Dr. Robert G. Perryman

His family roots run deep in the origin of Tulsa, where he spent 40+ years as a surgeon and contributor to the medical community.

Chapter 01 –
Introduction

Announcer: Robert G. Perryman traces his family genealogy to the beginning of Tulsa. He is a direct descendant of Benjamin Perryman who came to Indian Territory from Alabama in 1828. Arthur Robertson Perryman was Robert's father. His mother, Daisy Gentry came to Indian Territory from Arkansas in a covered wagon.

Dr. Robert Perryman was born in Tulsa and through his medical education, he became a surgeon, spanning a 46-year career. While remaining in private practice at Glass Nelson Clinic he was also part of the attending staff at St. John Medical Center, Hillcrest Medical Center, and courtesy staff at Saint Francis Hospital. Dr. Perryman was instrumental in the creation of the Tulsa Burn Center at Hillcrest Medical Center. He also contributed his time to a variety of staff appointments at medical facilities and associations.

Dr. Robert G. Perryman died October 6, 2020, at the age of 97. But you can hear his story on the oral history website *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.

Chapter 02 – 11:40
The Perryman Family

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is August 17, 2010. State your full name, please.
Robert Perryman: I'm Robert Gentry Perryman.
JE: Your date of birth and your present age.
RP: My date of birth is November the 20th, 1922. I'm presently eighty-seven years of age.
JE: Where are we recording this?
RP: We're at my home in Tulsa, Oklahoma.
JE: Where were you born?

RP: I was born here in Tulsa, Oklahoma, at 7th and Boston.

JE: Was that a home or where were you—

RP: My home, my parents' home, at that time.

JE: At 7th and Boston? In 1922, I guess that wasn't that unusual to be born at home.

RP: I'm not sure where I was born, as far as whether it was at home or at the hospital.

JE: Okay. When I asked you where you were born, you said, "7th and Boston."

RP: Yes, as far as I know, that's where I was born.

JE: So you're not sure?

RP: Well, that's what I was told.

JE: Yeah.

RP: Yeah, yes.

JE: Well, then, we have to believe that. [laughing]

RP: Yeah, correct.

JE: You were born at home. Did you have brothers and sisters?

RP: I had one brother that expired early, and then I have two brothers that are currently dead.

JE: What was your mother's name, her maiden name?

RP: Daisy Gentry.

JE: Where was she born?

RP: Around Eureka Springs, Arkansas.

JE: Is that where she grew up?

RP: Yes, for a period of time. She came to Tulsa as a young lady in a covered wagon, and started a little millinery shop here.

JE: Came from Arkansas in a covered wagon.

RP: Correct.

JE: To Tulsa.

RP: That's what they told me.

JE: Did she talk much about that covered wagon experience?

RP: No she didn't.

JE: Was that a whole family that came—

RP: No, it was just her.

JE: In the covered wagon?

RP: Well, I'm sure she came with somebody but it wasn't any of her family.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound). Your father's name?

RP: My father's name is Arthur Robertson Perryman.

JE: Where was he born?

RP: Well, he was born in Tulsa County. We had a little farm off of 131st and 145th East Avenue. And I believe that's the area he was born at.

JE: And then he obviously grew up there. Do you know how your mother and your father met?

RP: I do not.

JE: Your father was Creek?

RP: Yes, sir.

JE: Full-blooded?

RP: No. Half-blooded.

JE: So he's half Creek and half . . . ?

RP: Whatever else.

JE: Right. What about your mother?

RP: I really don't know.

JE: Okay. Let's trace your family background. Let's talk about that, which goes back to the beginning of Tulsa. For the record, the earliest settlers to this area were the Native Americans in 1836. A band of Creek Indians, the Lochapokas, came from Alabama. The Five Civilized Tribes came to this area as well: the Cherokees, the Choctaws, the Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles, all came to the area between 1828 and 1836, by way of the infamous "trail of tears." That journey ended under the branches of the Counsel Oak Tree, which is at 18th and Cheyenne. They called the new settlement *Talasi*, meaning Old Town in the Creek's native tongue. Talasi is the same word form, which Tallahassee, Florida, takes its name. And Florida is the original home of the Muskogee people.

So we'll begin with Benjamin Perryman, who came from Alabama. And he was a Creek Indian, came to Indian Territory in 1828, with six sons and two daughters.

Bob, you're related to Benjamin Perryman.

RP: That's true, he'd be my great, great grandfather.

JE: Did you hear stories in the family about Benjamin and what he did?

RP: I did not.

JE: Benjamin's son, Lewis, had sixteen children, had five wives.

RP: Correct.

JE: And three of his sons are known as George B. or George Beecher. We have Josiah or J. C., then we have Lewis, and then we have Thomas Ward. And Thomas Ward to you is?

RP: My grandfather.

JE: Your grandfather. I have here that in 1846, the first Lewis Perryman built a log cabin trading post near what is now 33rd and South Rockford Avenue.

RP: I don't know that it was Lewis, but that's where this log cabin was built. And that was the first post office until George Beecher came and built his home near 41st and Utica, and had a place there for the post office.

JE: Then we have George Perryman. He lived on a farm near Tulsa. In 1879, his ranch house was known as the White House.

RP: Right.

JE: What can you tell us about that?

RP: I lived not far from there when I was growing up. And it was at 41st, off of Utica, and I'll say south of 41st, probably about fifty yards. And it was a big white ranch house with a porch that went completely around the house. And I don't know how many rooms it had. It had stables. They had horses there. I used to go back there and ride a horse periodically, not very often.

JE: Who was living there at that time?

RP: That was George Perryman and Aunt Rachel, his wife.

JE: Can you describe George Perryman?

RP: No, I really don't remember him.

JE: But you remember riding horses there. How about Aunt Rachel? Do you remember much of her?

