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About W.B. Needles:

The following is a copy of a letter of November 28, 1979, written by James H. Grout, O.D. to Miss Pam Warbinton, then an optometry student at Indiana University collecting information for a history paper. Dr. Grout is a nephew of Dr. Needles practicing in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Dear Pam:

I have your letter re: W.B. Needles and the Needles Institute of Optometry.

My earliest recollection dates back to about 1921 when I was seven. I do not know when he first started the school. At that time W.B. operated the school at the New Center Building at 15th and troost [?] in Kansas City, Mo.

He held classes there and also had a correspondence course. His sister Lida Needles operated the office and did the clerical work for the preparation and mailing of the correspondence lessons etc. W.B. was away a good part of the time attending conventions and lecturing.

The reason I was familiar with this is that my mother (Genevieve Grout) another sister of W.B. worked part time there at the school assisting Lida and she took me with her (which was more fun than a baby sitter.)

The classes held there were under the direction of Prof. Ernest Occhiena. "Occhie" as he was called was a faithful and devoted friend of W.B., and also of mine, and I can vividly recall looking up at this towering man (I was 7) and seeing him reach into his vest pocket and finding a coin (usually a dime) and saying "This is for you, big eyes". He once found nothing less than a quarter and a quarter was some more money!

Along with Occhie (Though I didn't know them then) were Stanley McGuire, Joseph Little, and Alfred Eaton. This made up most of the faculty as far as I know.

As a side note, I recall being there when a large package came. My Aunt Lida opened it and it was a large silver trophy cup. My Uncle Will (W.B.) had won the golf tournament at one of the conventions and at that tournament was helped a good bit by getting a "hole in one".

Well, the school prospered and in 1926 he bought the college of ophthalmology and otorhinolaryngology from a Dr. McFatrigh. McFatrigh was, I believe, one of the originators, or the originator, of Murine. He moved his family to Chicago along with Lida, their sister Lucy, and his mother.

He took Prof. Occhiena and later hired Drs. McGuire, Little, and Eaton. The College was at 41st and Drexel Blvd.

In 1937 he bought the Bernard Hotel at 42nd and Drexel as a dormitory and then built a new College building directly behind the dormitory on 42nd St.

I kept the books on the construction of the building. (I had gone to school there in 1936) and it was certainly the most complete and beautiful building ever to be built for optometry at that time.

The building cost \$225,000, and in 1937 that was a lot of money. It was a monumental tribute to optometry and even more to W.B. Needles.

I was in Philadelphia visiting the Pennsylvania State College of Optometry to better evaluate our clinics when, while there, I was called to be told that W.B. was very low. When I got back to Chicago the next morning, he had died.

So in 1948 we lost what I believe to be the greatest man optometry ever had.

Please give my regards to Dr. Hofstetter. It's been years since I've seen him and I regard him most highly.

I hope this will help in your paper.

I will send your letter and a copy of this one to his son, Dr. Richard Needles. He can certainly add to what I have written.

Very truly yours,

James H. Grout, O.D.

More about W.B. Needles:

The following is a copy of a letter of December 5, 1979, written by Richard A. Needles, O.D., to Pamela Warbinton, an Indiana University optometry student collecting information for a history paper. Dr. Needles is a son of W.B. Needles practicing in Hickory, North Carolina.

Dear Pamela:

Dr. James H. Grout has forwarded your letter together with his reply to me for further additions to his material on Dr. William B. Needles and the Needles Institute of Optometry. I find yours a fascinating request because I have been uncertain as to the place he is held in archives and memory among those teaching in optometry schools. Surely at the Illinois College of Optometry, the second generation successor to the Needles Institute, material should be available in abundance, but I suppose it's quite possible much has been lost. No doubt you have inquired from them as to what is available.

Another source of information you might use is the historical records department of the A.O.A. in St. Louis, Missouri. I know they have some because eight years ago on a visit I found myself in a large photo together with my family and attendees at the A.O.A. convention in St. Louis in 1920.

I am going to recount for you some things I remember and also risk sending to you (under pain of swift and terrible punishment if lost) some early printed matter I happen to have.

Dr. Needles was born in Sedalia, Missouri, in 1879 and worked in a jewelry store there when probably a teenager for about a year or two. This may well have given him an interest in what was to become optometry following the turn of the century. In my early years our family traveled to Sedalia from our home in Kansas City and visited the jewelry store. He called my attention to the same display case with its glass top and sides and said it must have shrunk because in his time he had to keep the glass polished clean and it was at least a quarter of a mile long. I remember the grins on the faces of the original proprietors.

