

## OSCAR SYME

1919                    born in Rock Springs, Wyoming

1932-1936            high school in Westminster (Denver), Colorado

**1936-1940            premedical education, University of New Mexico (B.A., 1940)**

**1940-1941            Instructor in Chemistry, University of New Mexico**

1941-1944            medical education, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons  
(M.D., 1944)

1944-1945            intern, Bellevue Hospital (New York City)

1945-1947            United States Army Medical Corps

1947-1949            residency in Pediatrics, Babies Hospital (New York City)

**1949-1987            private practice in pediatrics in Albuquerque, New Mexico**

1951                    board certification in Pediatrics

**1987                    retirement in Albuquerque**

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ORAL HISTORY OF MEDICINE

Interview with Oscar Syme, M.D.  
March 2, 1990  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

The following is an interview with Dr. Oscar Syme of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Dr. Syme is a pediatrician who practiced here since his arrival in 1949 until he retired in 1987, approximately three years ago. This interview was held on Friday, March 2, 1990 in Dr. Syme's Northeast Heights home. I, the interviewer, am Professor Jake Spidle of the University of New Mexico Department of History and the New Mexico Medical History Project.

SPIDLE: As indicated in my letter, Dr. Syme, this is an informal interview and I hope we can just chat. I would like to start by getting some background information about you. I didn't realize you were a westerner until I began compiling your biography. You were born in Rock Springs, Wyoming?

SYME: Yes.

SPIDLE: Was yours a ranching family?

SYME: No. My father was storekeeper in Superior, Wyoming, which at that time was a coal mining town. We actually lived in Superior but the hospital was in Rock Springs and I was born there.

SPIDLE: Do you come from any medical background?

SYME: Not at all. There are no doctors in my family that I know of.

SPIDLE: What made you decide to go that route?

SYME: I think my mother put the idea in my mind. I can't remember when I wasn't going to be a doctor. And working in that direction made my choice of places and things easier.

SPIDLE: Homer Musgrave, the last physician I interviewed before you, kind of backed into medicine.

SYME: Some do, but for me there was no question because I had the wherewithal and the intellect for it.

SPIDLE: Did you grow up there in Wyoming?

SYME: Well, my grandfather had a ranch at Laramie, Wyoming, but I hardly remember Rock Springs because we left there when I was five. After my father left the coal mining town he became a traveling salesman, so we moved from place to place, mostly in Colorado. I lived in Montrose, Trinidad. Actually we lived here in Albuquerque for about six months but that was 'way back in 1926, before I was even a first grader in school. We finally ended up in Westminster, Colorado, a small suburb about ten miles north of Denver. It's now actually engulfed by Denver but at that time it was a village and that's where I went to grade school much of the time because we returned there off and on, and I graduated high school there as well, in 1936.

The Depression played a large part in our coming to Albuquerque. The hardware store for which my father worked as a traveling salesman went broke during that time and my father was then employed by the government. He was in the Soil Conservation Service and they sent him to Albuquerque. So he was here and we stayed in Westminster until I finished high school. I had two choices at that time. When I graduated from high school I won a scholarship to the University of Colorado, so I could go and live there paying board and room or, because my family lived here, I could live at home free and pay tuition at the university. That was the easier choice and we moved here in the summer of 1936 and I entered the university that fall.

SPIDLE: That's interesting. I knew you were a Columbia M.D. graduate so I just assumed you were some east coast guy who, after getting his degree, decided to come west. But you have good western roots.

SYME: Yes. As a matter of fact, I had never been east of Colorado or New Mexico. Well, I did, too. The girl I dated while in college planned to spend the summer at her home in Kansas, so I once drove her back. She planned to go to summer school there and I thought I would do that also. But I changed my mind when I woke one morning to a thunderstorm, which often happens in Kansas. We have thunderstorms in Albuquerque too, but they're always in the afternoon, so I hit the road hitch-hiking. But I didn't go back home. As I said, my grandfather lived in Wyoming and I had aunts who lived in those parts, so I spent the summer there. Up to that moment that was as far as I had gone east. Later I rode a Greyhound bus to New York City.

SPIDLE: You came to New Mexico in the summer of 1936 and even then you planned for pre-med. Was that a regular three, or four years?