RP: I don't.

JE: They are your great uncle and aunt.

RP: Uh-huh (affirmative), correct.

JE: Then we have J. C., or Josiah Perryman, who's the brother of George, lived on his farm ten miles south of Tulsa. And then he was the postmaster.

RP: Correct.

JE: Then the Indians gave the post office a name, Tulsa, was named after Tulsa Town, the old Alabama town of the Indians.

RP: That's my understanding.

JE: Let's talk about the Perryman Ranch. It was one of the biggest in the Creek Nation. What do you know about the Perryman Ranch?

RP: I just know that it had multiple thousand acres and that they had a lot of cattle on it. But I do not know the dimensions of it.

JE: Extended from 21st to 71st Street and from the Arkansas River to Lynn Lane in Broken Arrow.

RP: I know my father had some land at 31st Street and 145th East Avenue, an L-shaped segment of land. It was a total of eighty acres. But his sister had some and his brother had some and he just bought their part so he would have the whole property. Subsequently, gave it to his children.

JE: And today, 95 percent of Tulsa sits on what was once the Perryman land.

RP: Yes.

JE: About Aunt Rachel, she was the wife of George Perryman. She was of French and Creek descent. They were married about 1868, a few years after the Civil War.

So again, you remember going to their place? You would have been how old?

RP: Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. And when I went back there, Utica was a dirt road from 31st to 36th. Then there was a segment of pavement there on Utica, from 36th and it did not

go all the way to 41st. There was a big ravine just before, say, fifty yards proximal to 41st Street. And then the concrete ended. That was eventually corrected, but, at that time, it ended there.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound). It's said that everybody loved Aunt Rachel, she fed everyone. They say even the infamous Dalton Gang might have come through there.

RP: That's my understanding.

JE: And that her home was a home for twenty-four orphans. Do you remember any of that?

RP: I do not.

JE: Do you remember when she sold her downtown house?

RP: No, and I'm not sure where it was located.

JE: Well, when she sold the downtown house, she sold it for sixty thousand dollars. She demanded the money be brought to her in cash. And she took the money to the bank herself.

RP: Sounds like a Perryman.

JE: Then she had a residence at 6th and Boulder?

RP: I think that's true, yes.

JE: The site was used for the First National Bank Building at 6th and Boulder. The city wanted to buy it for use as a courthouse and she wanted to be paid in gold, because she didn't trust US currency.

And then Aunt Rachel and George had children: George B. Jr., Mamie, Robert, Abner Q., Ella, John H., Mose, and Emma.

RP: I didn't know any of those.

JE: And Monetta Trepp is the granddaughter of Mose, who was the son of George Perryman Sr.

RP: George would have been her grandfather.

JE: Yes. Mose was the son of George Sr., so then that would make the grandfather of Monetta.

RP: Right.

JE: The Perryman Cemetery at 32nd and Utica, Tulsa's oldest private cemetery, George is buried there and Aunt Rachel is buried there.

RP: It think that primarily the people that are buried there are the George Perryman family. I was raised on the corner of 31st and Utica, and at that time, my father owned the land back to the cemetery on Utica. That, subsequently, has three homes on it, but at that time, we had some livestock back there.

JE: Let's talk about your father, Arthur Perryman. What did he do?

RP: He had a job with the Gypsy Oil Company until, I guess the Depress came. He did own some real estate, while this was before the Depression, but he owned a half a square block between 7th and 8th on Boston.

His brother then owned the other half of the lot between 7th and 8th on Cincinnati. So they owned a square block between Boston and Cincinnati, between 7th and 8th.

When I was growing up, on the corner of 8th and Boston, there was a service station. There was a battery station, and there was an apartment he had built. Subsequently, that was sold and now the First Presbyterian Church owns it.

The other half block my uncle owned, there was a Chevrolet agency on it and it was Dick Winchell at Midwestern Chevrolet. But now the church owns that also. So that complete square block now, belongs to the First Presbyterian Church.

JE: Did you hear stories on how George Beecher Perryman acquired all this mass acreage? Do you know how he amassed all this land?

RP: I do not.

JE: It's pretty amazing, isn't it?

RP: It is, for that period of time.

JE: Right. And you always thought that the whites were taking land away from the Indians, and here he was—

RP: Accumulating it.

JE: Yeah. He was a very strong personality, obviously.

We have Benjamin Perryman, who came from Alabama. He was a Creek Indian. Came to Indian Territory in 1828, had six sons and two daughters. Benjamin had a son, Lewis. And Lewis, you tell us there.

RP: Lewis was the son of Benjamin. Lewis had five wives and multiple children. And of the children there was Josiah, and George Beecher, and my grandfather, Thomas Ward, and he had others but I'm not familiar with them as much as the ones I've mentioned.

JE: There's a Legus that you don't have any recollection of.

RP: I don't. I've seen it in print.

JE: Do you know any of the history of the Creeks', traditions of the Creeks? You talked about five wives; that was normal, I guess, for the Native Americans back then.

RP: Well, yes, probably Native Americans.

JE: Right. Do you know some of the traditions of the Creeks?

RP: I was never exposed to that.

Chapter 03 – 6:00
Tulsa in the Forties

John Erling: Do you remember the first house that you lived in?

Robert Perryman: The first one I lived in that I can remember was at 31st and Utica, 1646 East 31st.

JE: Was that a big house or do you remember?

RP: It was for those days. It was a two-story red brick house. It's still there but it's been materially added to since then. And at that time, my mother's sister lived next door to the west off of 31st. And next door to her on the west, Walter Perryman had a home. Those three families owned all the land back to where the cemetery began.

Now some of it wasn't on the cemetery, it was more west, but it was back to that level.

JE: In that Perryman Cemetery then at 32nd and Utica, Tulsa's oldest private cemetery.

