# TULSA MEDICINE HISTORY

## Betty Conrad, M.D.

*This is an excerpt from an interview with Dr. Conrad by George W. Prothro, M.D., on June 14, 2002, as part of a project to collect and maintain an archive of the history of medicine in Tulsa.*

Betty Conrad, M.D., was born in 1920, "in the oil fields of Texas." Although she didn't start school until she was seven years old, she quickly made up for lost time. "My father worked in the oil fields and went from one to another so I grew up in an assortment of places."

When she was seven, her family moved to Bristow because her sister became ill. "I had never been to school because we moved around too much and besides in Texas at that time you had to be seven to even go to school."

When she finally started her education, the principal told her she was too old to start in kindergarten so they tried her in the first and then the second grades. "I finally ended up finishing the third grade and then the fifth grade the second year until they finally decided I was where I should be."

She did well in school eventually graduating from Bristow Junior College where her class of 23 graduates had an unusual experience. "Our commencement speaker was Eleanor Roosevelt. It was a wonderful experience and recognition. This was 1939, and to have the wife of the president speak to us was really something. I remember there was much to do and Secret Service everywhere. I'm sure they had never heard of Bristow, Oklahoma before."

Dr. Conrad remembers vividly the event, even how the first lady was dressed. "She wore a blue lace dress with black lace insertion and she was very pleasant and very nice."

The college closed soon after the event. "What could they do to top a graduation with the president's wife as the speaker?"

Dr. Conrad entered premed at Oklahoma State University. "There were just a handful of students and partners were selected at random. My partner was going to veterinary school and looking after horses."

One of the students in her class was future Oklahoma Governor Henry Bellmon.

"I started thinking about medical school and my counselors told me that women just didn't go to medical school. They would say, 'now you would make a good teacher or something else.'

Dr. Conrad was not discouraged, "I didn't care what they said, I told myself that I'm going to medical school."

In 1941, when Dr. Conrad was accepted to the University of Oklahoma School of Medicine, "nearly everyone fainted. I was scared to death when I went to the admission committee meeting. They looked at me strangely then at my records – I had a bachelors degree, which only a few medical students had and I had a real good record and an excellent report in zoology."

Dr. Conrad's mother thought she was too young at 21 to go to medical school but she talked her into it.

"I am one of the few people still around who went through the three-year medical school we had during the war. Everyone was talking about Pearl Harbor and the boys were wondering if they should enlist."

About that time the school received a letter from Mrs. Roosevelt's husband. "The president said he didn't want any medical school student to enlist. He said he wanted them all to stay in school because doctors were in greater demand that soldiers."

As a result, Dr. Conrad's class did an accelerated three-year course. "We started early and stayed late and went through weekends."

There were a total of five women in Dr. Conrad's medical school class. Four were freshmen and an older lady who had, because of the war, returned to school to study medicine.

"We never had any problems, with other students, being the only females in the medical school. We were very close, maybe because of the war in part, like brothers and sisters."

There were, however, always reminders that being a female medical student was still new to a lot of people. "One of the girls was pregnant and near term and we were rushing down the hall at the hospital where we had class and a nurse thought she was giving birth. The girl announced that she was not a patient, she was going to the class in orthopedics."

In Oklahoma City, Dr. Conrad lived in a boarding house. "It cost $23 a month. My roommate's father, who had a wheat farm in Enid, insisted we use the lanterns he brought us when we were walking back and forth to school. "

Dr. Conrad's memories of medical school include the kindness and support of her fellow male colleagues. "The cadavers were in great tubs and I couldn't get them on the tables – I was lucky to have the boys to help with that."

Following graduation, Dr. Conrad became the first woman intern in nine years at the City of Detroit Receiving hospital. "The superintendent didn't think it was proper for a female to be living in the same building with the other interns, so I had a closet size room in the attic of one of the buildings."

The experiences in a major metropolitan hospital were varied and interesting for a young female physician in 1945. "There were so many things that I saw there. I remember one day two policemen arrived supporting between them a man who had been in a tavern brawl. Someone had run a crowbar through his head. He was walking and talking and one of the nurses said to me, 'you look even paler than usual.' That's when

my hair was still red."

