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THE STORY OF TAMPA'S FIRST DENTIST - DR. EDWARD DINUS NEVE

By RUBEN MORENO, D.D.S.

DR. MORENO

Had it not been for the sake of Wild Lemons that did not exist, the dental ailments of the inhabitants of Tampa and vicinity, including the Key West Conch of the early days, would have had to wait a little longer for immediate relief or else take a long trip for dental service. There was none available until 1876—yes, the year of the Philadelphia Exposition, and 100 years after the Declaration of Independence, or, to bring it closer, only 73 years ago.

Tampa’s first dentist, Dr. Edward Dinus Neve, was born in Saeby, Province of Jylland, Denmark. As a young man, while living in Copenhagen he became interested in watch-making and watch-repairing; and following the required apprenticeship, he was duly certified in his endeavor. However, he did not remain in this field very long because of the eyestrain caused by the minuteness and precision of this type of work; and so it was that in 1868 he decided to come to America. With a goal in view, he arrived in Chicago, Illinois, where he immediately started as an apprentice in his uncle’s dental office. Following the customary procedure of early days, three years later he became qualified to do dental work.

LIMITED ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Still seeking adventure and full of ambition or, should we say, pushed on by the hand of destiny to further his course, he left Chicago and arrived in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1871. Here, as a pleasant surprise, he found a Danish Colony and since his command of the English language was somewhat limited, he found it easier to settle among the Danes. His immediate means of a livelihood again reverted to watchmaking, this time on a house to house call. Because his funds were dwindling and his income somewhat meager, he shared a bedroom with a Danish chimney sweeper. This was one of his life’s comical anecdotes, which he often related with a chuckle."I used the bed at night while the chimney sweeper was at work and he slept
during the day while I silently worked on watches."

**WHEELS OF FATE**

Industrious and a hustler as Dr. Neve was, it did not take long before he was financially able to hang up a shingle in the heart of the Danish Colony of Omaha to start on his own as a dentist. But, he did not give up watch-making altogether, for he had established a reputation in repairing watches; and to satisfy the many demands, he decided to combine dentistry with watch-making in which capacity he dealt until 1876.

This year, the whirling wheels of fate rolled on once again for Dr. Neve. Governed by his venturous impulses, still full of ambition and optimism after having read with two of his close friends of the citrus opportunities offered in Florid and the wild lemon which was said to grow so abundantly in the Tampa area, Dr. Neve, Dr. Jensen, a physician from Omaha and Mr. Schwartz, a pharmacist, decided to come to Tampa to study the possibilities of the wild lemon exploitation for the manufacture of citric acid. Enroute to Tampa, aboard the Atlantic Coast Line, Dr. Neve and his friends set foot on Florida soil for the first time at Cedar Keys, this being the...
end of the line in those days. Here, they boarded the schooner *Matchless*, which was the only means of transportation between Cedar Keys, Tampa and Key West. They finally arrived in Tampa on Christmas Eve, 1876, only to be astonished and perplexed at finding only one lemon tree in the entire area; and this one and only lemon tree added insult to injury, for it was found in someone else’s back yard—that of Dr. Branch, whose home was on Washington Street, in the heart of the commercial district of those days.

**OPPORTUNITIES ARE HERE**

Despite the disappointment and dismay at seeing their dream frustrated, these three gentlemen of vision and ambition had sufficient foresight and courage to remain in Tampa rather than return to Omaha. They knew that in a not too far distant future Tampa and Florida’s West Coast would grow; because of its soil, because of its climate and port facilities. They knew that the opportunities were here.

Old timers will perhaps learn with surprise that it was in this pioneer drug store that Sidney B. Leonardi, employed by Dr. Neve as an errand boy, became a pharmacist, and later opened the Leonardi Pharmacy which for many years stood on the northwest corner of Franklin and Twiggs.

In time, Dr. Neve’s growing practice called for more space and he moved to a one-story building on the southwest corner of Franklin and Polk Streets, where O’Falk’s Department Store is today. Here he combined, with adequate partitioning of walls—jewelry store, dental office, and dwelling.

**NO STAR-GAZING**

As dentists, we can readily appreciate the tremendous energy and indefatigable determination to work, that the father of Tampa dentistry displayed, when we stop to realize that he worked under a handicap with little or no facilities without our present-day advancements, doing all his lab work, not to say the least of his enterprise as a jeweler and yet, finding time to board the schooner *Matchless* twice a year to take care of the dental ailments of the people of Key West. This kind of life, needless to say, did not give Dr. Neve much time to gaze at the stars and perhaps look at the moon in a romantic hope of a visit from Cupid. But fate plays its cards in such a way that the King is dealt with a Queen, and just as he was dealt all the way from Denmark, she too was dealt from another distant shore to meet the same hand.

