to.

Leidigh: I belonged to the National Dental Fraternity--the Delta Sigma Deltas. I belonged to the Gamma Gamma chapter in Iowa City. It's one of the oldest dental fraternities in the United States. We even have members now in foreign countries. I have a book that I got about two years ago and I couldn't find any but my name of anybody in Iowa or anybody that had graduated from Gamma Gamma while I was there. I don't know what's become of all my friends who were in the class of 1917, which I belonged to.

CW: What are some of the changes in dentistry. Talk about what it was like when you started. What was the practice like when you started?

Leidigh: Well, practice when I started--we did most of the work in our dental offices. Although at the time I started, we could send impressions of the mouth for full dentures to a laboratory in Cedar Rapids to have them set up the teeth and do the vulcanizing of the rubber plate that we made at that time, which made it much easier because it took considerable time if you had to do that in your office. You'd have to lose a lot of time of practicing on patients. At that time, we were getting \$35 a

set for a full set of rubber dentures for a patient. Gold crowns were costing \$10. Bridges would cost around \$35 or \$40, according to the length of them and what you had to do. Most of our work--we did some work with children, they didn't bring children in quite as often as they do nowadays--but I had a few children, they weren't hard to work on. You had to talk to them a little bit and explain to them what you were going to do.

CW: Did people have more or less cavities? Do children have more cavities now?

Leidigh: I think the children nowadays don't have the cavities that they did when I was practicing because they take better care. They have mouthwashes now that help take care of the teeth according to what I get in the magazines that I get from the dental organizations. I'm a life member of the American Dental Association and the Iowa State Dental Association.

[Unclear question from interviewer]

Leidigh: Well, when I first started, I made a lot of dentures because people did not take care of their teeth. They would wait until it was too late to do anything for them and we had to take them out. But nowadays--of my latter years--people took better care, they came oftener to the dentist, they made regular appointments, had a regular examination every so often so as to watch all that work. I found some--I found one lady that had had a gold filling I'd put in over 55 years ago and she was still having that filling in her mouth, which I think helped me out a lot. Well, my daughter has a gold filling I put in when she was in nurse's training and she's retired now from Linn County Care Center as

head nurse.

CW: Talk about Marion. Did you belong to any businessmen's associations?

Leidigh: While in Marion, I was a member of the school board for about four years, I'm a charter member of the Marion post Lion's club --have been a member now for 64 years--I'm a life member of two Masonic bodies, and have belonged to the Christian church ever since I moved to Marion as my wife was a life member of the Christian church so I went with her to church.

CW: Talk about the leaders. Talk about Marion in the 1920's and 1930's. Who were the town leaders? How did prohibition affect it? What was suffrage? Would you talk a little about suffrage?

1 Women getting the vote. The changes in dress.

Leidigh: (Laughter) Well, I didn't pay much attention.

CW: Well, then just talk about the town leaders.

Leidigh: Well, Marion was the county seat from the time I was born until I came back here as a dentist. Marion was the county seat untilsometime in the early 1920's when it was moved to Cedar Rapids. As far as leaders in the town, we had no real prominent leaders. We had some very good men at the head of the city offices and there wasn't a great deal of crime around here at that time that I can remember.

[Off-mike conversation about one town clerk]

Leidigh: Yes, we had one town clerk that only got \$100 a month until she retired from her job.

CW: You didn't pay much attention, you said, to women's suffrage. Did you talk about getting married?

Leidigh: No. Didn't say anything about that.

CW: A lot of doctors never ever mention anything on wives.

Leidigh: Well, you want me to tell it?

CW: I'm saying it's really funny, I've interviewed a lot of doctors and it's almost like they never were married.

Leidigh: I was.

CW: What about in those days that you didn't see a woman

Leidigh: Well, at the time I was in high school . . .

CW: What was it like to date?

Leidigh: I made a date with a girl in high school. I was there to try to make a date with her. I did it. I got the date and it so happened that that young lady became my wife in 1918 just before I went into World War I. Dating in those days was just a bunch of us going out to have maybe ice cream or going to the ten cent movies that we had in town at that time or a bunch of us going sitting on somebody's porch and talking.

CW: A husband didn't see his wife's ankles until they were married?

Leidigh: Well, I'm afraid I did. Well, she was sitting down when I saw them. (Laughter) (Wife comments on wearing high button shoes.)

CW: Talk about the first World War.

Leidigh: It wasn't very long in the first World War I was sent to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, Camp Greenleaf, to a medical training camp. There were 1200 physicians, 1000 dentists, and 800 veterinarians in this one training camp. None of us knew anything about giving orders and they found out that we couldn't give orders, so they had us go down there and put us in training to be able

to give orders in case we had to take charge of a bunch of men. I was there. I was discharged just before World War I ended. I received my commission right after I got home as a first lieutenant in the dental corps. But I did not keep it up because I could not afford to go to training camp at that time because I was just starting practice in Springville.

CW: Can you tell more what your uniform was like? What time did they get up? Talk about being in the army.

