

Dr. Frank Vanoni, Litchfield, CT

Interview by Ann Schillinger

There's a lot of stuff on Walker at the hospital. There's a portrait of him that you can borrow - they used to hang it in the waiting room, but someone, maybe a child, came along and punctured it with a pencil or something, so now it hangs in a back room. They have booklets, and pictures, letters. The person to call is Tim LeBouthillier.

I was the closest to him on the staff, but he was a lot older than I was.

Walker wasn't the only small town GP in this area; other doctors had practices in Norfolk and other towns; but he was a legend. He started at Charlotte Hungerford in 1930 - first appears in their Annual Report for 1929. (The hospital's new building was built that same year - the present psychiatric clinic was the original building.) He was a member of the visiting staff in 1929, without ward privileges. In 1933-34 he joined the attending staff, then in 1934-35 he was secretary of the attending staff. He was on its Executive Committee in 1946-47 and became Chief of Medicine in 1946-47. He was a member of the emeritus staff in his eighties.

His son Tom was a surgeon at Charlotte Hungerford; his wife's name was Midge.

Stories: there were a lot of stories about Walker. I remember that one time he was speeding down Route 4 and hit a car coming out of its driveway. The man behind the wheel was pretty shaken up and when he saw Walker approaching, he said "Oh, Dr. Walker, whenever I need you, you're here."

Another night he was coming down to the hospital for an emergency and skidded into a cornfield between Cornwall and Goshen; he just stayed in the car and dozed until help arrived, and never showed up at the hospital.

Another time a state policeman saw him parked at the roadside with his head bowed low over the wheel, and stopped to check if he was OK. Walker said, "Can't a man listen to the game?"

One time he got a call to go to a woman in childbirth. Her husband had died and she was all alone in the house with her children. He came, delivered the baby, cleaned up the mother, cleaned up the house, and cooked supper for the children before he left.

He always had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. He was so much part of life here. Everybody knew him, and he would come at any hour, anywhere. Weather was not a problem for him. He was really, really dedicated. He cared deeply about his patients. He knew who needed what. He became my uncle's doctor in 1962. He never treated him, but he needed a friend and Walker was that for him.

He was a legend, no doubt about it.

[Phone interview]

Walker was not a surgeon, he was a general practitioner – but in his day, GP’s took out tonsils and appendixes. I’m sure he did minor things like removing skin lesions and putting in stitches. I acted as an assistant to surgeons right up into the 80’s, but eventually we found that it took up too much time, so then the surgeons decided to hire another surgeon in case there was a need.

So Walker didn’t do major surgery but besides the tonsils, appendixes, skin lesions and stitches, he did episiotomies (we all did them, even the interns did) when he delivered babies, and he may also have assisted in caesarians – perhaps in emergency caesarians. It was not a big deal to get certified as a surgeon – the requirements were to go back to a residency in surgery for, maybe, six months.

This story was told to me by Mrs. Babbitt. Her mother was a nurse’s aide on the ward and participated in dozens of deliveries from about 1935 on. Sometimes the staff had to do double shifts at the hospital, and there was a little room with two cots in it called the “doctors’ sleeping room.” One time Walker had been working for hours and he went in and fell asleep in it. Later Mrs. Babbitt’s mother was exhausted and she went in and took the other cot. He saw her sleeping there when he woke up (they knew each other very well, he was her physician), and he told Mrs. Babbitt the next day, ”I slept with your mother last night.”

This same nurse’s aide (Frank doesn’t mention her name) kept a diary of every single delivery she participated in: parents’ names, patient’s name, sex of child, weight at birth, what problems may have occurred during delivery, and so on; and the hospital has been given this record. Walker appears in it many times. But they decided that the information it contained was too personal to give to us for the exhibit.

[Payments and fees] – I have no knowledge of that.

[VNA] The VNA that he founded was not the Torrington one, not the Goshen one either - I think it was the Northwest.

[Replies to questions about specific public health issues re: VNA]

Immunization campaign – Don’t remember.

Hygiene/water issues – Not aware of it - I’ll check with the Torrington City Hall.

TB – Not aware of anything special.

Polio – Polio was always with us, but I don’t know of anything special.

Infant mortality – No.

Maternal mortality – No.

Syphilis, other STDs – No.

Birth control – No knowledge.

Relationship to alternative medicine – I don’t know, but I would guess he would be open to trying something as long as it didn’t “get crazy.” He did use older techniques, like massage.