As a young boy, did you, uh, play around or go near the cemetery?

RP: Oh, yes, we were afraid of it but I can remember I had a cousin and a fellow named Bill Vandever, they went up there and tipped over a couple of the stones. They got into a little trouble but survived it.

JE: That was a cousin and Bill Vandever?

RP: Yes.

JE: Bill Vandever is of Vandever Department Store.

RP: He was, that's correct.

JE: And—

RP: They lived at 31st and Peoria.

JE: So what kind of trouble did they get in?

RP: I don't remember, I just know that I was told I wasn't supposed to do something like that.

JE: You remember what you did then in that area? Were there streams or anything? Did you go fishing or anything when you were a kid?

RP: Well, there was that creek, Crow Creek, down there. We spent a lot of time there. At the time I was there, Bren-Rose had about a dozen homes in it.

There was a fellow named Russell Cobb that was a police commissioner at one time, he had a wife that was a Russian. I knew his son, and his son was named Rusty Cobb.

Then there was a Dunn family there, Jim Dunn, I think it was, was a vice president or an official at Wilcox Oil Company, at that time.

And then there was a family named Wood, who had lived there close to our site at 31st and Utica. One of those became a doctor and he died recently. V. William Wood, was his name.

And then there was an architect named Leon Setter that lived back on 32nd Street.

And also there on the street they have a circle there, you know, Bren-Rose was a circle. I think it was the superintendent of schools, one named French, that lived back there.

By the time I got halfway grown up there, why, there was a lot of families living there. Claymaker lived there and L. B. Jackson's parents lived there.

JE: What part Creek are you?

RP: I'm about a little better than an eighth.

JE: Did you register?

RP: Yes, uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: You're a card-carrying—

RP: Yeah, I have it.

JE: Just a little more than an eighth?

RP: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: That's interesting that you're that low. You would think you'd be even more Creek than that.

RP: Right.

JE: What was the first school you attended?

RP: I started at Monte Cassino, because my birthday was in November and school started in August or September, whatever it was, and I was only there till I was qualified to go to public school.

The first one I remember, public school, was Lee School. That's where I met Ron Helmerich, he tells me.

JE: So that was your first grade?

RP: Yes.

JE: At the elementary?

RP: Yes, yes. And then I went to Elliot School, which was in around 36th between Utica and Peoria. At a certain date my parents sold their home. My dad had another house down on 407 East 14th Place. That's now in that inner loop; the homes are all gone there.

I had lived there probably three years, and my dad built a home at 37th off of Lewis, east of Lewis, which is still there. I went to Horrace Mann and I went to Central High.

JE: Then you graduated from Central High in what year?

RP: 'Forty.

JE: In 1940. Tell me what your dad did again.

RP: He worked for Gypsy Oil Company. I don't know whether he was a land man or what. But then he was laid off and he just happened to have some real estate. He owned a building there near Hillcrest and he owned an apartment house that had six apartments. On that same land was a filling station and a battery station. He got some rent from that. And he had a couple of duplexes out near the university.

He then went into the insurance business with W. F. Stall. Subsequently, Stall built a home next to the cemetery on Utica. I'm sure he bought the land from my father.

My father lived to eighty-four and died from a stroke.

JE: He was mainly in the real estate business then, most of his life?

RP: I guess, yeah. He owned this property that I told you about, the land at 131st and 145th East Avenue.

JE: Well, that was way out there, wasn't it?

RP: Oh, in those days, yes, oh, yeah. We had a tenant on that and I know I used to have to go out there with my parents about every other Sunday. One time there was a vineyard out

there on 145th East Avenue, had a lot of grapes from it. Sandy soil there. And there was a creek that ran through there. Subsequently, my folks built the tenants a little concrete house, which is still there.

JE: What do you remember from your high school days? Do you remember classmates in your high school days at Central?

RP: I remember a guy named Howard Kauffmann that, subsequently, became president of Exxon. I knew a guy named Guy Landis.

JE: The idea of becoming a doctor, was that in high school?

RP: That was before that. My mother wanted what she wanted and I just did what she said, you know.

JE: So your mother told you she wanted you to be a doctor?

RP: Correct.

JE: And you did what she said?

RP: I did. I didn't have any other desires at the time. I went to TU, Tulsa University, and I took a premed course. That was in 1940. I went to 'forty-three—

Chapter 04 – 4:45
Army Medical School

Robert Perryman: I was drafted.

John Erling: December 7, 1941, do you remember that day? You remember hearing about Pearl Harbor?

RP: Yes.

JE: Tell us about it.

RP: Well, of course, I was old enough to realize what had happened. But I didn't realize the full significance of it until the next day or two.

JE: You would have been eighteen, nineteen years old then.

RP: Right, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Do you remember hearing it on the radio or how you heard about it?

RP: Yeah, I'm sure I must have heard it on the radio.

JE: You were in school at that time at TU.

RP: Yes.

JE: And you continued till 1943, in school.

RP: Yes.

JE: But then, you were drafted.

RP: Well, that's true. But, I got my orders to go to Fort Sill. I stopped in Oklahoma City on the way and was interviewed to go to medical school. They accepted me. I went to Fort Sill and worked in the latrines there for three weeks and was shipped back to medical school in Oklahoma City as a PFC. Which I remained, until I graduated from medical school, a PFC.

JE: How many years was medical school?

RP: Nineteen forty-three to 'forty-six. We went to school, basically, the year round with a couple weeks off here and there, but no summer vacation. I think we went through in thirty-three months instead of thirty-six months.

JE: So in Oklahoma City, what was the name of the facility, the medical hospital?

RP: University of Oklahoma School of Medicine.

JE: Okay, you went to the University of Oklahoma School of Medicine as a PFC in the army?

