

Dr. Batten: 50 Years of Medical Practice in Johnston County
by Julia McCullers

June of 1999 marks half a century since Dr. Woodrow Batten first began to practice medicine in Johnston County.

A native of Micro, Dr. Batten opened his office on South Third Street in Smithfield in a building he shared with Dr. William G. Lee, a dentist.

Fifty years later, in his office behind Johnston Memorial Hospital, he continues to serve his patients with the skill and dedication that have been the hallmark of his career.

A typical day for Dr. Batten begins as it has for decades: breakfast at home on Sunset Drive in Smithfield, followed by rounds at Johnston Memorial Hospital to check on his patients who are hospitalized. He may visit them again later in the day.

Lee Farnell, president of Johnston Memorial, says this of Dr. Batten: "He epitomizes the kind of physician who shows genuine concern for every patient. He regards medicine as a calling as well as a profession."

Office hours -- all day on Monday and Wednesday, and half a day on Friday -- run until the last patient is seen. His office is typically filled with adult patients, many of whom he has treated for years.

On his way home for lunch, he may drop by the home of an elderly patient who isn't up to an office visit.

"My practice is largely geriatrics these days," he says with a smile.

Dr. Batten has been Medical Director at Smithfield Manor since 1984, and his schedule includes frequent trips there. He moves with quiet dignity from one room to another, speaking in a calm, low voice that encourages everyone to listen carefully. He never seems to be in a hurry, and he takes time to answer questions thoroughly. It is obvious that the patients and staff there, and in the other nursing homes he visits, respect his judgement and look forward to his visits. Dr. Batten treats each patient with a combination of modern medicine and uncompromising civility and kindness.

Carol and David Arnn, administrators at Smithfield Manor, describe him as a "model physician."

"Dr. Batten treats people from every walk of life with the same degree of respect," the Arnns say. "His bedside manner creates a calming effect. He always takes a positive approach, even when he is dealing with negative situations. He is a prince of a man!"

When he can spare the time, Dr. Batten enjoys golf at the Country Club of Johnston County, often playing with Jimmy Creech, James Wellons, Lee Rogers, Bruce Johnson, Bob Backner, and Eddie Thorndyke.

He and Mrs. Batten are avid gardeners and keep a lovely yard. They have shared an interest in identifying wild flowers and cultivating unusual plants throughout their marriage.

On Wednesday nights, without fail, he goes to choir practice at Smithfield's First Baptist Church, where his clear bass voice has been a vital part of the music there for 50 years. For 25 years his wife was music director at First Baptist, leading the choir, playing the organ, and building a tradition of musical excellence. Church members say it is impossible to measure the positive impact the Battens have had on the music program over the years.

Dr. Batten's nights are still interrupted by the ringing of the telephone, just as they have been since 1949. In response to some patient's needs, he may dress, get into his little red Nissan Sentra and drive to the hospital to handle a situation that cannot wait until morning. More often, he gives instructions over the telephone.

"One thing that has kept him going is his ability to fall asleep instantly," says Mary Gordon Batten, his wife of 53 years. "He wakes up fully alert and able to handle emergencies, but as soon as he has handled the problem he sleeps like a baby."

Woodrow Batten, born December 1, 1921, was the youngest son of the late Freeman and Polly Mae Parrish Batten, who farmed between Micro and Selma. As a member of a large family -- there were 11 Batten children, eight of whom reached maturity -- young Woodrow Batten grew up knowing the barns and fields of the family farm well.

"As the youngest boy," he recalls, "I did not do much of the plowing or working with the mules. My older brothers -- Floyd, Lloyd and Wilbert -- took care of most of that. I usually found myself on 'the chopping team' clearing weeds out of the crops. My sisters Hilda Gray and Essie Mae and I chopped many long rows together. Elizabeth and Jean were younger, and they were not on 'the chopping team.' My parents were great believers in the old tradition of 'sweeping yards,' and we children swept daily and kept every sprig of grass from growing in front of our house for years."

