



Above, Western Reserve Medical School, 1935. Right, the author in 1935.
Photos courtesy of the author.



SAVED BY ΑΩΑ



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A man whose temple-hair was becoming gray bragged to me recently that he had graduated MD at Ohio State in 1990. He was momentarily nonplussed when I told him that I had received my MD degree at Western Reserve University in 1935. His eyes mirrored the spinning of his mental calculator. That long-ago day, so difficult for him to imagine, is engraved

in my memory. I hope the occasion of graduation is a precious day to remember for all physicians. It is more than a once-in-a-lifetime event for each of us. For me it represented both achievement and challenge. Everything that preceded it made the achievement all the more unforgettable. The challenge was how I was to get home to California from Cleveland after graduation.

Remember, this was seven decades ago. My medical school era, 1931 to 1935, encompassed the deepest, darkest days of America's Great Depression. Few physicians remain who struggled through it. Interestingly, my memory of the period is not clouded by recol-

lections of hardship. I had my premedical education in San Diego, where my father served as minister in a local church. I marvel, even now, at his faith and fortitude, with three other younger children to provide for, in encouraging me in my plan to venture far away to medical school. Of course, neither he nor I had any idea what the next four years were to be like.

During my first year in Cleveland I lived in a fraternity house where room and board were \$45 a month. Medical school tuition was \$350 a year. At the time, to meet these expenses was a breeze financially. My prospects brightened when I scored one hundred

percent on the first major biochemistry examination, a test that caused two or three of my fellow freshmen to flunk out. It was my good fortune to have previously taught organic chemistry for two years at San Diego State College.

After that first year, the financial crunch began to squeeze my family's resources, as it did for so many others. It was necessary that I move out of the fraternity house. I managed to get a job, along with three more advanced medical students, manning the dispensary at Cleveland's Wayfarers Lodge. As compensation, we were permitted to live at the lakefront Lodge in our own large room and to subsist on the house diet. In return, we tended to the ailments of the two thousand transients who annually filtered through the lodge. These itinerant men could stay three days, then had to move on, to be replaced by newcomers, each of whom had to be examined the evening of their arrival for "seam squirrels" and "crotch pheasants," epithets given to prevalent clothing and body lice. We had a twelve- to fifteen-bed sick bay. Lobar pneumonia was rampant. The practical medical experience for me was invaluable, although it took time away from my studies. Nursing care of bed patients was provided by selected long-term residents of the place, but we played the role of doctors. A physician employed by the city dropped by in the daytime to check on our work. It was a maturing experience for a young medical student, a task I performed for my last three years at the university.

There was still tuition to pay and other expenses to worry about, since this job paid no money, only room and board, such as it was. To help solve my financial problems during my last two years I also manned the dispensary at the nearby Otis Steel Mill from midnight to 7:00 AM, seven days a week. The job paid seventy-five dollars a month. Because of the economic depression, steel production was shut down much of the time. Usually my only duty was to answer and record

the calls of the watchmen every half-hour. Employee injuries and minor complaints were infrequent. This gave me time in the early morning hours to study, catch up on my assigned homework, and occasionally to doze. Income from this job enabled me to pay my tuition, as well as to meet other expenses, including an occasional date. Also, I managed to buy a 1929 Ford coupe for eighty-five dollars. Personal transportation was necessary to fulfill my obstetrical service during the summer months between my junior and senior years. We were required to perform home deliveries of approximately twenty babies born to indigent mothers. An obstetrical resident and nurse were called to observe and assist when delivery became imminent. This sometimes required a bit of "holding the head back" while waiting for the resident to arrive, an unkind thing to have had to do. One irate husband threatened to throw me down the stairs if I did not let go.

With graduation day approaching I began to realize that the only way I would be able to get back to California to begin my internship at the Los Angeles General Hospital was in my so-far trustworthy Ford. The terrifying question of how I was going to pay for gasoline and oil (one quart of oil every fifty miles at ten cents a quart) was keeping me awake nights at the "Bum's Rush" (as the Wayfarers Lodge was commonly called). I had exhausted my meager savings. Enter the AΩA prize.

During my freshman summer vacation I could not afford to return to California for a visit with my family. Instead, I applied for a George Crile Research Scholarship and received a grant of three hundred dollars. This supported me while I spent the summer working in a laboratory at the Cleveland City Hospital (now MetroHealth). My project involved determining the influence of carotenemia on the validity of the icterus index (then a commonly used measure of jaundice). During the latter months

of my senior year, as I whiled away the night hours at the steel mill, I put the results of my research into a paper I submitted in competition for the annual Alpha Omega Alpha prize. My day of graduation in 1935 was doubly memorable for me when it was announced that I had won the AΩA prize, and with it an honorarium of fifty dollars. I had my MD degree along with the wherewithal for my return trip to California. During the four days and nights of the drive home (at forty-five miles per hour, maximum), I pulled to the side of the two-lane road for a few hours of sleep in my car when I was overcome by fatigue.

If it had not been for the AΩA prize, and the gods that look after such things, I might have ended up a permanent resident of Cleveland's Wayfarers Lodge.

Editor's note

Helen Conger of the Case Western Reserve University Archives provided this information about the AΩA prize:

The Western Reserve University chapter of Alpha Omega Alpha (the Alpha of Ohio chapter) did award a prize annually for many years. The prize began in 1917. In the 1920s, the chapter did some fundraising, and in 1923 established the Alpha Omega Alpha Endowment Fund—the income to be used for the annual prize essay competition or lecture expense.

In 1935, two students won: Earl Fay Nation won the fifty-dollar first prize and Franklin Alois Benes won the twenty-five-dollar second prize award.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Dr. William S. Haubrich (AΩA, Western Reserve University, 1947), who submitted this article to *The Pharos* on behalf of Dr. Nation.

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