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Tollman, B.S., M.D., J. Perry

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Interview with
Perry Tollman, M.D.
College of Medicine 1929

By Frank Menolascino, M.D.

1980

Dr. Menolascino: It is my pleasure to interview Perry Tollman, member of the class of 1929, also a former Dean of the University of Nebraska College of Medicine. You have in your lap the Caduceus of 1929; your picture is in there. Thinking back fifty years what do you remember most about your experience as a medical student here at the College of Medicine?

Dr. Tollman: Well, I suppose the bare dope that we were given before we came here had considerable influence, because a member of our class shuddered with the thought that we understood that by the end of the first year the class was going to be reduced by at least 25% and that just seemed to be cut and standard. I think I was a little surprised at the cordial reception most of us at least received with Dr. [John] Latta as our first instructor and then the other course we took at the time was bacteriology called then. But that reduced the class appreciably. And then of course, we went on into the gross anatomy, which took up practically all the rest of the year and some of the other studies. Personally, I found all the faculty I dealt with very congenial and easy to approach although I know that there were a lot of my classmates who shuddered if they saw one of them looking at him. (Laughter) They were sure that they were going to be ushered to the Dean's office the next thing.

Dr. Menolascino: Well, as you look back on your College of Medicine days as a student, did you have an opportunity to reflect on this when you became Dean yourself?

Dr. Tollman: Oh, yes, I thought about it every now and then because obviously there are changes going on all of the time. I think there's probably not a year but what some courses are different than what they were the year before and then it seems to be a pattern that every few years you have to shake up the whole thing. Now a few courses stay on but they rename some of

them and go back to their same notes in teaching, I suspect, but many others change a great deal with new information and new philosophies of education.

Dr. Menolascino: You finished in '29.

Dr. Tollman: Twenty-nine.

Dr. Menolascino: And then, as I recall, you took a residency in Pathology?

Dr. Tollman: I was in Pathology at the Brigham Hospital in Boston and then Dr. Poynter invited me to come back to the faculty here primarily in Clinical Pathology which was beginning to show some importance. Really, up to that time, blood counts and urinalysis were the only laboratory work and the interns did that. But within the few years that I was in school there was much more being written about the importance of different kinds of blood counts and bacteriology and culture work was really blossoming a great deal. So, I was asked to come back to head up what amounted to the Clinical Pathology section of the Pathology Department.

Dr. Menolascino: So you came on the faculty here. When was that when you came on the College of Medicine?

Dr. Tollman: In September of 1931.

Dr. Menolascino: Okay and you were then here with Latta and [Ed] Holyoke?

Dr. Tollman: Yes. I was starting off a junior member of the faculty so we just went on from there.

Dr. Menolascino: All right, good. What do you recall as far as the buildings? Now some of our other interviewees have commented there was essentially the North Building, South Building, University Hospital and they built a new wing on it I think while you were in school.

Dr. Tollman: While we were in school, yes.

Dr. Menolascino: And the Conkling Hall, I think, and that was about it.

Dr. Tollman: Conkling Hall had been built, but the hospital consisted of only the, what we call Unit 1 wing, was all there was of University Hospital. While we were here, they built what was called Unit 2 and that disrupted the baseball diamond and track that used to be behind the University Hospital.

Dr. Menolascino: They built that to the West of Unit 1?

Dr. Tollman: Of Unit 1, yes.

Dr. Menolascino: As you look back on that time as a member of the faculty in the late '30s actually, what was the political climate of the public climate as far as the support of the College of Medicine in the '30s and the '40s?

Dr. Tollman: Well, of course you will remember those were, well, you wouldn't remember.

Dr. Menolascino: My dad kept telling me that but you're right, you're right. (Laughter)

Dr. Tollman: Because the Crash of '29 and the drought of the early '30s had reduced the productivity of this state just tremendously, really. And so there was even more concern about taxes than there is at the present time. I'm not sure that the people were any more vocal than they are now, but at least the legislators knew that they were going to have to be awfully cautious about taxes if they wanted to keep their jobs. So, well, I can give you a small example. In the first year or two that I came here we started an on-the-job training of medical technologists. They were technicians then but they have become technologists since. There was no tuition. They worked in the laboratory doing the things that they were being trained to do and among the first three that finished our course, one stayed on for a year at no salary because there weren't any jobs. Hospitals out over the state generally, for instance, and this is true for adjoining states, didn't have anybody in the laboratory. If the doctor wanted a urinalysis he did it or taught one of the nurses to do it and maybe somebody would do a blood count, but that was the magnitude of

laboratory work at that time and so we just kind of went on from there. By the way, the end of the first year I was on the faculty, the Legislature cut the salary of all state employees by 25%.

