This country doctor did it all – even outside his field

Bank, farm owner also performed dentistry, politics and pranks

Joseph Hugh Saye, born in Chester County in 1862, was a "country doctor" who practiced in rural York county for nearly a half century. He was unusual in two ways: the amount of medical training he received and his achievements outside of the medical field.

NEARBY HISTORY

Louise Pettus

He went to school in a field school, so called because they were built on abandoned cotton fields. From the one-teacher school he went on to Fort Mill Academy, which had a fine reputation under the Rev. J.B. Mack. He finished the course in June 1882 and then went to the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Baltimore for his degree in medicine.

After practicing a few years, Saye went to Polyclinic of New York for post-graduate work and received a certificate there. Polyclinic was a combination hospital and medical school which allowed doctors such as Saye to learn the latest techniques. Polyclinic was founded by a Lancaster county native, Dr. J. Marion Sims, who became the "Father of Gynecology."

Most likely, Saye was under the direction of Dr. Gill Wylie, a Chester County native for whom Lake Wylie is named. Saye's family was poor (his father was a Presbyterian minister and his grandfather a blacksmith) and Saye worked to pay his way for all of his schooling after finishing the country school in Chester County.

Saye acquired a farm and a bank while continuing his medical practice. He also got involved in state politics, being a pioneer in the "Good Roads" movement. He was chairman of the Permanent Roads Commission of York County for six years. Saye was elected to the state legislature and was always in the forefront of progressive measures. For 42 years, he was a member of the Democratic Committee of York County.

In 1925, while waiting for a child to be born, he told the father, who happened to write news about the Sharon area for the Yorkville Enquirer, about his early days as a doctor. He said there was no hospital within 40 miles and he also served as a dentist, pulling teeth after infection had set in.

Saye said that when he began, he was shocked by the "gross ignorance" and "queer ideas" he encountered. He told of being called about a mother who had given birth to a child 12 hours earlier. When he got there he found that although there were a half dozen old women seated before a hot fire, that neither the mother nor the child had been bathed. What's more, there were two children sick with measles.

Saye gave orders that the mother and child be bathed. "The old women looked at me as though I was crazy and one of them informed me that never in all that community had she heard of a mother and babe being bathed and clothing changed until the baby was three days old. And do you know I had to raise a row sure enough ..."

Another story told by Saye was one about a black man who was badly hurt in a fight: "I examined the man and found that he had a crushed skull and, seating him in a piece of woods by the side of the road, I told him that the back of his skull was crushed and pressing on his brain. I told him I would try to raise it, but that since I was without the proper instruments I didn't know whether I would be able to do anything for him or not."

Saye began work and the man never so much as groaned though he would have to have been in great pain. Saye continued, "Finally I paused in my operation for a moment when he raised his head and asked 'Doctor would you mind if I lighted and smoked a cigarette?'... he calmly smoked with bowed head while I cleared the brain of the cracked skull." Saye remarked that this man "lived to make many a bale of cotton."

Being a dentist as well as a medical doctor was not unusual in areas such as western York County where the population was sparse. Saye said that he had pulled hundreds of teeth in one day. He remembered a "mean trick" he did one day while admitting that as a young man he was sometimes devilish as a way of having fun. He said that he was pulling a tooth of a young woman who had a decayed molar. "Her face was swollen until it resembled a full moon." He finally got the tooth pulled but not before she had "squalled so long and loud that she could be heard a mile in each direction.

"She had a brother who did not have any more sense than the law allowed and who witnessed the operation. He chided her about crying and being a baby and all that sort of thing and finally he concluded, 'Why sister, I will let the doctor pull out any tooth I have in my head and I'll bet you he can't make me holler.' "

The sister told him to go ahead and get it pulled, that the doctor would make him yell, too. Brother opened his mouth and Saye said that he never saw "whiter, firmer, prettier teeth." The devilish part that Saye then played was to pull out a good tooth and, sure enough, "there was never a squawk out of him!"

Saye married Ella J. Rainey of Sharon. They had four children: John Rainey Saye, Mrs. Rebecca Bankhead, Mrs. Josie Lee Terry and James McJunkin Saye.

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