RP: Yes, and they also had naval cadets there, and then they had civilians.

JE: Where did you live?

RP: I had a brother that was an insurance adjuster there and I lived with him for a couple of years. And then I had met some girls here that lived in Oklahoma City. Their father was a surgeon and he had the Polyclinic Hospital.

So he asked me if I'd like to work with him at the hospital when I was not in school. That's what I did. He had an old house right next to the hospital that he said I could live in a couple rooms. I lived in that and ate at the hospital.

JE: So during your years of medical training you lived as a civilian?

RP: I lived as a civilian, but, you know, we had to do calisthenics every morning at seven thirty, or whatever time, and before classes.

JE: Okay, at school?

RP: Right.

JE: You go to school—did you wear the uniform?

RP: Didn't have to.

JE: But they'd still have calisthenics for you every morning?

RP: Yes.

JE: You had to fall in, I guess, as they say.

RP: Right, right.

JE: At seven o'clock in the morning, or whenever.

RP: Right.

JE: And you'd do calisthenics. And then from then on, life was like a civilian, wasn't it?

RP: Yes, I got a first class private's pay at fifty-four dollars. And since they didn't have a barracks, I got a subsidence to pay ninety dollars a month. So I was really in pretty tall cotton.

JE: All right.

RP: Particularly since the doctor gave me this place to live and let me use his home as a home away from home.

JE: Not a bad way to spend the war years, was it?

RP: It was great, yeah.

Then, when I graduated, I had to take an internship, and I took that for eighteen months there at the University Hospital in Oklahoma City.

Then I went to Fort Sam Houston, and took a course that every doctor had to go through when they were inducted down there.

And then I was ordered to Kwajalein Island. No, I had to go to Travis Air Force Base, which is in California. I was there about a month before my orders came.

Then I was flown to Hickam Field, stayed there a few days, and then was flown out to Kwajalein, which is an island about a half a mile wide and two and a half miles long. On one side, it had a landing strip, under which were multiple dead Japanese soldiers. On the other side, it was an atoll, and it was a nice area, but they dumped the honey there so you couldn't get in that water. Where the Japs were buried, it was rough water, it was the ocean side, couldn't get in that.

But there were a couple of islands nearby and we could get the navy to motor us over there and have a picnic and so forth.

But I had to spend eleven months on Kwajalein.

JE: What did you do?

RP: At that time, they were flying army and navy personnel back from Okinawa and Japan to Tripler Hospital in Honolulu. I was to check them when they came through. If I found one that I thought needed a doctor, I could go to Hickam with them.

So it wasn't difficult to find one, and I went to Hickam, and then to my consternation, I found that the orders were I had to be on that rock, Kwajalein, for nine months. So I ended up having to spend eleven months there, to make up for my time out.

Chapter 05 – 7:35
Remembering the Helmerichs

Robert Perryman: Then I was discharged. I came home and my dad said, "I want you to meet a friend of mine." And it was a fellow by the name of C. C. Cummings. He had an oil company, I think, it was Cummings McIntyre, or McIntyre Cummings. He lived there at the corner of 30th and Zunis.

So we went over there, and he said, "Well, what are you going to do?"

And I said, "Well, I want to be a surgeon and I've got to find a place to go. I don't know any place right now."

Well, he said, "You need to go to Cleveland Clinic."

I said, "That would be great but I'm not sure I can get in there."

"Oh," he said, "I'll get you in there." And he did.

So they told me, "Well," they couldn't take me that year but for me to go to Toledo, Ohio, and they would put me with a friend they had there, a surgeon in a hospital. And then the following year I went to Cleveland. I just followed my orders and then I spent my surgery career training at Cleveland Clinic, primarily. I had a little bit at Toledo.

I married a girl from Toledo.

John Erling: What was her name?

RP: Her maiden name was Adams, Carolyn Adams. That time I was at Cleveland and I thought, *Well, we're going to go back to Toledo and practice.*

But there was a surgeon here named Bud Yandell. Bud was with the Glass Nelson Clinic. Bud had a hernia; he didn't want Glass to fix it. Glass had injured his hands with radiation from taking x-rays. He had gone to school with George Crowell Jr., at Harvard and Yale. And they were in the army together in the South Pacific.

So I just happened to be chief resident, or whatever it was, I was a senior at that time with George Crowell, as his assistant. He knew I was from Tulsa, so just about the time he was going to start the operation, he scraped a little scalpel across Yandell's abdomen and said, "Yandell, it's time you had a partner."

Yandell said, "Okay, who?"

So he told him me. So I came down and we made a deal. And, of course, I was happy because this was my home.

JE: Yeah.

RP: My wife wasn't too happy. But it's turned out to be great.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). Wow! Right times, right places.

RP: Luck, you know, you never know what's going to happen.

JE: But you stepped up and met the challenge of the time, and you became a well-respected surgeon.

RP: Well, yeah, but I certainly had little breaks, I'll tell that. Of course, I know Walt.

JE: Walt Helmerich.

RP: He called me my first year up there—

JE: In?

RP: Cleveland. And he said, "I'd like for you to be at my wedding."

I said, "Walt, I'm the lowest man on the totem pole here. I can't go anywhere." So I didn't.

But he said, "Well, I'm going to marry Peggy Dow." And he said, "She's been in Harvey."

And Caroline got on the phone. And he said, "Well, go see that." So we did.

Anyway, when we came back here, they gave us a little party, along with Jack Bates.

JE: Reading and Bates?

RP: Yeah, he's related to Walt.

Mrs. Bates and old Mrs. Helmerich were sisters. And anyway, they gave us a little party and that helped my wife. My wife didn't know anybody here. Well, that's not true. She went to a college called Monticello, just north of St. Louis, on the Illinois side, Alton, Illinois.