Dr. Menolascino: They cut the salary?

Dr. Tollman: They cut the salaries by 25%.

Dr. Menolascino: How did you explain that to your wife?

Dr. Tollman: Uh, well, she's a Nebraskan and I think understood. (Laughter)

Dr. Menolascino: Okay, okay.

Dr. Tollman: As it happened, I was hurt less than some of the others because I had spent that first year paying back some of my college debts and finished up enough of them that the 25% cut didn't hurt quite that much.

Dr. Menolascino: And in the '40s how was the scene here when you were a faculty member?

Dr. Tollman: Oh, one little incident that might amuse you of that early '30s period. Dr. Poynter was Dean and of course had to appear before the Legislature to justify the enormous expenditures of the medical campus and one of the legislators said, 'Can't you run that hospital on less money than you're spending now?' And he said, 'Yes, I suspect we could. We could put straw on the floor.' And they apparently accepted that enough so that we got along and as an example of the rates that we were accustomed to at that time in the mid-30s, and I don't know the precise date off hand, there was quite a hassle going on as to whether the counties should pay anything toward the cost of hospitalizing patients from those counties. And the Legislature finally devised a formula that the county would pay 2/3's of the cost of the hospital day, but not to exceed \$4.00 per day.

Dr. Menolascino: Not to exceed?

Dr. Tollman: Not to exceed. And, actually, our costs were not a lot above that because nurses got \$35 to \$50 a month. The Head Nurse probably got a lot more than that but that was the scale of pay during those real hard times.

Dr. Menolascino: What about the size of the class did that go down during the Depression years?

Dr. Tollman: No, no.

Dr. Menolascino: The same?

Dr. Tollman: No, the class really remained very much the same until the war years came along when there was a good deal of pressure to enlarge the numbers of graduating students which we accomplished in part by increasing the number per class and then by going to the three year curriculum, which we used all during the Second World War. But no, that period of the '30s and '40s was when the numbers of physicians in small communities was declining so we were being asked repeatedly, 'Can't you turn out more doctors so we can have a doctor in our community?' Now those doctors who were retiring from the small communities were the ones who were graduated by the fly-by-night schools of the 1900 period when finally the Flexner Report came out and called attention to the bad status of many, many of the schools. But, that generation of doctors was dying and the communities were asking for more so we were not urged to cut back.

Dr. Menolascino: So, with World War ...

Dr. Tollman: World War II and then with the military needing so many physicians we were urged, 'Can't you increase your classes somewhat?'

Dr. Menolascino: And you went under the three year accelerated program?

Dr. Tollman: We went under the three year accelerated program. Perhaps it ties in here as well as any, I'm sometimes asked, and 'Were there changes in the qualities or perceptions of the medical students the kinds of people we dealt with over that span of years?' I think the most

dramatic change, as far as I'm concerned, related to World War II. When the very great majority of our students were in the military service assigned to the Medical School, mostly Army some Navy, Air Force wasn't separated at that time, and then there were some students who were going through in the usual fashion, but for the first time in my remembrance, medical students had a regular, consistent income, and began to be married while they were in medical school.

Dr. Menolascino: They were receiving a Service stipend?

Dr. Tollman: They were receiving a Service salary and this led to some friction between the Navy boys and the Army boys because the Army had to get out and drill every Saturday. They had to stay in uniform. The Navy boys had uniforms but they didn't have to wear them and they didn't have any drill formations and so forth but that's beside the point. But, anyway, this gave them an opportunity for marriage, which hadn't applied to very many. For instance when my class graduated, I don't know but I would guess, there were not more than eight or ten of the 74 who were married by the time they graduated. With the war that was reversed, almost, and in the years following World War II perhaps 25% of the students were married when they came to medical school.

Dr. Menolascino: How did your salary do in the '40s?

Dr. Tollman: What?