SYME: I went four years and graduated in 1940. I then made application to three or four schools, intending to go to Columbia if I could get in. The reply I received from them said they thought perhaps I should wait a year and apply again. So that year I started working for Standard Oil Company in a bottom-of-the-ladder job but was only there a month when the university contacted me. At that time there were three professors in their chemistry department and one of them planned to leave on sabbatical to finish his doctorate. So, since I had graduated with a major in chemistry, they asked whether I would teach chemistry or at least be in the department for a year. I only had a BA degree but I could supervise the laboratories, and I worked for the university that year, which provided me with tuition money there. So when I applied to Columbia the second time my application came back with an acceptance along with a scholarship, so I spent my money on room and board in Bard Hall.

SPIDLE: How did you know Columbia was a premier university?

SYME: I really don't remember. Albert Simms and I were friends and he was a year behind me. The school here was small; there were only 2,000 people and I knew everybody, especially those who were in the same situation I was. He applied to Columbia at the same time I did and was accepted, so although he was a year behind me in college, he went at the end of his third year so was a year ahead of me there. That was one thing. We probably talked about it together and he made it, and I made it. My wife attended college at the University of Chicago for one year, then came back to the university and that's where we met. I was accepted everywhere, including the University of Chicago, but having worked and won a scholarship at Columbia made it an easy choice.

SPIDLE: I interviewed Al Simms three or four years ago; he told me about his Columbia days. It was a good experience for him and I assume it was for you, too.

SYME: It was indeed. It was in a new part of the country and as far as education is concerned at that time I don't believe it could be surpassed by any school anywhere--matched maybe, but not surpassed. It was A-one and we felt most fortunate to be able to partake of our education there.

SPIDLE: You were there in 1941 and that's the period when they were telescoping the curriculum.

SYME: Yes, after my first year in school that summer was the only one we got off. My closest friend and classmate, Ken Calder, was from Flint, Michigan. He is now a psychiatrist in New York City. We planned to go to New Mexico, but we didn't have any money so we hitch-hiked from New York City to Flint, Michigan and planned to go on to Albuquerque. But he decided he needed to work through the summer and would stand a better chance of doing that at home, so I got on a bus to Albuquerque and came home. My wife and I had been engaged before I left to go to medical school. We were married that summer just a couple of days before we had to return to school. So, as you say, it was a short period. We got off, but rather than a whole summer it was only a month because, as you know, that was war time. I still remember studying anatomy on December 7 and one of my friends had a radio--I didn't even own a radio because, as I said, times were bad. We had adequate food, clothing and shelter but we didn't have extras and at school I got along as best I could on what I had. And I still remember one of my friends came tearing down the hall shouting "The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor!" so we all gathered around whoever had a radio and spent the next couple of days listening to news of the war. That changed medical school because ASTP, the Army Service Training Program, came along and we had a choice of going into the Navy or the Army. My brother was a Navy pilot who was killed in the war, lost in the Pacific. But my eyes weren't good enough to get into the Navy, so I joined the Army. As a matter of fact, most of us went into the Army. That made medical school a whole lot different in that we didn't have to worry about money--it was all paid for--and it's a lot different now. My own kids graduated recently and the prospect of being deeply in debt when you come out of medical school is really serious, and was so even in those days, although today tuition has gone up a thousand per cent, or ten times what it was when I was in school. Anyway, with me in the Army and my wife working we had enough to live on. I was a private first class in ASTP. It occurred during my second year in medical school and continued through my third and fourth years.

SPIDLE: The idea of that program was to cut out summer vacations and therefore finish more quickly. What was your commitment?

SYME: You were in the service and as soon as you graduated, you were given a commission and that was it.

SPIDLE: Was that for an unlimited period, for two years? Or was that for the duration of the war?

SYME: For the duration, yes. But the war was just about over by the time we came out in 1944. Starting in 1941 I would ordinarily have graduated with the class of '45, but with only a week or so at Christmas and in the summer, we kept right on attending school.

SPIDLE: Was the pace difficult? Medical school, of course, is a stressful demanding thing.

SYME: It became a job. You were there to do it and you did it. I don't think it was any more stressful knowing there were no vacations than it would have been otherwise.

SPIDLE: I talked to one of your peers a long time ago who told me about telescoping and the rapid program. And I wondered whether that had a negative impact in terms of a lack of time to relax and let things digest. Did you ever worry you were trying to cram too much into too brief a time?

