

HARRIS COUNTY MEDICAL SOCIETY

Ellen Durckel

Interviewing

Dr. Mylie E. Durham, Jr.

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Q Well, the first thing you can do is tell me about your childhood. How old are you and where were you born?

A I am 65 years old. I was born in Houston, Texas. If you look right out that window over here, you will see the house in which I was born. Right across the alley, in this same block.

Q What street is it?

A It is 21st Street. It is a two-story green house right back here.

Q Tell me about your parents. What were they like?

A Well they were both pretty nice people. They ...my father was a doctor. He was born in Louisiana. And raised there. Went to high school there. Went to medical school at the University of Tennessee and went two years to medical school there and ran out of money. He came here to Houston out here in the Heights to work for a year to gain enough money to go back to medical school.

Q What kind of work was he going to do here?

A Pharmacy work. In those days I think that most of the medical students had some - about the only thing that had, really, that was concrete and a little bit scientific was pharmacy and so he already had his pharmaceutical license so he could practice pharmacy, he worked here in the Heights met my mother and they were married and he went back to school and came back here to intern -- he interned here at St. Josephs Hospital.

Q Where did he finish med school, Tennessee?

A Yes, University of Tennessee -- medical student.

Q And tell me about your mom.

A My mother was born and raised here in Houston. She -- her father was an Abercrombie and in the -- basically the oil business, but he was the other side of the Abercrombies that hit about 14 dry holes in succession and lost all his money and never did recoup it. Anyway, my father met my mother while he was working here and so -- she was raised here...

Q How many siblings did she have? Where did she fall in the line of her family?

A My mother? Did she have any sisters, you mean? Or brothers?

Q Or brothers?

A She had one brother and that's all.

Q And how about your dad?

A My father had four brothers.

Q And where did he fall in the line?

A I think he was second in line as far as age was concerned.

Q What are your boyhood memories of your home over here?

A They are very pleasant, really, I guess just like everybody else's is. As you can see, the house was in relatively close

proximity to the hospital. Heights Hospital started in 1924 -- my father worked out here -- he came out here after he interned and started in practice and there was a doctor already out here and his name was Sinclair. They started Heights Hospital in 1924 with four beds in a little small house and it has grown to what it is now.

Q How did it start up? Do you know much about the beginnings of it?

A Not very much -- I don't remember too much about it, except that it started up as a small hospital and it gradually grew -- it stayed small for a long time. My father could walk to work. Of course, in those days he didn't spend too much time in the office, because he had to go make house calls and he had to deliver babies in the home and everything -- so he would be gone maybe overnight sometimes just to deliver a baby.

Q How about your brothers and sisters?

A I have one brother and one sister.

Q Where did you fall in the line?

A I am the oldest.

Q So what are your other memories of your dad practicing medicine in 1924?

A I don't remember much about then, but as I was growing up I always remember being closely associated with the hospital, because we lived so close to the hospital, my dad was so intently involved in the hospital. I guess I've been around medicine all my life -- closely associated with it -- worked in the hospital when I was twelve years old.

Q What are some of those memories? What are some of those pictures that you might tell a grandchild -- or some of the stories about some of the things -- what was the hospital like then?

A The hospital, of course, was very small, but it was very busy because it was the only hospital on the north side in those days. I remember that my father used to like sports - all sports, and so did I, and he used to try to go to everything - go to all the ball games and everything, especially football, but we never made a football game on time -- we never saw the kickoff -- we were always late, because he had to work. I would have to go and bug him at the office in order to get him to leave to get there to at least see some of the ballgame.

Q What about the memories of him going on house calls? Did you have automobiles in those days?

A Yes, surely there were automobiles. When I got old enough to learn how to drive a car - when I got old enough to drive - and when I got old enough and strong enough to carry a golf bag, I saw my father a whole lot, because I caddied for him when he played golf. I went with him on house calls and I would sit out in the car -- in those days you didn't have any air conditioned

cars and I remember the damn mosquitos used to eat me up all the time.

