



Written by Dick Mason, The Observer August 02, 2008 12:51 pm



Smoke billows from the fire at Hot Lake Sanatorium on May 7, 1934. - Photo from "The Hot Lake Story"

He was as skilled as he was compassionate, a physician as flamboyant as he was determined to bring cutting edge medical care to his patients at Hot Lake Sanatorium.

He was Dr. William T. Phy, a physician who died in 1931 yet remains, in the eyes of many, the face of Hot Lake. A man whose tale is among those featured in a new book by Richard R. Roth — "The Hot Lake Story: An Illustrated History from Pre-discovery to 1974."

The 462-page book, which is almost coffee table in size, has more than 300 photos and covers aspects of Hot Lake's history not addressed in earlier books. This includes a detailed, objective look at Phy's story.

"He was an extraordinary individual but not infallible," said Roth, who grew up at Hot Lake and now resides in Orting, Wash.

Phy served as a physician at Hot Lake Sanatorium from 1901 to 1910 and from 1917 until his death. He made an indelible mark during his 23 years there.

"Almost everyone you speak with who knows Hot Lake history identifies Hot Lake with Dr. W.T. Phy first," Roth wrote.

The author quotes Walter Pierce, Oregon's governor from 1923 to 1927 and a man who played a major role in financing Hot Lake Sanatorium, to make his point.

"Ninety percent of the people came to the Lake because of his (Phy's) skills and magnetic personality. He was Hot Lake," Pierce said.

Physicians who worked with Phy at Hot Lake included Dr. Nathan Edward McAlister. He practiced under Phy for several years between 1919 to 1925. McAlister once described Phy as a surgeon so skilled that he "seems to have eyes in the ends of his fingers."

Phy was confident of his skills and enjoyed displaying them. He had a separate seating area with an observation window overlooking the operating room.

"The surgery room was his theater. His adoring audience could look through the observation window and marvel at his surgical abilities," Roth writes.

Phy's flamboyant nature was also evident by his mode of transportation. Phy, in 1908, purchased a \$4,600 6-cylinder Franklin. At the time there were only 17 cars in La Grande and 34 in Union County.

"He delighted in driving the most expensive auto in Union County," Roth said.

Phy also prided himself on having the most complete and up to date medical reference library possible.

"For a physician in rural Oregon, the number of texts in his library, covering treatment of disease, surgical care, etc., would rival that of any professor teaching in a hospital of the day," Roth wrote.

Phy believed in treating people regardless of their ability to pay. Roth found no documented evidence of a patient needing medical treatment at Hot Lake being turned away due to an inability to pay.

"This says a great deal about the time and age in American history. It also says a great deal about the man, Dr. W.T. Phy," Roth wrote.



in his book is that Phy had connections to the Mayo Clinic of Rochester, Minn., and knew its founders, Dr. William W. Mayo and his sons, Dr. William T. Mayo and Dr. Charles Mayo. Roth said he found no affiliation, professional or social, between Phy and the Mayo family. Records also indicate that Phy never studied at the Mayo Clinic or worked there.

"Apparently the rumor and legend of an association between Phy and the Mayo brothers is



A group of employees pose with a patient at Hot Lake around 1910. The photo was taken when the site was known as the Hot Lake Springs Co. - Photo from "The Hot Lake Story," obtained courtesy of Helen Mae Phifer

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Many photos of this memorabilia are in the book.

These items and memories of his family at Hot Lake and the many fascinating people who visited there give Roth reason to enjoy reminiscing about his youth.

“It was a fantastic place to grow up.”

“The Hot Lake Story,” published by Heritage Quest, is available in La Grande at Earth ‘n’ Book, the Mitre’s Touch Gallery and Sunflower Books.



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