SYME: I can't say I did because I was able to do it. I made an A rating and all the other things that indicated I was in that area of the class structure. As a matter of fact, it worked out well for me when it came time to choose a specialty because as soon as they were ready the class ahead of us was taken away. It so happened that there was room for more interns and residents at Babies Hospital, and I spent almost my entire fourth year there. Ordinarily I would have taken medicine, surgery, OB/GYN and so on. But I took my surgery quarter on the surgical floor in Babies Hospital. My medicine quarter was spent there on one of the "age" floors--I think it was the three to five age group--because they divided patients into age groups, one floor infants, one floor three to five, one six to ten or something like that.

SPIDLE: So you were funneled toward pediatrics right then. Was that accidental?

SYME: No. That's what I felt I wanted to do and this was an opportunity that just fell into place. Then of course, we graduated and immediately went into an internship. My favorite hospital in New York City at the time was Bellevue so I made application there. Bellevue then had four divisions--one each related and associated with Columbia, New York University, Cornell, and a fourth one that wasn't associated with any medical school. I first applied to the Columbia division, and didn't hear from them so I applied to the fourth division because I wanted to be at Bellevue, and it came through at almost exactly the same time as my acceptance on the Columbia division, so I interned on the Columbia division at Bellevue Hospital.

SPIDLE: Was this a rotating internship?

SYME: Well, not as you think of rotating. There were four quarters: medicine, surgery, chest and the fourth one could be laboratory, psychiatry or something like that. But when I arrived they had cut out one because the war was still on, so we were given a year's credit but only nine months of activity. So I spent mine in medicine, surgery and chest. And that's another thing that projected me toward pediatrics. The medicine unit was in the old part of the hospital which was built in the early 1900s, so it was at least forty years old and perhaps older than that. As an intern I was assigned to take care of a woman's ward with sixty beds--three beds wide, twenty beds down the hallway. Some of those ladies hadn't been out of those beds in fifteen years--stroke or some problem kept them bedridden, and Bellevue Hospital being a city hospital, was the only place where that kind of service was available to them. We provided that service but it cured me of wanting to be a geriatrician. I had all the old people I could ever take care of as an intern on that medical ward at Bellevue. It was an interesting experience because we saw the drunks and the homeless. Many of our patients were of that nature. They had to get medical care somewhere and because Bellevue was handy, that's where they came.

SPIDLE: It's odd, because in a sense your last year in medical school was already kind of special. And then in your internship you backed out.

SYME: Well, there was no choice. That's the way internships were determined in those days. We also knew we weren't going to be anywhere but in the service after that and that's actually what did happen. As soon as our nine month internship was over I went to Carlisle, Pennsylvania where the Medical Officer's Training School was located. That was interesting and worthwhile in that we became more or less acquainted with the ways of the Army. The war in

Europe was over at that time, and part of the reason why the internship was shortened was because they needed medical officers in the discharge centers where soldiers were coming home. The European part of the war had just about ended then, in the spring of 1945. I faced the prospect of going into a discharge center, and they more or less gave us a choice of where we could do that, so I chose Bruns Hospital in Santa Fe.

SPIDLE: To me that's a tantalizing story. It was a giant, more than two thousand bed hospital, wasn't it?

SYME: Well, I didn't get to Bruns, (both laugh) so I can't help you in that respect. My wife, who was pregnant at that time here in Albuquerque, had our first child, a daughter, then went to stay with her sister in California. But before she left I came home on a ten-day leave and then was assigned to William Beaumont Hospital in El Paso, only to have that order immediately rescinded and my status changed from the Army Medical Corps to the Army Air Force and assigned to a camp in California. So I probably spent half a day at William Beaumont before I was transferred.

From there I went to a camp in the eastern part of Washington State where I got orders to attend the Air Force medical training school in Texas, which was extremely valuable because we learned things insofar as medicine is concerned that you don't learn in medical school. While at Brooks Field in San Antonio we learned how to examine men in the Air Force, especially those who would become pilots. I learned a lot more about examining eyes, ears and special senses pilots would use in their activities there at Brooks Hospital in San Antonio than I did in medical school. At that time, too, my wife and I were able to spend time together and I got acquainted with my daughter, whereas I was by myself in those other places. This was perhaps the best time I had as far as my experience in the service is concerned. It was interesting as far as medical work because I was learning new things. My family was with me and that made it worthwhile.