Q Did he take you to see any of the patients?

A Very seldom, sometimes he did.

Q Did he tell you about some of the patients?

A Oh, yes, and in the hospital -- also, in those days, quite early, he used to do children's tonsillectomies in the home, and after I got old enough, it got to be where I would go with him and he would put the child under ether and then he'd fix everything and I would drop the ether in the mask over the child's face -- and so I helped him operate and take out tonsils in those days. Also, it was my job at the end of each tonsillectomy to -- he would carry the small child over to the couch in the living room -- and it was my job to see that that child was on its side with his head down so he wouldn't aspirate anything when he started waking up.

Q What are some of the other interesting patients that you remember as a boy -- compared to things that you wouldn't even do or experience today in medicine -- baby deliveries?

A I guess home deliveries -- I never did help him with those or anything like that, but I don't remember much about medical experience in my childhood. I remember the first operation I ever saw. He let me come in the operating room -- I was fourteen years old -- and in those days it wasn't like it is now. There wasn't any privacy or anything like that, and we didn't worry about malpractice too much. He gowned me - I walked in and he showed me how to scrub my hands and everything - and so they put the gown on me and put the gloves on me. He told me where to stand. He was fixing a hernia, I remember that -- and I stood there and he told me to put my hands up like this and not touch myself in any way -- and before long, it wasn't too long -- I felt really hot, and all of a sudden I felt this sweat coming on my brow and I reached up with my gloved hand and touched it and he said - go over there in the corner and sit down. I went over there -- I was just about to faint. He made me sit down and put my head down.

Q What do you mean there was no privacy and no malpractice? Tell me about that?

A Well in those days there really wasn't. Like, for instance, we have certain rules and regulations now in the hospital about who goes in the operating room. We aren't worried aboutI remember there was one famous one about a doctor, an obstetrician, who was at a cocktail party one evening and the hospital called him and told him that one of his patients was there and she was ready to go ahead and have her baby. So he turned around to his male friend and said, "Have you ever seen a baby born?" And so this guy said "no" and he said, "Would you like to?" and he said, "Sure". So they went up to the hospital

and he gowned him and took him into the operating room and told him where to stand over there and he watched the whole thing. See, that was all. Well, the woman learned that he was there in the operating room and he really had no authority to be there, and so she sued the doctor for invading her privacy. And I think he won a whole bunch of money. So you know, only authorized personnel can come in the operating room now.

Q Well, tell me about your other brothers and sisters? Did any other brothers or sisters go into medicine?

A Yes, I had one brother and there was 20 months difference in our ages and we were best of friends. He was an obstetrician/gynecologist. We went to college together and I went to the University down at Galveston to medical school and he went to LSU medical school in Louisiana. We practiced together, my father, my brother, and myself. Charles died when he was 44 years old. He had a stroke one Sunday afternoon while he was home and had a convulsion. He had a severe headache. His wife called me and I went over to see him and he said, "Matty, I have the worse headache that I have ever had in my life." So I said, "Where do you hurt?" At about that time, he had a convulsion and our family got him out of that and he said, "My head hurts me" and he put his hand back there and he had another convulsion and lost consciousness. So I brought him over to the hospital and did a tracheotomy on him so he could breath, but the next day he died and he never did regain consciousness. Prime of his life. And I have never got over it. I guess I never will. We were the best of friends. He was a great guy.

Q What about your early elementary and high school days?

A Well, I went to elementary school and junior high school here in the Heights.

Q What was Houston like in those days?

A I guess all right. Course the Heights was recovering in those days from ...well, it was a separate city for awhile, a small city. I think in 1936 it became a part of Houston and Oscar Holcombe did that. The first time he was mayor and I don't think that the Heights people ever forgave him for it cause everytime he ran again, they were against him.

Q They did not forgive him for making the Heights a part of Houston?