Dr. Menolascino: How did your salary do in the '40s? You were not doing too well in the '30s.

Dr. Tollman: Well, as a faculty member none of us really expected to earn as much as a practicing physician earned. We did have, however, a little promise of security in a sense that we were, we had a pension promise. If we looked at the details of the proposal if we stayed on the faculty to the time of retirement and worked up to the top levels of University pay, we could get as much as \$200 a month pension. That plan was set up when I think the Chancellor probably got \$4,800 a year.

Dr. Menolascino: Wow.

Dr. Tollman: And it wasn't changed for years and years and finally, of course, that changed over to the TIAA contributing formula.

Dr. Menolascino: CREF.

Dr. Tollman: And so on. But, our salaries were I think not bad. They didn't match the practicing physician but I think we had a feeling of security enough in our positions that we didn't worry all that much.

Dr. Menolascino: Now the '50s brought some major changes for you.

Dr. Tollman: That brought major changes, yes.

Dr. Menolascino: You had been in Pathology and now you became Dean.

Dr. Tollman: Yes.

Dr. Menolascino: Why did you choose to become Dean if I may ask?

Dr. Tollman: That's a long story.

Dr. Menolascino: Well, I mentioned to you before we started you were the Dean here when I was in the College of Medicine. It's the first time in my life I can ask the Dean questions instead of the other way around. (Laughter) I mean you've been on the faculty.

Dr. Tollman: Yes, I had been on the faculty you see then twenty years but things were changing. The review of medical schools was becoming more critical and our school was one that was considered to be not doing average level training by and large especially in the clinical years because up to that time, all of the clinical faculty were volunteers, including the Chairman. And this led to a degree of individualization within the teaching of any department and it was not really coordinated very well and complained to the students that some of the men, and especially

the busier ones, that they really wanted to hear and be involved in their teaching would have to get somebody else to take their place this day or this week and so on, so I think there was some basis for question. And then my predecessor in the office again had the facility for annoying an unusual number of people so there came to be a lot of friction and tension between the Dean and faculty and this led to some tensions among faculty, et cetera, and it finally came to the place where he left and they asked me to take over the job. I think I was in an unusual situation really, within the faculty, in that my contacts were with basic science faculty and with the clinical faculty because with the pathologic service and the laboratory service I was dealing with the clinicians all the time and I think they felt that I was one who understood all phases of the faculty composition training and responsibilities, et cetera. And I felt I could do it and so I said, 'Yes.'

Dr. Menolascino: How long were you Dean?

Dr. Tollman: Twelve years.

Dr. Menolascino: Twelve years. I know it's difficult, but would you point to your three major accomplishments from your point of view. I know it will be difficult because many things went on then.

Dr. Tollman: Yes, a number of things happened. One, I think this change led to a healing of some of the tensions within the faculty. We were able to bring in full time people within the clinical departments in which we brought in Dr. [Robert] Grissom in Internal Medicine, Dr. [Merle] Musselman in Surgery, uh.

Dr. Menolascino: Dr. [Gordon] Gibbs?

Dr. Tollman: Dr. Gibbs in Pediatrics and ...

Dr. Menolascino: I think Dr. [Roy] Holly was.

Dr. Tollman: No.

Dr. Menolascino: I've been corrected on that that's why I hesitated.

Dr. Tollman: Lester O'Dell.

Dr. Menolascino: Okay.

Dr. Tollman: I am blocking because, well you don't know radio of that period. There was a famous character on the radio, Digger O'Dell, and he was very promptly named Digger.

Dr. Menolascino: That's right. Now wait a minute, you're getting into my age group.

(Laughter) I came to the College of Medicine, you know, in '53. You brought the first four full time staff.

Dr. Tollman: That's right.

Dr. Menolascino: That's a major step forward.

Dr. Tollman: Well, as we developed our philosophies and I must say that Ruben Gustafson who was Chancellor at the time was really a very great help in all of this. I think he understood the medical component of a university better than his predecessors and if I may say, of his successors. And so that seemed to be the important first step. Agreed this is going to take more money. We went to the Legislature and they were receptive. They didn't ever give us as much as we asked for but then I've never known that to happen. (Laughter) Second, it was realized we were going to have to do more building, have more space and more facilities for various activities around the place and so we got this building program going. And then we got into more research and one of the things we got was the Eppley Building, which was the first concrete example of coordinated research functioning on this campus. Now there had been research going on in the basic science departments most strongly but some in the clinical departments before that.