When that came to an end, it didn't take long before I was shipped overseas. I was a first lieutenant while at Carlisle and went into active duty with that rank. I received my captain's rating while at Brooks General and went to Clark Field in the Philippines as a captain in the Army Air Force. Jimmy Kieran, a classmate of mine, also was assigned there at the same time. Do you recall a radio program called 'Information Please'? Well, the sportswriter on that show was Jimmy Kieran's father, and we listened to it back in the old days. We knew each other fairly well while we were students and now here we were, away from home, so at least that association made my overseas period more acceptable.

The war was over and we were discharging people home but some officers had families and children as well, so I got to do some pediatrics, too. The rule was if you had an immediate relative who was killed in the war you didn't have to serve overseas. So while the duty was interesting and a new experience, after I had seen all I wanted and lived through one of their rainy seasons, I entered my claim for duty stateside. That got me home but it didn't get me out of the service because I didn't want out; I was making money.

One day while still at Clark Field I wrote to one my pediatrics professors telling him I was in the service and wanted a residency in pediatrics. He wrote back saying there was no problem, no question about it at all, and it was mine whenever I wanted to take it. My residency was to start in July, 1947, so I did some Christmas shopping in Honolulu on the way home to my family from the Philippines. Shortly after that we were assigned to Hill Field in Ogden, Utah, so we spent about six months there, again doing pretty much what I had been doing as a flight surgeon, which was what the Texas school was designed to do--make us into flight surgeons. And once

more we made friends with people that have been everlasting. During these periods we came to know people from different parts of the country and have maintained lasting relationships with them. We still correspond and send Christmas cards.

In any event, the same excuse that got me home from overseas could at any time get me out of the service altogether, so at that time I chose to do just that. I brought my family together and we went to New York, where I became a resident in pediatrics at Babies Hospital. We lived in Shank's Village, which was the last camp for gathering soldiers for overseas duty before being shipped out. They remodeled all those old barrack type buildings and made them into apartments. That was the most unique habitat we ever lived in because everyone there was required to have an advanced degree, and they considered a residency as an advanced degree. These were people like myself who had come out of service to complete their education and get on with their lives. So this was a unique village in that everyone was more or less an intellectual and all of us had kids about the same age. We already had our daughter and our first son was born there.

In those days a residency consisted of thirty-six hours on, twelve hours off, and we organized a car pool for people going back and forth. Camp Shanks was in New York, just above New Jersey on the west side of the Hudson River, so we had to cross the George Washington Bridge which was about six to eight blocks from the Columbia Medical School and Hospital complex. We made that trip day after day, week after week through the whole two year residency period.

SPIDLE: You knew early on that you wanted to be a doctor and a pediatrician. Did you also already know where you wanted to set up your practice?

SYME: Well, during the last weeks of your residency you begin to ask 'what am I going to do now?' I felt I wanted to come back west, but wasn't sure about where in the west. One of the older previous residents said he had corresponded with Rustin MacIntosh, the professor of pediatrics at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons and the Chief at Babies Hospital. He lived in Tucson, Arizona. He wrote that he needed someone to replace his associate who was leaving. I corresponded with him and he told me to come on out. I brought my family to Albuquerque and afterward I received a letter from him telling me the man who planned to move had changed his mind.

So there I was in Albuquerque but with no definite prospect about where I would practice. I liked Albuquerque, my family liked it, this was home, our families were here. We came back after my residency ended the first of July, and I arranged to take the basic science examination. I didn't have to worry about the medical examination because I had taken national boards which, as a matter of fact, was the way Columbia University structured their final exams in those days. We took the first part of our national boards at the end of the second year and took the second part at the end of the fourth year. We took the third part at the end of our residency and internship, and New Mexico accepted that in place of the medical examination. I had no problem with basic science but it took about a month before I was notified I had passed and could obtain my license. So because I knew there would be no problem about it, I applied for my license and actually set up my practice about the last ten days of September of 1949 and that was the start of my practice.

SPIDLE: Was that with anybody's patronage?

SYME: No. There were six pediatricians in Albuquerque when I came.