Leidigh: Well, we were just like any private in the army. We had to get up in the morning at roll call or when the bugle blew for roll call and go to eat. Then they took us out for drills, we'd have to march sometimes as high as five miles and then five miles back to camp again. We had to answer questions, take examinations of different kinds of what orders to give. It was quite an interesting affair especially with the veterinarians, they had the worst job, they had to ride the horses bareback. We didn't ride, we walked.

CW: The dentists didn't have to ride a horse. Did you enlist in the army or were you drafted?

Leidigh: We had no chance.

CW: Tell about that.

Leidigh: We didn't have a chance to enlist, we were taken down to the Armory at Iowa City and sworn in. . .

CW: After you were graduated?

Leidigh: They found out--they had put a few dentists in as first lieutenants early and they found they didn't know how to give commands, so they had to teach us that to do. Shipped us right

down to Georgia.

CW: Right away.

Leidigh: I remember when I went down, my wife went with me.

I had my orders for a ticket from the Rock Island railroad out of Davenport. I went down and got it and told them I wanted a ticket for my wife. By golly, they gave me a seat in the parlor car and when I went down to pick up my ticket, they never charged me for my wife 's ticket, they gave it to me. I don't know how that happened. All the other fellows had to ride in the daycoach, I rode in the Parlor car!

CW: Boy! That was a respect for women. That was neat.

Talk a little bit about marriage in the early days. Your patients. Changes in the children who came into your office.
[Interviewer's questions are faint and fade off]

Leidigh: I was married on September 18, 1918. I spent part of my time down at Iowa City and my wife stayed in Marion and was working for the railroad. After I came out of the service, I went to Springville, opened an office and started into practice there. It was a little hard starting because people didn't know--they'd been going to Cedar Rapids--and they didn't know whether they wanted to come to me or not. But they finally did, they found that I wasn't overcharging or anything like that. A lot of them didn't come till they had to. That was the reason why so many of the older people lost their teeth rather early. Children weren't brought in too often unless they had a toothache or sore gums. But in later years, we examined the children every few months to be sure their mouth was in good shape and

also people would come in as I gave them dates for return appointments for an examination. But in those days, we charged nothing for examinations, charged \$5 for cleaning teeth, and extractions were never more than a dollar. That was the way things went in the early days. Since then, they have entirely changed, but I notice that more youngsters go to their dentist to be examined but they don't have the work to be done that they used to have to have done.

CW: Did you work alone or did you have someone in the office? Tell about how that's changed. Did you work alone till you retired? That's a big difference.

Leidigh: While I was practicing, I had no assistant. I tried several times to get one. And each and every one I tried, they said, "Do I have to work when you're doing extracting?" I said, "You certainly do!" And they would say, "Well, I can't stand the sight of blood." And they wouldn't stay. So I quit asking young ladies to work for me and did my work all by myself. The only time I had an assistant was the times when I was still giving gas and that was necessary.

CW: Talk about anesthesia--like gas. Talk about what the dentist used for pain.

Leidigh: We used cocaine at first. Then there was gas and finally novocaine came in about--oh, I'd been practicing in Marion about, probably four or five years when novocaine came in and I went to Des Moines and took a course in learning how to inject it. After that, it made all dental work practically painless. We'd make injections in different parts of the mouth and deaden

that section of the mouth and the patient would not feel a thing.

CW: How was cocaine given?

Leidigh: Injection.

CW: Talk about that.

Leidigh: Cocaine was injected but we had to be careful about it. Some people could not stand it. And we had to be careful to not inject too much. It did not always reduce all the pain.

CW: How was gas administered? You know, we don't know.

Leidigh: Well, I don't want to tell them some of the things about gas. Gas was given along with oxygen and we had to be very careful not to have more gas and have the oxygen too low because the patient would turn blue and pass out. It would work very nicely but we always needed an assistant for that to watch the patient and watch how much gas to give. But it was a little unhandy, you had to have a mask over their nose and that was some bother. I didn't like to work around it. But when Novocaine came in, I dropped the gas because I felt it was a little too dangerous to have around. If they wanted gas, they'd have to go elsewhere to get it. Novocaine was our great help when it came in, because we could do any kind of work under Novocaine and the patient would feel no pain whatever.

CW: What did your family do for vacations in the old days? How did you travel?

Leidigh: My wife and I traveled by train at first until I finally got a car.

CW: What year was that?

Leidigh: I didn't get a car till after I was in practice in Marion.

CW: 1920?

Leidigh: I don't remember what year it was now. After we got a car, we did quite a bit of traveling out to the west and down into Oklahoma where I had a sister living. We didn't do too much traveling, our income wasn't too big and we had to figure to do traveling.

CW: [Unclear interview comments or questions]

Leidigh: During my time of practicing the men made all the money to keep up the home. Their wives stayed home with the youngsters and took care of them and did the other things around the home which worked very fine. At that time, there was not a whole lot of trouble with delinquency among youngsters because they had somebody at home with them whenever they were there and they learned how to mind. The last few years, when the husband and wife are working, the children do not have anybody at home when they get home after school. They just run around, they do as they please and that, I think, has caused a lot of the delinquency among young people in the present day.

