

Dr. Tom Earl's career at Hospital spanned 40 years

A small town country doctor

by Bill and Donna Beth Carter

From the Earls' picturesque country home in Burgoyne, Ontario, Dr. Thomas Earl, retired since 1988, looks back fondly on his days as a vibrant participant in the growth of the Saugeen Memorial Hospital.

Dr. Earl graduated (early, in 1944, because of the war) with the Class of '45 from Queens University in Kingston, Ontario. On completion of his military service (Hagersville and London Military Hospital), he avoided being shipped overseas by one month, due to the Japanese surrender in August, 1945. He returned to Westminster Hospital after the war, where he met Dr. Jack Lawrence, the physician who would set up a private practice in Southampton in 1946. It was Lawrence who persuaded the young doctor to establish his own private practice in neighbouring Port Elgin and join Lawrence on staff at the new Saugeen Memorial Hospital.

Lawrence and Earl were joined in opening the new hospital by Drs. J.E. Fraser (described as "the granddaddy of us all"), W.A. Broddy, W.E. George, J.V. Nelles and W. Wallace. Dr. and Mrs. Earl (Edna) arrived in Port Elgin on June 21, 1948 and retired on July 1, 1988 — after long and rewarding service spanning forty years.

Earl fondly recalls the early working conditions at the hospital, such as being on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "They [the patients] didn't go to emergency...we were called to go to their homes...and house calls in winter could be scary." As well, he remembers, "We did our own X-rays and lab work." He considers the conditions then to have been "no different from any other small hospital that is supported by the community...the working atmosphere was always very good."

Mrs. Earl remembers the original Medical Records Department as being located in a small room under the original stairwell. Much of the early equipment — bedside tables, over-the-bed tables, etc. — was built by the Carpentry Department. In the early days, he said, "Money was tight...we made do." He also recalls that "everyone knew everyone else...a family atmosphere...we all worked together."

During his 40 years of service, Earl saw many changes take place in the general evolution of the hospital, such as the gradual swing from being on call only for his patients, to being on call for everyone's.

At that time, he recalls, "Bill Weiss [Taxi] drove the original ambulance," and Weiss had a standing order to buy the Earls' used cars, e.g., "my old Pontiac," which he refitted to be used as ambulances. Driving the ambulance was later taken over by Dean Thede, then later again by Kent Milroy [Funeral Directors] and Pete Sullivan.

When asked if any one individual or individuals stand out in his recollections, Earl's answer was a quick: "Everybody had to be recognized for their adhesiveness." Working in a small community hospital, he says, everyone got along with everyone else, "...like a big family, we all worked together."

They worked together and they partied together. The hospital staff even had their own bowling and skating leagues. One night the doctors themselves went so far as to clean up the operating room after they had finished "...so everyone could go bowling."

Before hospital expansion there was a Nurses' Residence where the emergency room is now located, and this was the site of many parties, camaraderie and good times recalled by Dr. and Mrs. Earl.

When asked if he remembers any patient — famous or infamous — being treated at the hospital, Earl replied: "Everybody!"

Dr. and Mrs. Earl were both quite open about crediting the Hospital Auxiliary and community organizations for raising the money necessary for specialized equipment. He considers Saugeen Memorial Hospital to be "...one of the better-equipped and staffed" hospitals in the country.

When asked if he considers himself to be a small town, country doctor, he eagerly replied, "Yes. No question." Dr. Tom Earl was — and is — proud of his service to this community and adds:

"As somebody who has participated in the changes...I have nothing but the greatest respect and admiration for the staff, administration and hospital Board, and for the citizens of the area served by the hospital. I will be

following the progress of the [Saugeen Memorial] Hospital through the coming years."

Mrs. Edna Earl, always a valuable part of her husband's medical practice and the Port Elgin/Southampton community, added: "This one [Saugeen Hospital] beats many of them...it's the tops."



Jim Craddock, left, helps Dave Clazie of Paisley unload the Watson Canoe that he bought from the Greater Saugeen Trading Company. Clazie was the business' first customer. The Greater Saugeen Trading Company, located on Queen Street in Paisley, held its Grand Opening last Saturday.