Perhaps not from equally distant, for it was from the neighboring island of Cuba that Miss Alicia M. Gonzalez arrived in Tampa on November 5, 1891, in the company of her parents. They took lodging at the Palmetto Hotel, situated on the northeast corner of Florida Avenue and Polk Street, later site of Sears and Roebuck. Bright and early the next morning Mr. Gonzalez had his breakfast and started off for a sight-seeing stroll of the small town. Miss Gonzalez arose later only to be dismayed for she, too, had planned the morning stroll and would have wanted to join her father. However, spurred on by the early morning breeze and her interest in the new locale—Tampa of 60 years ago—she left the hotel in hopes of finding him. She soon realized that her potentials as a marathon were none too great and that she might well start on her return to the hotel before walking endurance gave out; so, exhausted and still minus “Daddy” at a block’s distance from the hotel and as a last attempt, she stopped at the jeweler’s in hopes of finding him there. Once more disappointed, Miss Gonzalez asked Dr. Neve if a man answering her father’s
description had been in, but apparently the jewelry had not enticed him. Again disappointed at not finding her father, she returned to the hotel completely unaware of the fact that she had, however, found her future husband.

ROMANCE BLOSSOMS

Because Dr. Neve was also a boarder of the Palmetto Hotel it is clear how a friendship gradually grew from a mere acquaintance. The set up in the hotel dining room was such that two tables were reserved for the boarders and three for the transients. This immediately placed a distance and a barrier for admiration; but it was not long before the young dentist made it a point, disregarding the rules of the place, to select the table at which the Gonzalezes partook of meals. And so it was that interest grew and Dr. Neve soon became an ardent admirer of the young girl from Havana.

Approximately a year after their arrival in Tampa, Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalez returned to Cuba, leaving Miss Gonzalez in Tampa as she had now acquired a position as bookkeeper for the E. A. Clarke Company, gent's furnishing business, then located at the southeast corner of Franklin and Lafayette. After business hours Miss Gonzalez was engaged in teaching Spanish, English and French classes which she held in a small parlor on the second floor of the hotel. This space was kindly offered Miss Gonzalez for this work by the proprietor of the Palmetto Hotel, Mr. R. F. Webb, a civic leader of the pioneer days.

Home For Bride

In the month of April in the year 1894, Dr. Neve and Miss Gonzalez became officially engaged and were later married at the home of Mrs. Flora Mahoney on October 1, 1894. They made their home in Tampa at 1103 Tampa Street, the northeast corner of Harrison and Tampa Streets—the home that Dr. Neve prepared for his bride. This remained their home for the duration of Dr. Neve's life.

In July of 1920, Dr. and Mrs. Neve left for New York for a visit to his native Denmark. The couple arrived in New York on the 14th of July, made the necessary arrangements and paid their passage on the steamer to Copenhagen, Denmark, scheduled to leave the next day. But Dr. Neve became seriously ill the following morning. The physician's diagnosis was a possible rupture of appendix. He was asked the hospital of his choice for immediate surgery and he replied that he had no preference, but since Mrs. Neve was a Catholic, he would choose the St. Vincent's Hospital.

The Last Rites

The following day, July 16, 1920, his condition was grave; peritonitis had set in and not much hope was given by the attending physicians. He asked his wife how long the doctor expected him to live and she answered, three or four hours—did he wish to see a Lutheran minister; to which he replied, "No, I always intended to die a Catholic." And so it was that Dr. Edward Dinus Neve, Tampa's first Dentist and Jeweler, of Saeby Province of Jylland, Denmark, born a Lutheran, was baptized and received the last rites of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. He died one hour later, a Catholic.

Mrs. Neve returned to Tampa, bringing the body for interment at the St. Louis Cemetery. Dr. Neve's body was later removed to the Cemetery of Mary, Help of Christians School for Orphan Boys. Mrs. Neve had donated this orphanage to the Salesian Fathers, as well as the Villa Madonna della Neve to the Salesian
Sisters, an orphanage for girls. These two institutions stand today as a monument to the memory of the man who came from far distant shores to help make the way for many—Tampa’s first Dentist, Dr. Edward Dinus Neve.

As it was, Dr. Neve, Dr. Jensen and Mr. Schwartz opened in partnership Tampa’s first drug store on the corner of Washington and Franklin Streets, the site later occupied by the Tampa Daily Times. Until then, the practicing physicians in this area provided themselves with patent medicines to prescribe to their patients. In some cases, they would do their own compounding. The drug store was one very much needed facility. It was in this same drug store that two counters were set up for the jewelry to be sold by Dr. Neve and a space also provided for his dental office. This picture gives us three "firsts" in Tampa:

1. The first Drug store

2. The first jewelry store and jeweler, and

3. The first dental office and dentist.