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An Irish fulfillment of the Hippocratic Oath

Paint Him Irish!

By Pat Kourt

Norman Rockwell, you missed one! While you were capturing young love, childish pranks, old age, and city physicians, you overlooked a quiet Irish country doctor who remains a treasured memory to thousands of Western Oklahomans.

He called himself a "pulse and thermometer" doctor, but William Albert Ryan was a friend, confidant, and mentor to everyone he met.

Doc's arrival in Thomas, Oklahoma, in 1932, was one of those "I just came for the weekend and decided to stay" stories. His brother Red, a lawyer, had encouraged Doc to practice medicine in Watonga; however, during the thirties, starting a medical practice seemed impossible. Then, seven weeks later, two Thomas men, Bob Norris and Milt Herring, urged Doc to help them out for a weekend while their ailing physicians were recuperating. With only three shirts, eight cents, and an old Chandler car, Dr. Ryan moved to Thomas for a forty-year stay.

The OU Medical School graduate and former high-school wrestling coach wasted no time after his arrival in August, 1932. One of his first ventures was to choose a wife to share his long days and nights as a country doctor. He had met Mary Moore, an R.N. when he was a senior medical student. She had arrived in Thomas to nurse Mr. Southwell, who had pneumonia. Until Doc's death, Mary assisted him in his office. Their three children — Richard, Pat, and Alberta — filled Mary's time while Doc was busy tending expectant mothers or sitting by a patient's bedside.

Much of Dr. Ryan's memorable reputation revolved around his calm manner in stressful situations.

One cold December day, Doc's two sons raced across a pasture searching for a Christmas tree. Doc sat in his car reading a medical journal as he waited for the boys. Suddenly, shouts broke the silence as the brothers fussed and scuffled with a small hatchet. Never looking up from his magazine nor worrying about the dangerous situation, Doc, unlike most fathers, quietly said, "Richard, you get in the back seat. Pat, you get in the front with me." Both boys obeyed immediately, and the family drove home with nothing said.

Doc's calm mannerisms were also evident with his patients. In his green plaid flannel shirt and baggy khaki pants, he greeted every man, woman, and child as if that person were the only one in the world. In his tiny Main Street office, Doc would chew his plug of Day's Work tobacco, take a pulse, lean over to a small can on the floor, spit, and then listen to a patient's heartbeat. Even if Doc's patient needed only five minutes of his attention, the two of them might visit for half an hour while other people crowded the tiny waiting room. Mutt and Ruby Rymer, Doc's close friends for many years, recall, "He always had time for you, no matter what time of the day or night. He listened to aches and pains and problems and was especially good at cheering

up the elderly. He was like a magnet drawing people to him. I swear, though, he looked like he oughta be settin' on a tractor instead a havin' a stethoscope around his neck."

Almost unbelievably, countless folks from the Thomas-Fay-Oakwood-Putnam-Custer area have said that they can't remember Doc becoming angry about anything. Perhaps his Irish tenor voice, either singing or yodeling, kept him at an even keel. Whenever his old car got stuck on muddy, red-clay backroads, Doc would warble "My Wild Irish Rose." He laughed easily at mishaps and gave credit to his Irish ancestry. "Why, if I weren't Irish, I'd be ashamed of myself!"

Webb Barton, Dr. Ryan's office helper through his high-school days, remembers Doc's giving credit for his yodeling to the "crippled boy of the air," a radio personality of the forties.

"Too, there were the long nights when I went with Doc Ryan to deliver a baby way out in the country. He always made me sit in the car where I'd sleep until he was through and then would wake me up for the drive back to Thomas," Webb recalls with a wide grin.

"Kids. He had a special way with them. Doc bought pigs for me to feed, just to keep me out of trouble. I also washed his old gray car for a quarter a week. I learned responsibility from him," continues Webb.

In addition to children, Doc thoroughly enjoyed animals. One of his few pastimes was coon hunting, which took him and his companions such as Leo Crowdis up and down Rough Creek and along the South Canadian River. There was hardly a creek or pond in the area where Ryan didn't hunt or fish, usually with his grandson Greg or the Alexander twins. He used the outdoors as his favorite cure-all.