Dr. Conrad thought for a while she might like psychiatry and worked briefly at the Taunton State Hospital in Taunton, Massachusetts. There she discovered that a number of middle aged women were showing up "completely out of their heads." After several months of a general diet including salt pills, the women would be completely normal.

"These women were treating themselves with 'Dr. Miles' Nervine,' which was tincture of triple bromides and they had hyperbromidism. Nobody thought about it and we cured these women."

Although she decided that she was not cut out to be a psychiatrist, she admits that her psychiatric training was helpful later in practice.

Dr. Conrad completed a residency in internal medicine at the Buffalo General Hospital in New York.

Dr. Conrad returned home to Tulsa in 1950 to look for a job. After applying to several places, a large VA hospital in Texas hired her. Following about two weeks on the staff there, the Director called her in to tell her that her x-rays indicated that she had tuberculosis. On her way home, she met with a TB expert in Dallas who referred her to Dr. R. W. Goen in Tulsa.

Dr. Conrad remembers her first encounter with Dr. Goen. "He said, 'now Dr. Conrad I'm going to say one thing, in the relationship between you and me, I'm the doctor and you're the patient.' I said yes sir and in the relationship between you and me we will have it understood that unless you explain to me why we are doing a thing and tell me what every medicine is and is for, I'll get another doctor. He said, 'it's a deal' and I knew he was the doctor for me and I underwent a study that lasted more than 40 years."

In 1953, Dr. Conrad was feeling good and came to the medical society to meet with TCMS executive director, Jack Spears. "He said he knew of a job that would be good for me. The lady who had been head of the blood center had just left. Well, I had never been to a blood center and didn't even have a good book to read on it. We had a good staff with excellent nurses who knew how to do an IV. Our biggest problem was trying to get enough donors." As a result, Dr. Conrad started scheduling mobile visits to take the blood collecting operation to the donors.

During her tenure at the blood center, one of the most exciting events for everyone there was the acquisition of a centrifuge.

In 1966, Dr. Conrad left the Red Cross blood center to become Director of Contagious Disease Control for the Tulsa City-County Health Department. Among other things Dr. Conrad learned about the social and sociological ramifications of tuberculosis. "There were patients who were afraid for others to learn that they had TB and there were people who were afraid to take pills because it might give them TB. I even had one person who left town in the middle of the night after being diagnosed with TB."

Dr. Conrad became known for her no-nonsense approach to finding and treating patients with TB. "I used the bulldog principle. Once we learned that a person might have TB, we didn't let them get away without confirming it and, if needed, providing treatment."

Dr. Conrad received help from the judicial system and law enforcement. "I knew the judges and the sheriffs and I understand that one person said about me, 'if that red headed bitch sends for you, you better go, cause if you don't she'll have the sheriff out for you the next day.' "

Another topic, for which Dr. Conrad became well known, was sex education with emphasis on venereal disease. She trained medical students and spoke to many organizations and schools. "One day I was requested to speak to the Ladies Missionary Society at a large Methodist church about VD. Most of the ladies were in their late 50's or over 60. A few over 70. I gave my talk and afterwards it was a little quiet until one lady stood up and said, 'I am a retired schoolteacher and I want to thank you. This is the first time we have had a lecturer who has used good English.' "

*Dr. Conrad with the Red Cross centrifuge in 1955.*

Dr. Conrad continues to volunteer in free clinics with her time and ability to get people to donate needed items including one of the most important – soap. "We collect as much soap as we can. After all, food stamps don't cover soap."

"Probably the biggest achievement of my medical career was seeing my nephew, Michael Conrad Ellis, become a physician, a radiologist and Fellow of the American College of Radiology."

"I realized that my constant efforts to pass along health information were being received when I heard my engineer nephew say to his wife, who was a little negligent in getting the children's shots, 'my aunt Betty says every child should have his immunizations, so be sure that these kids have them."

Perhaps the one experience that best sums up the dedication and attitude of Dr. Conrad's career was when a large man, who had tested positive for TB informed her, in no uncertain terms, that he was not going to the hospital for treatment. "I looked up at him and said, 'you are going and I've got two deputy sheriffs that will see to it.' You know, that man received treatment, was cured and later came back to thank me."