And there was a girl from here—there was a guy in Tulsa named Forest Mensinger, big oilman at that time. His daughter was up there, and a guy named Don Atkins, here's a CPA, his wife was up there. My wife knew them.

Anyway, we came back and soon adjusted to it.

JE: Well, Peggy was kind of in the same boat as your wife.

RP: Yes.

JE: She came here, she didn't know anybody either.

RP: When we were growing up, Walt had a convertible Cadillac, and I had a secondhand Ford. So when we double dated, you know who got the good looking girl, don't you?

JE: [laughing]

RP: But anyway, the Fowler family has been remarkably good to me over the years. I operated on Mr. Helmerich a couple of times.

JE: Walt's father?

RP: Yeah. The old man called me, he asked me to come up to the office. I did, of course. He said, "You're going to be chief of surgery at Hillcrest."

I said, "Mr. Helmerich, I rarely go over there."

"I don't care," he says, "you're going to be chief of surgery and I'm going to clean that place up." And he did. That's what started Doctors Hospital. The people that he decreed qualified. They went over there and started Doctors Hospital. They came out smelling good, really. They made a fortune when they sold it.

But anyway, he did a lot for Hillcrest Hospital. He was over there every morning around five o'clock, making rounds.

JE: Walt's father was?

RP: Yes.

JE: And he wasn't a doctor.

RP: Right. And then one time, we went to Thailand for our church. Presbyterians have a hospital in Chiang Mai, Thailand. At that time, it was the second largest city, next to Bangkok. It's up near the Burma border.

The next thing I knew, Mr. Helmerich arranged for us and we left Thailand to go to Hong Kong. He put us with a guy there that had a clothing store. Then he arranged for us to go to Tokyo and he had people meet us there. They stayed with us for three days. I know we went to the Imperial Palace and we were in a cab. I was worried, the sticker was going all the time. I said, "Well, let me pay for that."

"Oh, no, it's all taken care of." Mr. Helmerich had paid all that.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

RP: And we met the family that had Mikimoto pearls. Walt, my contemporary Walt, knew this family. So we called them and we had a cocktail with them and she arranged for my wife to go to a place and get pearls. Little things like that, that that family has done for us.

When we were gone, her mother came to stay with our children. She said, "There will be a lady come to the door in a fur coat and she'll have eggs for you. And that's Mrs. Helmerich." She used to come every two or three weeks. So they've always been good to us.

JE: You and Walt then were good friends down through the years.

RP: Yes, I think we still are. He had that surgery and he's still uncomfortable.

JE: Yep. Describe the personality of Walt's dad.

RP: He was a gruff old guy. Hell, he wasn't really well liked. But I couldn't say anything but good about him. I took his appendix out one time. You know, in those days, the appendectomy was worth about two hundred bucks. But his was ruptured, and here I was operating on a very prominent guy. So I charged him four hundred dollars. And I guess he got about half mad but it was my understanding that my work pacified him. He was always good to me after that.

As a matter of fact, I operated on him when he died. He had diabetes and he was Hillcrest. He got a dead leg and I didn't even know he was over there. And he had that guy call me and come over and see him. And we had to take his leg off.

Paul was in New York and wanted to know if he should come back. I said, "Well, nothing you can do, he's not going to make it."

Bob Patterson, his son-in-law, stayed with him all the time. He was really good to him.

And Mrs. Helmerich, she had a colon operation and I went over to see her after her surgery. They used to live at 2300 and then he built Yorktown and they moved up there. And he wanted me to go up and see her there as she got Alzheimer's real bad.

JE: Walt's mother?

RP: Cadijah, yeah, named Cadijah. He still wanted me to go up there every couple of weeks. She would always dress perfectly and manicured. They took good care of her.

Chapter 06 – 5:50
Cars, Sports, Music

John Erling: Do you remember back—this would have been in the 'forties, the cars you drove? Remember the cars you had?

Robert Perryman: Yeah, I do. I had secondhand Fords. And my first new car I bought my first or second year in medical school from Fred Jones. I had met the Jones' daughter, Mary

Lynn Jones, and they had a son named Fred Jones Jr. And I was dating the girl some. So I told Fred Jr. that I'd like to have a new Ford, I wanted a convertible.

He said, "We got one for you!" [laughs] So he got me the first car I had, first brand new one I had.

JE: What year?

RP: 'Forty-six.

JE: And you had accumulated enough money?

RP: Yeah, oh, I had because I didn't really have any expenses.

JE: What color was it?

RP: It was red.

JE: Walt Helmerich, was he jealous of that?

RP: Oh, no, he had a black Cadillac. And one time, he had a red Mercury convertible.

JE: Back in those days, did baseball interest you? Did you cheer for certain teams?

RP: No I didn't. Now football, of course, I was interested in Oklahoma. Of course, at TU I was interested in Tulsa University, and they had a good team back in those days. You know, they had Glenn Dobbs, went on to become All-American.

When I came back to here and I was at Glass Nelson, the Dobbs' boys wanted me to take care of the football team, so we did it as a clinic. We had an orthopedist named Bob Johnson and a couple of surgeons and internists. I guess there were about ten of us. The university gave each of us two tickets to the football. And we took care of their team and, matter of fact, in a couple years, we had a guy taking care of the hockey team.

JE: What was the name of your clinic?

RP: Glass Nelson.

JE: Yeah.

RP: It was located at 21st and Atlantis. It's still well. When I quit we sold it to Sister Therese.

JE: Of St. John Medical Center.

RP: Right. They own it now. We sold the building to St. John.

JE: And then you moved your practice.

RP: No, I quit practice there. And then the Sister gave me a job as a medical director of surgery for ten years. Then she got tired of me.

JE: She let you go?