CW: What do you think about divorce?

Leidigh: I've been asked what I think about divorce. I think it's one of the worst things we have. I can see no reason why two people who have been married cannot get along if they love each other and why they can't agree and why they have to argue. Course, we've all had arguments, but we're able to settle them in a good way and then the trouble is forgotten. If people could do that nowadays, there would not be the divorces there

are, there wouldn't be the trouble raising youngsters like they have now--with either the father gone or the mother gone. It makes it hard on the entire family.

CW: [Unclear questions] What changes occurred with better transportation? People could live farther from work with the automobile or trolley than they used to, you had to live close to your work.

Leidigh: (Laughter) Well, since the automobile came in in my time, I find that some people I worked on lived farther away from Cedar Rapids and Marion than they used to because with the automobile they were able to live in smaller towns and find cheaper rent and still get to their jobs in the cities. At that time, gasoline wasn't too high and they would make it back and forth very nicely. Even though some of them had dirt roads to go on, they managed.

CW: [Unclear questions and some dialogue] Were you an only child?

Leidigh: My sister was a registered nurse and lives in Davenport. She's nine years younger than I am. She just got back from Florida and she picked up some bug down there.

CW: Could you talk any more about Marion as a railroad center or anything about the feeling in Marion. Was it close, were the people more friendly than Cedar Rapids?

Leidigh: Oh, I think they were very friendly here in Marion. A lot of them worked for the railroad.

CW: Talk a little bit more about the railroad.

Leidigh: In Marion, in the early days, a big percent--a lot of the people worked for the railroad and everybody was friendly. We had a

lot of trains going through here and I finally worked for the railroad here in the roundhouse when my father was roundhouse foreman and I found there was a lot of people there that had lived here for years had been with the railroad. Either working in the roundhouse, switchmen in the yard, taking care of the making up the trains or the men at the depot who handled the running of the trains such as the train dispatchers and operators. Then they also had the men that had charge of the different sections of the railroad such as the men who they had in charge of the section men and the traveling engineers and such as that. It was a town that wasn't big at the time--I would say between two and three thousand people. But it was a town--you knew practically everybody in the town. Everybody was friendly.

[TAPE ENDS WITHOUT COMMENT]

INTERVIEW TOPICS
CEDAR RAPIDS: THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

- 1 --When were you born? Where?
- 1 --How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids? (Marion, Iowa)
- What are your parents' names?
- 1 --Where did you go to school?
- 6,7,9 --Are you married or single?
- 5 --Did you raise a family? How big?
- 3 --What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community

1. Transportation

- 1,11,13 --Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
 - Trolleys (the Interurban)
 - Horses and First Automobiles
- 1 --Mud roads and the seedling mile
 - Hunter Airport and the first planes
 - Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)

2. Communications

- 1 --Newspapers
- Radios
- Advertising
- Telephones

B. People in the Community

1. Amusements/Recreation

- Motion Pictures
- Cedar Rapids Parks
- Dances
- Carnival Week
- Chautauqua
- Community Theater
- Little Gallery
- Symphony Orchestra
- Circus
- Greene's Opera House
- Amusement Parks (Alamo)
- Camps
- Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

2. Famous Characters

- Cherry Sisters
- Grant Wood
- Carl Van Vechten (The Tattooed Countess)
- Marvin Cone

3. Lifestyle
 - Life before air conditioning
 - Winter Activities
 - 11 --Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
 - Clothing
 - Toys
 - Saloons/Taverns
 - Farm Life
4. Family Life
 - Household Help
 - 12 --Women's Roles
 - Childrens' Activities/Behavior
 - Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws)
5. Ethnic/Minority Life
 - Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
 - Indians
 - Segregation of Blacks
 - Jobs Available
- C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community
 1. Education (Dental School) 2-3
 - Cedar Rapids Schools
 - Coe College
 - Mount Mercy College
 - 1--Cornell College
 2. Government
 - City Services
 - Streets/Roads
 - Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)
 3. Medical/Dental 2-5,9-11
 - Hospitals
 - Patient-Doctor Relationship
 - Broken Bones
 - Polio, TB, Debilitating Diseases
 - House Calls
 - Home Delivery of Babies

4. Business and Economy --5
- Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
 - Local Brewing Companies
 - Retail Businesses /Department Stores
 - Professions
 - Banking and Finance
 - Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
 - Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
 - Farmers Market
 - Mills on Cedar River
 - Buildings Erected
 - Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
 - Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)

5. Attitudes/Values
- 12--Children/Discipline
 - Sex/Petting
 - Charity
 - 12--Divorce
 - Work
 - Working women, Voting Rights for Women
 - Patriotism (World War I)
 - 7--Dating

- D. Historic Events in and Outside the Community
- 1. Catastrophic Events
 - Clifton Hotel Fire (1903)
 - Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
 - Bank Closings (1933)
 - Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
 - Public Library Murder(1921)
 - 2. National Historic Events
 - Womens' Suffrage
 - 7-9 --World War I
 - Roaring 20's
 - Prohibition
 - Great Depression