Dr. Batten's boyhood interests included the BYPU (Baptist Young People's Union), the Boy Scouts, the 4-H Club, and Micro School, each of which influenced his future.

"My family were staunch members of the Micro Missionary Baptist Church," he says. "We attended regularly, and I enjoyed singing the hymns and such. A lot of people thought I might enter the ministry, but although the church has always been important to me, I never wanted to be a preacher."

He joined the Boy Scouts when he was 10. "I like to say that joining the Boy Scouts caused me to give up smoking," he says with a smile. "Like most boys, I had tried rabbit tobacco, Indian cigars, mullein, and just about everything else. But the Scouts caused me to give up smoking for the rest of my life."

(Dr. Batten's patients are quite aware that he is an adamant critic of smoking, seldom missing an opportunity to point out its threats to good health.)

"One summer I was able to go to old Camp Tuscarora (which was then near Mount Olive), and that was a wonderful experience," he recalls. "I paid my way there by picking up several bushels of potatoes that had been left in the fields. I reached the rank of Life Scout, but not Eagle."

The 4-H Club also played a significant role in his early life: "In 1936 I won the Johnston County 4-H corn-raising contest. The next year I fed the corn to a calf that won first prize at the Johnston County Fair in Smithfield. That same year I took the bull up to the State Fair in Raleigh and spent nine days there, sleeping on the hay nearby. A friend who also had an animal in the competition and I cooked our meals on a little hot plate -- pork and beans and things like that. We got milk from the cows in the livestock barn and fresh eggs from the poultry building. My bull won third place, and the whole experience was a great adventure!"

At Micro School, principal L. J. Worthington "kept us boys busy, as he should have," according to Dr. Batten. "I played baseball and basketball and won the 'declamation contest' when I was in high school."

"My seventh-grade teacher, Rebecca Scoville, is one that I remember vividly," he says. "She was musical and taught us a lot of entertaining songs that I can sing to this day."

Freeman Batten died when his son Woodrow was only 14.

"It was hard," Dr. Batten remembers. "My father was a man ahead of time in some ways. For one thing, he practiced diversified farming long before it was widely done. We grew a lot of produce -- tomatoes, beans, watermelons, cantalopes, and things like that -- and sold them in Smithfield and Selma and to contacts he had in Danville, VA. My father was progressive, and we had carbide lights in our house before most people in the county did. Later, he installed a Delco system of batteries that gave us even better power. He often took me, his

youngest son, on trips with him. He tried to teach me a lot of the things he knew. I remember going to the Sandhills with him to buy peaches for the family and the neighbors. Once or twice a year he made up a load of produce and took it to the Kennedy Home, an orphanage in Kinston, as a gift. He was not a great reader of books or papers, but I often saw him reading the Bible."

His mother undertook the job of rearing the family, and by all accounts did an admirable job.

Why did the farm boy decide to become a doctor?

He's not really sure, but as he says, "I never really thought of being anything else."

He suspects that the fact that he nearly died of pneumonia when he was six years old may have had something to do with it. He admired the family doctor, Dr. J.B. Person of Selma, whose picture is on display in Dr. Batten's office today.

After finishing Micro High School in the Class of 1938, 16-year-old Woodrow Batten entered Wake Forest College, then located in Wake County.

"Going to Wake Forest as an undergraduate in those days cost just peanuts," he says. "Tuition was maybe \$150, and I lived very simply. I brought a lot of canned food from home. One year my cousin and I rented a little apartment that cost \$15 a month. Another year I lived in a faculty member's home."

He earned part of his expenses by working as a lab assistant, he recalls.

Woodrow Batten earned his BS in Medicine (cum laude) from Wake Forest in 1942.

Bowman Gray School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, affiliated with Wake Forest, was brand new when Dr. Batten became a student there in 1942. Because World War II had created immediate needs for doctors, the usual four-year program had been condensed, enabling him to earn his Doctor of Medicine degree in 1944. Rejected for military service because of childhood asthma problems, he began a six-month internship in pathology at Bowman Gray.