A Right. I can't remember much about the Heights in those days except we always considered ourselves kind of separate from Houston and it was kind of like being raised in a small town. The Heights was named the Heights because it is 8 feet higher than the center of town and it has always remained a kind of separate community from the rest of Houston. I went to elementary school over at Helms School which is right over here, just a block from us, and then I went to Alexander Hamilton Junior High School. Back when I was eight years old, I started

developing bronchial asthma and a couple of years after that I had pneumonia twice in one year and liked to died. So I was always pretty sick during my young life and because of my asthma and being sick so much and being out of school so much, I went to high school in Kerrville to a military school called Shriner Institute. I had gone to summer camp for three years in a small camp just outside of Hunt, Texas, which is about twelve miles from Kerrville, called Rio Vista. Both my brother and myself went there to the summer camp. Then I think my parents got to know Shriner and I did too in a way, especially in Kerrville, and so I went all three years of my high school there.

Q When did your interest in medicine and science stimulate, or was it always just a part of your life?

A I think it primarily in a way had always been a part of my life. I have always loved sports and in high school, although Shriner was a junior college and high school combined (which it still is). It was strictly military in those days. When you played sports, even though you were in high school, you played junior college sports. So I played on a tennis team and was number one on the tennis team. I had played tennis all my life and that is about the only sport I did. I played tennis up until I went to medical school and then I started playing golf. I played golf until about seven years ago when I got mixed up in medical politics and medical organizations. I haven't played anymore. I enjoyed myself at Shriners. It was a lot of discipline but that didn't worry me too much. It was an excellent school.

Q Did you become interested in becoming a doctor at that time?

A I probably became interested in becoming a doctor because of being so closely associated not only with my father, but also when I worked in a hospital when I was young.

Q Did you always do well in school? Were you expected to do well by your parents?

A Well, neither my mother nor my father, although they were very intelligent people, really insisted on us doing well. We just always knew that they knew we would do well, you know, so I guess both my brother and myself did because we were good students.

Q Was there any big expectations that you were to be a doctor when you grew up?

A No, it was just the opposite. My father always told us that he never did want us to study medicine. In fact, he always told us the bad things about medicine. He had a favorite saying. He said, "If you study peanuts, as hard as you study medicine, the whole thing about peanuts, you will be much richer, you will work less, and you will have more knowledge about one thing than you will about medicine. Both of us, of course, studied medicine.

Q Did you consider other professions?

A I considered one other profession. That was journalism because I think of my sports background and because of liking sports so

well, I just felt that in a way I would have liked to study journalism and write. But I never did pursue it anymore.

Q Did you consider being a professional athlete?

A No, I didn't.

Q What about the memories of your mother growing up? What are some of the things you remember? You told me you spent a great deal of time with your Dad.

A No, I spent very little time with my father. In fact, I had to grow up to be big enough to carry a golf bag or old enough to drive a car before I ever saw him at all. He worked all the time. He didn't seem to have any time for us at all. We probably took two family vacations in my whole lifetime growing up and that is all. Because of my bronchial asthma and my having to be out of school and away a lot, my mother always went with me because I was young. So I knew her very well and we were very close. I had the upmost respect and admiration for her. She left the rest of the family and went with me. We went to New Mexico one time and stayed about three months and went to San Antonio one time. I went to school there, one half year to junior high school. All this because of my illness.

Q What are your memories of her and your special times together? What influence did she have on your life?

A She had a lot of influence. She was a strict disciplinarian. She believed in discipline. She was a person who believed from day one that you should discipline yourself. That you should know what to do, how to do it, and do the right thing.

Q What was her name?

A Her first name was Jolly. Last name, of course, was Abercrombie until she married my father.

Q What are some other factors about your relationship with your mother that really influenced you? What are the things that you took from your relationship with her that influenced you for the rest of your life?