Also, using some of his surgical expertise, Doc "deodorized" two skunks and often was observed walking down the street with those critters on his shoulders.

Doc seemed especially fond of one coon dog he owned. He liked to brag that it was his "hundred-dollar dog!" When asked how he knew it was a hundred-dollar dog, Doc remarked casually, "Because I traded two fifty-dollar dogs for him."

Besides a quiet sense of humor and calmness about life, Doc **could** get in a big hurry — especially if a life were at stake. Many people remember his trail-blazing to reach a patient. As one friend spoke of those times, "The Lord was with him when he drove. He could turn his car on a dime! More than once, he laid two wooden planks across a washed-out area to reach an expectant mother." Once in a snowstorm, Doc drove back into Thomas for medicine and then returned it to the patient.

Doc's time of relaxation ceased, no matter where he was, if he received a call from the hospital. "All you could see was a streak of dirt," a friend remembers.

Whenever his patient entered Thomas Memorial Hospital, Doc expected the best care for him. If the gentle doctor ever became ruffled, it was only after an ailing patient wasn't given the very best care.

"Old Irish," as he sometimes referred to himself, had one character trait which upset many of his patients and close friends. He loved people so much that he wouldn't charge for his medical services. Bob Norris, a former owner of old Thomas Drug, once had a father-son talk with Doc, even though they were near the same age. Bob urged Doc to become more financially secure. "But I don't want to charge more, Bob; I'd lose all my friends." Since most folks had next to nothing during the Depression, that's what Doc thought he should take from them — nothing.

Despite reprimands, Dr. Ryan continued delivering babies for \$25-\$35. Often he didn't charge at all but stated firmly, "That's my boy there. No Charge." He never knew how much a family owed him because he didn't keep books. "People know how much they owe me" seemed to be his thought.

Ed Sweeney attested to Doc's generosity when he remembered answering a call as a volunteer fireman across the South Canadian River east of Thomas. With a cinder in his eye, Ed went to the Ryan home late that night and wrote a check in the amount of ten dollars for the emergency medical services. When Ed went to the drugstore the next morning, he found that Dr. Ryan had left nine dollars in change for him.

Slipping money back into a patient's pocket was not uncommon for Doc either. Because of such incidents, many of his friends paid him with cash only with a brief lecture attached to it. However, Doc and his family enjoyed cakes, chickens, fresh fruit, vegetables, and sides of beef from grateful patients. Also, the townspeople of Thomas

presented a car and a boat to the Ryans in appreciation for their dedication.

Another mark of devotion to Doc was the long list of babies who were named for him. He estimated he had delivered close to three thousand by the end of 1970.

With his favorite tobacco or an occasional cigar, Doc loved to sit in the old corner drugstore with banker Charlie Johnson and swap stories. Because the two men were physically similar in size and shape, out-of-towners often mistook Charlie for Doc. The short, plump twosome enjoyed many chuckles about the mistaken identities.

Doc's philosophy of life was simply "people first," and he bragged about what a great community he served. Denying himself to help others was a major reason for the town's success. He gave credit to Dr. Omer, one of his predecessors, for teaching him surgical skills. Doc talked lovingly of his mother from whom he said he inherited his compassion for others.

Even during his final hours, Doc was unique. He troubled no one as he prepared himself to go to the local hospital where he died of a heart attack. A previous attack had warned him to slow down and to take life easier; but of course, his medical practice took priority over his personal well-being.

Yes, he died just as he had lived for seventy-four years — quietly and unpretentiously. He "took life just as it came."

On a chilly April morning in 1974, hundreds of mourners crowded the Thomas United Methodist Church and wept softly for a man who had admitted that he "might be a legend."

So there he is, Mr. Rockwell, a venerable, beloved friend who gave every ounce of his energy to helping whoever was in need — Dr. W.A. Ryan, our wild Irish rose. 11

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