While a medical student, Woodrow Batten attended First Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, where he soon noticed a lovely auburn-haired young woman who was the assistant organist and a member of the choir. She was Mary Gordon Walters of Bladenboro, a music student at Salem College. Even though he had come from a home where music was important and where his sisters had taken piano lessons, Woodrow Batten could not read music. The young medical student began to sing in the choir, and Miss Walters began to give him private tutoring in music. Their first dates were spent teaching him the bass part for anthems the choir was planning to sing.

"Woody" Batten and Mary Gordon Walters were married in June of 1946, when he was a resident in internal medicine at Duke Hospital in Durham.

Following a stint as Chief Resident in Internal Medicine at North Carolina Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem, the Battens moved to Asheville in January of 1949. Dr. Batten was in practice with Dr. Samuel Crow there.

But Dr. Batten wanted to return to Johnston County to practice. He had heard that a new hospital was to be built here, and that was a major factor in his decision to come back.

In late June of 1949 the 4-H boy from Micro returned here, and, save for a two-year period when he was drafted to serve in the U.S. Navy in Jacksonville, Fla., he has been here ever since.

The Battens have four children: Pam Batten Webb of Forest City, who is a mathematics professor at Isothermal Community College; Gordon Batten of Dillsboro, an artist and potter; Eric Batten of Bryson City, who is associated with the Carolina Mountains Outdoor Center and is a land developer and builder; and Dr. Julia Van Batten of Denver, Colorado, who formerly taught at the University of Northern Colorado and is now associated with a new charter school in Denver.

Dr. and Mrs. Batten have one grandson, two-year-old Tanner.

Dr. Batten has seen many changes in the practice of medicine over the past 50 years.

"I charged \$3 for an office visit, and \$5 for a house call in 1949," he recalls. "Most people paid in cash, but I have been paid with hams. Health insurance came along later, and office bookkeeping became much more complicated."

He recalls making many house calls to patients who lived on unpaved rural roads in remote locations. "I had a little Studebaker that I drove on those calls," he says. "Sometimes Dr. George McLemore and I would go places together, particularly if the case was a difficult one. There was no 911 number for people to call -- we had to go to them instead of their coming to us. The funeral homes provided the only ambulance service that was available in those days."

"When I was a boy, it was really rare for a person to go to the hospital," he observes. "A patient had to be very, very sick to go there, and sometimes the family would cry because they assumed a loved one who was sent to a hospital would not survive. That attitude has changed quite a bit. We have so many more medications and procedures to help patients than we did then."

As a medical student, he worked with young polio patients at an emergency hospital in Hickory. "We really couldn't do much for them then," he remembers. "But the Salk vaccine came along in 1954, and polio is now a thing of the past."

After the new Johnston Memorial Hospital opened [redacted] Dr. Batten was one of the first physicians to note that many of the hospitalized patients were there for mental rather than physical problems. "Almost half of the patients needed mental health care," he pointed out, "and yet there were no facilities for them."

Along with Dr. C.C. Sox, Dr. C.W. Sanders and Carl Worley, he was instrumental in the formation of Johnston County Mental Health Association in 1963.

"Johnston County has always had a high incidence of allergy problems," he notes. "The Neuse River Valley is a hotbed for mold, mildew, grasses and pollens, and there is a lot of asthma, bronchitis and emphysema. That hasn't changed. In an internal medicine practice, I see a lot of heart disease, high blood pressure, arthritis, and diabetes. Too many people smoke cigarettes. Too many are overweight."

Dr. Batten is very much aware of how patient-physician relationships have changed in the last few decades.

"Health care is not as personal as it once was," he observes. "Insurance regulations and government regulations can come between the patient and the doctor who is treating him, and that isn't good medicine."

He is a member of the Johnston County Medical Society, the North Carolina Medical Society, and the American Medical Association. He was the organizer and first president of the Johnston County Heart Association, which later became Tri-County Heart Association.

"I have always enjoyed practicing medicine," he adds. "Nothing else would have been the right thing for me to do with my life."