RP: Yeah. They didn't have the money. I had told her when she wanted to buy our building, I said, "We're going to be fair with you, Sister. Whatever they appraise it for."

Well, she sure wanted our building and we were fair with her. And she was fair with me.

JE: You remember back in the 'forties and the movie stars and the movies you saw and songs or anything like that?

RP: No, but I do remember the "Lucky Strike Hit Parade," Kay Keiser College of Musical

Knowledge, Woody Herman, well, yes, I like that kind of music a lot. When I was in high school.

JE: These bands would come through Tulsa?

RP: Some of them would, yeah. We didn't have too many big ones.

JE: So you'd see them at the Brady Theater?

RP: If we saw them we did. Now in Toledo they had a couple of the good orchestras come through there. And there was a place, Centennial Park, we used to go out there. But that was only for that year.

JE: You said your mother wanted you to be a doctor.

RP: That's true.

JE: But did you select surgery?

RP: I did. The fellow I worked for in Oklahoma City was a surgeon. And I became intrigued with him.

JE: What was his name?

RP: Stout, Marvin Stout. And he had this little hospital called Polyclinic Hospital at 13th and Robinson. That was right down 13th from the medical school, about a mile west.

JE: You discussed with him about becoming a surgeon?

RP: I probably did, I don't remember exactly. I know I also became acquainted with a fellow named J. B. Eskrich, who was a big obstetrician there. But I decided I really didn't want to do it, I wanted to be a surgeon.

JE: Remember your first surgery?

RP: Probably an appendectomy.

JE: For a surgeon, is that one of the easy ones?

RP: Probably, yeah, um-hmm (affirmative). If they have appendicitis. It certainly isn't very easy if they don't have appendicitis.

JE: Do you remember hearing presidents on the radio, FDR?

RP: Yes, I can remember FDR, and I think I remember LBJ.

JE: Truman?

RP: Yes.

JE: Eisenhower? Did you ever see any of these people?

RP: Not in person. I remember when Truman fired MacArthur in Japan, brought him back.

JE: It was Glass-Nelson Clinic, wasn't it?

RP: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: The doctors that you practiced with there or any other doctors that were you colleagues in the community, some of their names?

RP: Well, you apparently already met C. T. and Shepherd.

JE: C. T. Thomson.

RP: Yeah.

JE: Dr. Bob Shepherd.

RP: Right. And Bud Yandel, my partner. There was one named Dick McDowell, he was a fine surgeon. There was a fellow, Ralph McGill, excellent surgeon that was located at Hillcrest. Tom Hardman was a fine surgeon. All of them are gone now. C. T.'s still around. Bob's around. Bob will be ninety-one, I think, January 1st. He's about my age.

JE: 'Fifty-three is when you started your surgery.

RP: Yes.

JE: Tell us about the tools you had to use then as compared to what they have today.

RP: Oh, our tools were more than adequate, you know, we didn't have all the ultrasound and we didn't have the robotic surgery and I wasn't trained in laparoscopic surgery. That really happened just about the time I quit surgery.

Billy Paul Loughridge was a cardiovascular surgeon here. I think he was probably the first cardiovascular surgeon trained here. I think he came about a year after I was here.

I could have stayed at Cleveland and gone into thoracic cardiovascular surgery but we'd lived with a pittance for so long, I wanted to get started. That's when Yandell said I could come with him.

Well, I jumped at it. My wife didn't jump, she just acquiesced.

JE: But she ended up liking it here, didn't she?

RP: Yeah.

Chapter 07 – 7:00
Surgeries

John Erling: How many years were you a surgeon?

Robert Perryman: I practiced thirty-five years, just into thirty-six years.

JE: Any surgery that stands out that was particularly difficult and you were nervous about and it turned out all right? Any story about that?

RP: Well, any time you got a ruptured colon, where it emptied the intestinal contents out, that's a very touchy operation and wasn't often successful because of the infection rate. We had penicillin and we had sulfa but we didn't have the sophisticated antibiotics, in those days.

I had to do an infant from Miami, Oklahoma, that had atresia, that's not a fully developed segment of small bowel. C. T. helped me, we did it together, and it worked out good.

Bob Shepherd and his group called Garrick, Shepherd, and White, they had the biggest surgical practice in town. They had all the Jewish trade. I had one or two Jewish patients but they didn't pay, they didn't have any money. Shepherd got all the wealthy ones.

Our group, we were probably number two, as far as St. John's area. C. T. developed a big practice there but he could have had a larger one but he went to Francis. There were some surgeons there, it was solo. There was a J. B. Thompson and there was a Dick McDowell, but they didn't have the larger practices.

Surgery is different nowadays. We'd operate on them in the morning. I'd come home for dinner and go back and make rounds in the evening. They don't do that anymore. It was a great life, I thought. I enjoyed my practice.

JE: When St. Francis came online the early 'sixties, like 'sixty-one, in there, were you asked to go out there? Did you think about it?

RP: Oh, yeah, we went out there, we tried to help them. But I never had more than two or three patients out there. And the traffic added an hour to my day. It wasn't really worth the while.

JE: That was considered "way out there"?

RP: Oh, yeah.

JE: At that time.

RP: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Because you were at 21st, so that was like four miles out there.

RP: Four miles and then a mile or two east.

JE: Right.

RP: But that was an excellent hospital and I was on a couple of committees out there, I can't remember what they were. We did do some surgery out there.

JE: Did you feel a competition between the two hospitals at that time?

RP: No, I'm sure they do now. But they were just getting started and we were really trying to help them by taking a couple of patients or so out there. And they were very kind. It worked out good, I thought it was fine.

JE: In the 'fifties, blacks in Tulsa, were they treated differently?