A She was, in my young life, more of a role model to me than my father was. Of course, she had to be father and mother to me. That is why I think she was so strict with me because she tried to act like my father sometimes because he never was around. We looked to her for everything. She disciplined us..she would whip me all the time. I would never cry and that would really make her mad. She just insisted that we were going to do things because it was the proper thing to do. For instance, I remember when we lived over here and there were two other houses on the block. There was a boy growing up about the age of my brother and so he, my brother, and myself ran around together. He started wearing long pants before we started wearing long pants. I use to say I am going to do this unless you say I

can't. She would say you can't do it and I would always say why? So I remember saying, "J. C. Wingle wears long pants. Why can't I wear them?" She would say, "I don't care if Jesus Christ wears long pants, you are not of the age where you can wear long pants, and I am not going to let you wear long pants." You know, there was no further talking about it. That's all there was.

Q How about the fun times? What did she teach you about enjoying life.

A We had a lot of fun together. She liked to read a whole lot and she read all the time. She was a very intelligent lady. She would develop me by insisting that I would start reading at a early age. We got the most enjoyment out of it. We were good friends and good buddies. When she stayed with me, we would go every place. Taught me early all the manners so we went to the restaurants, picture shows, everything.

Q Do you think that she and your father were close?

A Well, I don't think they were. My father, like I said, was always working. She would say that sometimes he wasn't working; that he was doing something else besides working. But I always figured that he was working because I never did see him and that's the only place I felt he would be. I thing that she resented this very much because she had to play second fiddle to medicine.

Q I think a lot of doctors wives have to do that.

A Sure. I think so. So consequently, she did not like it at all. She always fought it and I think that separated them a lot. It didn't separate them as far as their marriage was concerned because they stayed married all their lives.

Q Was she sad that you and your brother went into medicine?

A No, she was very proud that we both studied medicine.

Q So you graduated from hight school now and then how did you direct your life from there?

A Well, I went to Baylor in Waco to college.

Q What year was that?

A 1937 to 1941

Q What was your religious upbringing as a child?

A Baptist. I went to the Baptist church down the street.

Q Learned the Bible? Studied the Bible?

A Sure. We studied the Bible and also went to a Baptist college and I took Bible in college.

Q So you were premed at Baylor and what were those years like?

A Those were good years, of course. We had fun. Baylor, at that time, was a small school. A good school. I was very interested in chemistry and during my last year, I worked. Although I was fortunate and I did not need to work because of my father and his financial structure. But I got a job and worked in a laboratory as a laboratory assistant in

chemistry. I had a good time during college.

Q What are some of our vivid memories of those days?

A I think the one big thing I can say, outside of the learning process through college was.....well, I was never very smart so I had to apply myself and study alot, but I was rooming with my brother and we were doing the same thing together.

Q You were very close.

A Yes, we were very close.

Q Do you have any other vivid memories of things that you did? That you look back at and might laugh at today? What were the fashions and the trends and the music?

A I think most of us wore double-breasted suits in those days. I don't remember about the music in those days.

Q Baptists don't listen to much of it?

A Yes, we did and we had a good time. Our home was never strict religiously. As far as my father and mother doing things and having parties and things. They were very liberal.

Q When you look back over your childhood and I realize it has been a while, but were there any people that influenced you a great deal through your childhood, through college? Were there any influential figures that you particularly remember shaped your life? Who were they? How did they do?

A I don't remember off hand. I remember that one of the reasons I went to Baylor was because of a young man that I roomed with in Brownwood at Shriners Institute who later went on to Baylor and played football there. I was going to go to Baylor on a tennis scholarship and I was offered a tennis scholarship to go to the University of Texas and play tennis there, but I didn't play tennis when I went to Baylor because I felt like I was going to have to study and take premed. So I didn't do it. We got to be good friends at Shriners Institute. He was older than I was. I think one of the main reasons I went to Baylor was because of him. His name was Milton Evans. He was an athlete. He was small, even in those days, to be a good athlete, but he had a lot of coordination. He was quick and he could do anything in sports. I admired him primarily because he could do everything he did good. I didn't try to emulate anything that he did except that I often wished that I was as talented as he was in sports. He could do all kinds of sports and do them well.

Q Were there any teachers along the way? Aunts, uncles, friends of the family that particularly influenced you beyond your parents?