Dr. Menolascino: I ...

Dr. Tollman: There's one little comment, almost a side comment in a way, I'd like to toss in. You may remember a character by the name of Terry Carpenter who was in the Legislature for years and years and years. Terrible Terry and he was very proud of the name.

Dr. Menolascino: Yes.

Dr. Tollman: Very shortly after I came into the office, Terry called me and wanted to know if he and his wife could come down and visit with me about the medical campus and what we were doing and what our hopes were and so forth. And they came. We spent a whole day; I went over everything. Opened up all of our books, we looked at the curriculum and talked about why it was organized as it was and we toured the facilities and hospital and dropped a few hints of things that we were not able to do in caring for patients that were a part of current medical practice of the time and so on and I must say that Terry was always helpful for the rest of the twelve years I was in that Dean's office. Now he tore a lot of other people apart but I must say that Terry I think understood what we were trying to do and I found him very helpful.

Dr. Menolascino: And you got many things done.

Dr. Tollman: We got some good starts.

Dr. Menolascino: The new Conkling Hall.

Dr. Tollman: No, Conkling Hall had been built before that.

Dr. Menolascino: That had been built? Nebraska Psychiatric Institute?

Dr. Tollman: We got the new Nursing School building, the one beside Conkling Hall.

Dr. Menolascino: Yes. That's what I meant, the new one.

Dr. Tollman: NPI was one of the earlier ones. We got the Animal House which has been now renamed a couple of times. We got the start of University Hospital, we called it Unit 3, has almost been covered up since.

Dr. Menolascino: Combined program with Children's Hospital.

Dr. Tollman: Combined program at Children's Hospital and so I think we got some things done.

Dr. Menolascino: You must be very proud of your accomplishments as Dean. I mean that sincerely, you must be very, very proud. After you left as Dean as I recall you went to Thailand.

Dr. Tollman: We were in Thailand for a year. They were opening a new medical school there so I went up and worked with that faculty which was a real interesting experience. I must say that I found the Thais a friendly people. They accepted us. The one thing that did bother a little bit is that they're very deliberate. I caught on very quickly when I got there that, of course, I was working with the Pathology Department, that the best way was going to be to talk over with them some things that might be changed and present this as several alternatives, what I saw as the advantages and disadvantages of each and then nothing would happen. Then about three months later here would come a memo from the Chairman of the Department that this is going to be and he always picked the one that I had thought I had presented the most advantages for. But they had to talk it over and they made the decisions and I thought we got along very well.

Dr. Menolascino: So the last fifty years have been very good years for you, haven't they?

Dr. Tollman: They have. They have.

Dr. Menolascino: You've done a great deal.

Dr. Tollman: And that's been a most fantastic fifty years in a great many respects.

Dr. Menolascino: I know you've been interviewed before as far as the Centennial, a hundred years of our medical time, you represent half of that one hundred years. Miss Cessna, our Librarian, has discussed the role I think you having been a staff member understand the value of a library. Indeed that is a major backbone of the College of Medicine. Could you comment on that?

Dr. Tollman: Yes, I can tell you things about that. Some of this antedates my Deanship, so I'm not taking any credit for that. But in those hard years of the early '30s, this faculty and pretty heavily the basic science faculty with good support from the clinical faculty but they weren't being paid so this was not quite the same situation, decided that maintaining the library accessions and function was one of the most important things to do and they agreed to cutting their departmental allowances for general maintenance of their department in order that the subscriptions and the various library functions could be kept up. So this has been a tradition going back a long way. And of course, some of those earlier men on the faculty really started and gave this library a big boost. They were bibliophiles, Leroy Crummer stands out particularly. So that, yes, I think the library has been a particular point of pride with this faculty for a long time.

Dr. Menolascino: And the book in your hand represents fifty years ago for you.

Dr. Tollman: Fifty years ago; 50 years ago.

Dr. Menolascino: And that's fifty years I personally have appreciated reviewing with you for our Archive of this Centennial year. Thank you very much, Dean Tollman.

Dr. Tollman: It's been a pleasure. Good.

Dr. Menolascino: Thank you.