RP: Yes. You know, St. John had a ward down on the ground floor and they probably had maybe twenty beds. But we didn't treat them different, we took care of them surgically, as we would anybody. We didn't get paid. That was before Medicare. Of course, we had to take our emergency room for surgery.

Shepherd's group had to take it about five or six months. Any patient that came in that didn't have a doctor, who had surgery, they had to cover it.

I think they must have taken it five and we took it three and then there were a couple doctors that took it months at a time. It wasn't any problem, we didn't complain. I know

we had a little hard time getting some of the guys to take the emergency room coverage, until Medicare came along. And then they all wanted in.

JE: So that was anybody who came in, that was blacks and whites then both, because whites would come in too, perhaps, and couldn't pay.

RP: Oh, yeah, right, and they might not have a doctor.

JE: Yeah.

RP: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And so we kind of have that same scene today, don't we?

RP: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: But the blacks were put in a separate ward to themselves, weren't they?

RP: At that time.

JE: Yeah. You remember—this wouldn't have affected you as a surgeon, but polio in the 'fifties.

RP: Yeah, I remember that. They had—

JE: What are your remembrances of that?

RP: Well, you know, then they developed that vaccine that we helped give the polio vaccine. Hillcrest had the big polio ward. I remember the iron lung but I never really had a patient that had polio.

JE: Any friends or anybody who knew who had the disease?

RP: Not active at that time. I knew some subsequently that had had it.

JE: Yeah.

RP: But the county society got mobilized and we gave that polio vaccine all over town. Tulsa had a good medical society. There are politics in medicine though, just like there's even politics anywhere.

JE: Okay, what do you mean by that, "politics in medicine"?

RP: Well, there's some guys that are interested in being involved in the politics of it. They want to be the president of the staff. They want to be on the State Medical Society board. That sort of thing.

I did some of that, I was president of the medical staff. I was chief of surgery at Hillcrest, chief of surgery at St. John, we were on the board of Blue Cross and Blue Shield. I was chief of staff when Sister Therese came to Tulsa. Apparently, our medical staff really wanted somebody like Jim Harvey. Did you ever know a Jim Harvey?

JE: No, but he was at Hillcrest.

RP: Yes, very good. So when this nun came, they protested, and I just said, "Well, let's just give her a chance and see how she does." And she told my wife that, "We showed them." She did. She did a good job, she's done a great job.

JE: And she came with administrative training.

RP: Yeah.

JE: And so she had been a CEO.

RP: Yeah.

JE: Where—

RP: Small hospital, I think it was in Mexico.

JE: Roswell, New Mexico.

RP: Yeah.

JE: Whereas the sister preceding her at St. John didn't have the training—

RP: Came up through the ranks, yeah.

JE: . . . that she had.

RP: Right.

JE: I've interviewed Sister Therese for this, and she said it took her a while.

Was there something about Mr. Harvey because she'd said the doctors had said, "Well, if you want to work for Mr. Harvey, you can go there"? Was he a tough person to work for, be around?

RP: No, I didn't think so, but I think she was right to do that. I didn't remember that. She was very effective and very straightforward and very fair and very Catholic and very hospital-oriented. Which is good.

JE: And she says in the interview it took her about five years to really get it going the way she wanted it—

RP: I'm sure.

JE: . . . to go. Because she was a woman in what we would consider a man's world, as an executive.

RP: Yeah, I can't remember who was the CEO when she came.

JE: Then there was a lot of building going on at St. John at the time you were there.

RP: Yes, and it still is.

JE: 'Seventy-six, that $44 million North Tower was dedicated. Dr. Shepherd talks about also how the administration and the doctors seemed to get along very well. Is that your understanding?

RP: I think that's true, yeah.

JE: Where there seems to be in many hospital the separation and the fighting, but not at St. John.

RP: Yeah, I think I agree with Shepherd, it was a very amiable relationship.

Chapter 08 – 9:12
Medical World Today

John Erling: What brought you to the decision to retire? How old were you when you retired?

Robert Perryman: I was sixty-six. I'd been lucky, I'd never had a malpractice case. We went to these seminars, PLICO, that's an insurance farm of the State Medical Society. They would hold those for doctors to warn them about malpractice. The one I went to, they said, "Look to your right, look to your left, one of you three are going to be sued this year."

Anyway, I never got sued, so I thought maybe I'd better quit. We had an opportunity to sell the building and Sister started that group called Omni. Our pediatricians thought they would go with that. Really kind of dissolved our situation.

By that time, we had Dr. Nelson's son, Franklin Nelson. He was a surgeon and he tried to stick around for a little while, but, I don't know, he wasn't able to make a go of it. He joined the navy and spent some time there. He's out now and lives in Pennsylvania.

JE: What do you think about the medical world today and doctors? I'm sure, judging by your personality here, you had a pretty good, as we say, bedside manner.

RP: Hopefully.

JE: You were easy to visit with and be around. So that helped you a lot.

RP: It does help, right. I think you've got to be considerate and be willing to talk. The problem is now, I think, these organizations want you to see as many patients a day as you can. And you don't have the time to sit down and talk to them.

We have a nephew named Phil Perryman that works for the University of Oklahoma. Takes care of all the intensive care patients at St. John that are related to the University of Oklahoma. Here was here, maybe last month, and told Caroline, my wife, "That's the problem with doctors now, they didn't have any time to spend with patients."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RP: I think that's probably going to get worse. I think we're going to have a problem having a sufficient quantity of doctors.

JE: Something's going to have to give in the hospitals, say, over the next twenty-five, fifty years. One hospital person told me they thought they'd become kind of like utilities and that clinics would be bigger and bigger and that the hospitals would be kind of run like PSO or something and they'd just be a utility. I don't know if you have an opinion about that or not.

RP: Well, I think he's right about the clinics. I think that's the best way to practice medicine, because you have available specialties to call on and it doesn't take a month to see somebody.