A No, I don't think so. Frankly, I spent most of my time when I was young either being sick and away from home, or being

away from school. There wasn't anyone in my family that really helped us that I remember very well, except my mother's mother. At one time, I think, in my young life time, almost every member of either my mothers' family or my father's family lived with us. I don't know why in the hell that was, but it was, and I have often thought about it. You know there was never just the family that lived there at home. I remember one time we had both my mother's mother and father with us. In my young life, I remember my mother's father who was a great man to me.

Q What was his name?

A His name was Charles Abercrombie. My brother was named after him. I was named after my father. I am a junior. He knew all the oil fields stories and everything else. I remember he smoked a cigar all the time.

Q He used to tell oil field stories?

A He used to tell you stories that would curl your hair. He really would.

Q Do you remember any of them?

A No, not really. No.

Q What was it about your mother's mother that sticks out in your memory?

A She was probably one of the most selfish women that I have ever known in my whole life. I think there were two reasons I didn't care for her too much. I cared for her because she was my mother's mother, but she was so selfish with my mother even though she lived in my mother's home. She was still very selfish with my mother and I swore that I would never find a woman that was as selfish as she was. She never wanted my mother to go any place with my father. She never wanted them to go any place together at all. She wanted her to stay home. I took a lot of disrespect. She loved my brother. For some reason, she thought he was just the greatest thing that ever lived, and you know she didn't have too much time for me I thought in those days.

Q Well, that was a mistake!

A I didn't care for that and I remember her for that. She really loved my brother. She thought he was so great and could do everything just right, you know. There was just 20 months difference in our ages so we were pretty close together all the time.

Q So did you meet the woman you were going to marry in college?

A Yes, I have been married twice. My first wife I met in college.

Q She was different from your mother's mother?

A Both of my wives have been different from my mother's mother. I met the woman I married, the first time, who is

the mother of my two children who are both boys, in Waco. I met her in college. She and I were married after my second year in medical school.

Q Well, what was it about her that made you decide to marry her? What was she like? What did she do?

A She acted like she had a lot of sense to me at the time. She was always very happy, happy go lucky, and she was

Q How did you meet her?

A I met her on a blind date. My brother started going with a girl who he later married. He married while he was at school, in college. She was this girl's best friend so we started going with best friends, that is what it was. He was going with his future wife and so I met her through him. It was a blind date, I guess you might call it. We went together all the time that I went to college. I met her in my third year, my last year in college, at the beginning of it. I went through college and two years of medical school.

Q Then you decided to get married?

A We decided to get married.

Q Was she really the one you wanted to marry? Were you in love with her? Was there anyone before or did ?

A No, I have always gone with a lot of women, so I really didn't have anybody to really marry.....You know

Q This is historic now. These things are very important. They shape peoples' lives. Your choices in that area.

A They shaped my life, all right. I guess it did. But anyway we went together for a long time and I don't know whether I just didn't get married out of sheer cavalierism because I just thought it was the thing to do. Looking back on it...

Q Well, I think that is commendable. In 1985, I think that is a commendable act that you performed there.

A Well, I don't know whether it was or not. Anyway, I think my brother was already married. He married her best friend and I don't know, looking back, I don't think I ever really loved her. I just felt it was the thing to do, just to make her, what is the old saying, to make her a honest woman.

Q Well, that's still commendable. Okay, we need to get back to the influences. You did well enough to get into medical school. How did you chose the medical school you were going to go to? What was going on then?

A I had always figured that I would go to medical school and be a doctor and that I would go to the University of Texas down at Galveston. In those days, I thought it was the best medical school in Texas.

Q What year are we talking about now?

A Going to medical school? In 1940.

Q So you applied? No problem?

