

50th Anniversary For Starke; 100th For City

Some people say that Dr. George Starke's bedside manner does as much for them as his medicines. Others, who know him better, say it does more.

The Sanford physician seems always surrounded by an aura of unhurried calm. He is gentle, yes. But it goes deeper than that. His whole attitude is one of concern; of listening to what people are saying.

It will be 50 years, come Sept. 15, that Dr. Starke has been listening to the problems of the people of Sanford, and providing healing for body and soul. Yet there still lurks, in his deep bright eyes and around the corners of his mouth, the hint of a smile

which says, 'this old world has some strange quirks, but together we can crack it.'

The first unkind twist came when the young George Starke applied to study medicine at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He had always wanted to be a doctor, inspired, says Starke, by the example of a Doctor Montgomery in his hometown of Melrose. So after studying through the 10th grade in that small community, he completed high school and earned his college degree at Florida A&M University.

But when he applied to the University of Florida, he was refused admittance.

That's the way it was, back in 1923, if you were black.

"I didn't get angry. I knew the rules," recalled Dr. Starke. "I just thought because I grew up near Gainesville, and because I'd be a day student they'd let me in. But that didn't make any difference."

Other all-white schools also turned him down, and finally he enrolled in the medical school at the all-black Meharry University in Nashville, Tenn.

Upon graduating, he and a group of colleagues had planned to open an obstetrics-gynecology clinic in Birmingham, Ala., but it didn't work out and Starke

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(Herald Photo by Jean Patesor)

DR. GEORGE H. STARKE: 50 years in medicine

Starke: 50 Years In Medicine

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set off for Lakeland instead. But on the way he was diverted by a doctor in Orlando who persuaded him to come to Sanford instead.

On Sept. 15, 1927, Dr. Starke opened his first practice in a small space above the old "Jerry's Drug Store" on Sanford Avenue.

"The town was pretty small in those days. There were only nine or ten other doctors here," recalled Starke. "But I was in a good location because a lot of people traded up and down Sanford Avenue, especially on Saturdays and Mondays. Those were the days the people came in from the farms."

Those were also the days when doctors made house calls, and Dr. Starke remembers driving out into the surrounding farm communities to deliver babies or answer emergency accident calls.

He had hoped to specialize in obstetrics and gynecology, but found himself answering the need in the small community for a family doctor and surgeon as well.

He had been in Sanford just a short while when he was accepted by Harvard University to do his residency at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. He was one of only four black doctors to be accepted — "and they kept a close watch on us," smiled the doctor.

But he recalls Boston and the "old Charles River" with fondness, reminiscing about the cold winter days when the river would freeze over and they could walk across it.

In 1933 he returned to Sanford and has practiced here ever since, becoming,

over the years, one of the strongest and brightest threads in the fabric of Sanford life.

From the beginning, his patients have been both black and white — "I guess when they heard I'd been to Harvard it helped," he said with a wry smile.

But despite the fact that many of his patients were white, it was not until 1947 that Dr. Starke was able to work in the old Fernald-Laughton Hospital. "The answer was always the same — 'closed staff,'" said Starke.

In 1947, he became the first black doctor to hold membership in the Seminole Medical Association — he was also the first black member of the Florida Medical Association, and the second in the American Medical Association.

In the beginning, said Dr. Starke, his attempts at improving race relations were mainly on a one-to-one basis. Later he helped found, and serve as vice president of the city's Biracial Commission. Its goals were to improve living conditions and seek better jobs and higher pay for blacks, and to obtain better schools for all children.

"Apparently it has changed," said Dr. Starke of black-white relationships in the community today.

"Children today don't have respect for the structures in society. Their attitude generally does not seem as good as in the old days."

While he has been involved in fraternities, lodges, and housing and recreation projects over the years, and most recently in the Night Fire interdenominational church

gatherings in the city, Dr. Starke's main devotion has always been to medicine.

"I'm one of those people who felt I never needed more than four hours sleep a night. I've kept office hours till one, two in the morning and then answered house calls to deliver two or three babies.

"That was my life, and I've enjoyed it."

Dr. Starke attributes much of his devoted service to the principles he was taught in medical school. "We were taught, number one, that our life is not our own but belongs to our clientele. And number two, that it was our job to alleviate pain by whatever method possible.

"Also, that we were to answer the call whether the patient had finances or not. In all the years, I don't think I've asked two people if they could pay for the treatment I was giving them," said the doctor.

"It was these principles that spurred me on and on through the years."

His wife, Ruth, who died a year ago last January, maintained the business side of his practice during their long life together.

Dr. Starke had planned to retire in September, on his 50th anniversary. But now it rather depends on whether he can get a replacement in time. And besides, the doctor is becoming increasingly reluctant to leave his practice.

"It seems when a man retired he becomes inactive; he loses his reason for living. And he dies," said Dr. Starke. "So I'll probably continue working after September — even if its only parttime."