Cleveland Clinic…recently, they've really gotten a lot of our awards. Cleveland has been number one in cardiovascular surgery. And they are two, three, four, or five in all the specialties there, Cleveland Clinic.

Of course, I guess Mayo is number one. They've got a subsidiary in Phoenix. Cleveland Clinic had one in Fort Lauderdale. Of course, St. John, they own the anesthesiologists. They work for St. John. I said, "Why do you do that?"

"Well, their malpractice insurance is up to sixty thousand a year, the anesthesiologists. Once they join St. John, it was six thousand. St. John is self-insured."

And the cardiovascular surgeons at St. John now work for the hospital. Of course, the hospital is losing some business. The orthopedists built their own little surgical unit. They got that surgery hospital out on 71st across the river and spine hospital, and they have all these outpatient surgeries. It takes business away from the hospital.

JE: Does that surprise you that whereas some of the surgery that back in your day, they'd have to at least spend the night or the next night, and—

RP: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

JE: . . . now they come in in the morning and they go back home.

RP: Absolutely. We used to do hernias and they'd spend five days in the hospital. Now they go home that day.

JE: As you look back on that, do you think that we didn't need to keep them in the hospital that—

RP: Yeah, I think we didn't need to, but, boy, the patients wanted to be in. [laughing] They'd heard about it and just wanted to be in. I think it's still a great profession to get into. I think a young man can go into and always make a living. He may not get wealthy, and he probably really doesn't want to, but he ought to be able to make a respectable living.

JE: Plus improve the lives of a lot of people.

RP: Yeah, sure.

JE: It must have given great satisfaction to perform the surgery and that person's life was going to be extended.

RP: I agree.

JE: Were there many females surgeons?

RP: Not at that time. There are now. My wife's sister in Tucson had cancer of the breast and I didn't agree with what they planned to do and so I called—now St. Francis had one named Mitchell. She's not practicing now. I don't know why. And St. John has one named Flynn. Female breast surgeons.

I talked to both of them and I got them to kind of agree with what I thought was the right. But anyway, they, it worked out all right for her sister. She just had to have two procedures. I thought one could have handled the whole thing.

That means another exposure to anesthesia and another exposure to possible infection, and it isn't fundamentally necessary, I don't think.

JE: So isn't it nice to have these young ones listen to, uh—

RP: Yeah. Well, they—

JE: . . . the guru.

RP: Well, they're probably better trained in breast surgery than I was. Of course, George Crowell was an advocate of lumpectomy and radiation. This was back in 'sixty, and, of course, they're doing a lot of that here now.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). So a young man or woman listening to this, what kind of advice would you give them if they're interested in the medical profession or in the surgery business? What would you tell them?

RP: I'd say go for it if they're really dedicated to it. You can't go into it for the money, but there is a lot of reward. You get satisfaction, and you ought to be able to make a comfortable living.

JE: It's hard to believe you say don't go into it for the money. You would think a surgeon, for what they do, the delicate things that they do, would be highly paid. And you're saying that they're not of the highest.

RP: Well, I think the cardiovascular surgeons are now. But that was a new field when I came. But, you know, gall bladders, that was about a seven hundred dollar procedure.

I remember operating on Old Man Siegfried. He had a cancer of colon and he went to an internist named Tom Fair, who was at the Springer Clinic. Tom called me and said, "Could you take this patient?" He said, "He won't go to St. Francis and he needs surgery."

So it was Old Man Siegfried. We operated on him and I charged him what I thought was a good fee. I think it was about eighteen hundred dollars.

He came into the office and said that was nowhere enough and gave me more money. [laughs] Unusual.

JE: Gave you more than eighteen hundred?

RP: Yeah, oh, yeah.

And then I know another guy, I took his stomach out. He asked me the same thing and I said, "Well, we'll charge you near about twelve, fifteen hundred dollars." Not near enough. I never got a penny. [laughing]

JE: Didn't get anything?

RP: No. Things happen.

JE: [laughing] I guess in the cemetery, you believe in the cemetery it's mostly descendants are those of George B. Perryman?

RP: Right. I don't know, there was some friction between that family and our family. I know there was a son of George B. that lived on the other side of my dad's brother, who was the furthest west in our group. It was a little house that sat back off, oh, about a hundred yards, but we never were friends with them. I was half afraid of them, I don't know why.

JE: And they were your relatives?

RP: Yeah, they were cousins. Then I did know some. There was one guy that became the director out at the zoo. He was a real nice guy.

JE: What was his name?

RP: Pulaski Perryman, but he went by something else.

JE: And here is a picture of the man—

RP: Benjamin, yeah.

JE: . . . Benjamin, who brought the whole Perryman family to what would become Tulsa.

RP: That's true.

JE: And this painting is by George Catlin?

RP: That's my understanding, yeah.

JE: Hangs in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC. George Catlin was a painter, author, and traveler, and he specialized in portraits of Native Americans and the Old West.

RP: I think they have a copy of that at, uh—

JE: At Gilcrease?

RP: Um-hmm (affirmative). Probably down in the storage. But we've seen it out there.

JE: Interesting when I sit and look at you, I see the Native American face.

RP: Oh, really?

JE: When you first see you it doesn't strike you, but when I sit and look at you, you realize, and maybe it's because I know you are. Nobody's ever probably said that to you.

RP: That's true.

JE: They haven't?

RP: Nobody has.

JE: Yeah, it's probably because I interviewed Charles Banks Wilson and he specialized in drawing and painting Native Americans.

RP: Well, my father really looked Indian. As a matter of fact, when we got married in Toledo, I think he caused quite a sensation there. He looked like almost full-blooded.

JE: Thank you very much for doing this.

RP: You bet.

Chapter 09 – 0:33
Conclusion

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