- A Sure.
- Q Did you apply at other places?
- A No.
- Q What was that experience like?
- A Of course, it was a new experience all together. Especially for me. Being away from home wasn't, of course, because when I look back I had been away from home most of all my life. So I didn't really mind being away from home. I was close enough to home that if I wanted to come home I could anytime. It was really a new experience to me like it's with anyone else. It was an enjoyable experience for me because it was doing something I wanted to do and I liked to do very much.
- Q What was it like to go to medical school in those days?
- A It was hard as hell. We worked hard.
- Q How about the war? Was there war at this time?
- A I'll come to that. After I had been there for two years, the war became a reality. All of us that were breathing and could breath were taken into the Army or Navy. I volunteered for the Army. I had been to military school so it was old hat to me. They took us into the Army and sent us down to Fort Sam Houston and we went through basic training there. All the medical officers and then we went to school as private first class. They were doing the ASTP program in those days. Then when we graduated, I graduated as a 1st Lieutenant in the Army.
- Q What was life like then? Did you chose a specialization?
- A No. I came here to Houston to intern. I interned at Jeff Davis. In 1944 they said they would take 10% of the intern class and let them stay in a residency during the war and the rest of them had to go in the Armed Service. So I applied for surgery and stayed an extra year as a surgery resident. We had a very skeleton house staff in those days so we did work an awful lot. After that year, I went down and said take me, I want to go in the Army, and they said the war is over and we are not taking anyone anymore. Any way you can't go in the Army because you have a history of chronic asthma. We aren't taking anybody in with any kind of history of chronic illness. I was still having asthma, but only sporadically in those days. But I was doing everything I wanted to do. After that year, I saw how hard my father was working out here. So I came out here with him to start a general practice.
- Q Your mother was still alive?
- A Yes.
- Q And she was happy about this?
- A Yes, she was happy that I was working here and with Dad.
- Q And had your children been born at this time?

- A No, neither one had been born at this time. No, after I got in practice, the first one was born.
- Q So tell me about those first days starting to practice medicine in Houston, Texas. If you were going to paint a picture for a grandchild, what was it like?
- A Well, I would say, that it was difficult in those days like it is now to get started. It is always difficult in medicine to get started. I don't care where you are or if you are a super specialist or whether you are a family practitioner (general practitioner in those days). But, I had a good background for working. I had a whole year even though I was a first year surgery. At the time, there was so much work to do and very little people to do it so I had a good background as far as working and doing work. Most of it was trauma, however. But I had been around the practice of medicine long enough, worked in it, and born in it, that I felt that I knew how to relate to people as far as being a doctor was concerned. The most difficult thing I had to overcome when I came out here (one block from where I was born and in the community where I had been raised) was that my name was Mylie Durham, Jr. Everybody out here called me Junior. I made house calls at night and I would say, "All right, Miss So and So, you need a shot of this and I will write you two prescriptions and if you can, come in the office in the next couple of days and see me". She would say, "You really think I need this, Junior?" and I would say, "Yes you do." and she would say, "Will you call your father?" It was very humiliating, especially to someone who thought he was the greatest doctor in the whole world. It was hard to overcome this stuff. I had people come in that would not let me give them an intravenous because I was young and I was raised with them. They called me Junior. "Junior, call your dad and ask him to do this." So that was the greatest thing. It really got to my brother more than it did to me. But Charles really hated it. He was who he was and he was there..
- Q Did you ever think about leaving?
- A No, we never did. We had such a fellowship and such respect for our father that we never thought about leaving. No, but it was sure hard to swallow.
- Q At least until the wetness dried behind your ears.
- A You know, for a long time, even after that, I had a year of surgery and in those days, any kind of surgery we did over there, I did a whole bunch of surgery, and the training program had very few doctors in it so we did a lot of work.
- Q How did you chose surgery? Did you consider other specialties?
- A No. I came back here and was doing general practice so I

did general practice for twelve years out here with a two year stint back in the Army. I really worked hard to get myself in the Army and I stayed two years during the Korean War and then came back here.

A You went over to Korea for a couple of years?

A No, I didn't. I went to Austria and to Italy and was stationed over there.

Q During World War 11?

A During the Korean War. Then I left my practice and went out to the medical center and took a four year surgery residency and then came back here and did surgery. But in those days, when I first came out here, I did OB, medicine, and