He studied optometry in Chicago, just where I am not sure, but I recall something about the "McCormick School" long since defunct. He returned to Kansas City, married in 1905, I believe, and commenced practice. He had numerous talents, but surely his most noteworthy was his ability to explain in lucid detail anything that he understood well, a characteristic I have noticed in a few first rate teachers. Note—beware of the teacher who can't or won't bring the loftiest of concepts down to simple, understandable levels—I hope your professors at Indiana are all of the first category.

He early found that many of the local refracting opticians, practicing optometry with licenses obtained under the grandfather clause, did not understand fully what or why they were doing what they were doing during the examination. In about 1908 he established some night classes helping these men and yes, even some women, to a better understanding of their work. This apparently appealed to him and so in 1910 he obtained whatever charters or credentials were necessary and began the Needles Institute of Optometry. It seemed successful from the start and he soon had students attending from throughout the mid-continent states. These as I well recall remained friendly and loyal throughout his life.

Dr. Grout mentioned Professor Ernest Occhiena. "Occhie" (the letters mean "eye" in Italian, he once told me, and pronounced "Oakey") had studied medicine in Turin, Italy, had a father of some political prominence, but for reasons only vaguely hinted at, fell out of political favor and Occhie came to the United States and my father found him somehow in Kansas City broke and destitute. He was taken in and given help of the necessary kind, studied the optometry course, at that time little more than a year in duration, took handwritten notes, said to stand in a stack three feet high, and remained as an instructor, right hand man, and finally dean of the Needles Institute and its successor, Northern Illinois College of Optometry, until his death in 1946 or 1947.

William B. Needles was a convivial, gregarious person, well liked and friendly. He enjoyed life in all aspects. When he entered a room or the company of friends or strangers all eyes and ears tended to turn toward him. It wasn't long before he was describing something that seemed to sound terribly interesting and had everyone's attention. No wonder he was in demand as a speaker at state optometric meetings and seminars whenever he could get away. At age five years I accompanied him and my mother on a speaking tour that included Denver, Colorado; Salt Lake City, Utah; Spokane, Washington; Portland, Oregon; and San Francisco, staying at the Palace Hotel but traveling across the bay by ferry, accompanied by the seagulls, to Berkeley and the University every day for a week (such a memory), then to Los Angeles. Quite a trip on the train for 1916.

On one occasion about 1922 or 1923 he was asked to speak in Denver, Colorado. He wrote back that previous engagements prevented him from doing so but that he could recommend a smart, eager young graduate from Kearney, Nebraska, who might substitute if they wished. His name was Arthur M. Skeffington. They agreed and that began a career that made waves for over fifty years and still does since his death. (See the Journal of the A.O.A. for June, 1978, for a better look, but don't believe all you read.) Consult also with Professor Hofstetter.

As you have no doubt learned, the state laws governing the practice of optometry were passed in the various legislatures during the first twenty or so years of this century. Dr. Needles was frequently asked to appear and testify before lawmakers in various states.

In 1921 he purchased the charter for what was up to then known as the Northern Illinois College of Ophthalmology, Otology, and Otolaryngology which since 1872 had trained physicians in E.E.N.T. but gradually had added more and more optometric students. This I believe was a course of two years or maybe even less for the optometrists after high school. No college credits were required. The name at that time was changed to Northern Illinois College of Optometry, being confined to the teaching of optometry only. It was operated simultaneously with the Needles Institute until 1926 when the faculties and facilities were combined in the city of Chicago. By this time the faculty was enlarging considerably, together with the student body. His efforts were confined chiefly toward administration and speaking here and there. The school had remained proprietary in its corporate structure until 1927 when chiefly for income tax purposes it became chartered as an eleemosynary institution—at least in form, though less so in practice.

During the years of the depression, the enrollment actually enlarged and the tuition became fixed at \$300.00 per year not including books which might cost another \$10.00 to \$15.00 per year. The physical plant became overcrowded and in 1936 plans were developed to build a thoroughly adequate school of optometry. Dr. Grout has mentioned that this was completed in 1937. His figure of \$225,000 is accurate and this combined with the hotel located adjacent to the new building and costing close to the same amount made the total of about \$400,000. At today's costs for the same structures multiply by ten for an idea of the value.

1. This was the first building ever constructed for the teaching of optometry. All others rented existing buildings. The state universities usually relegated the teaching of optometry classes to the basement of the physics lab or some other such distinguished location.
2. This building was built entirely from private funds obtained from the tuition paid by students alone (still \$300.00 per year). There were no federal or state grants available nor was there an endowment fund of any type, nor aid from any alumni. Dr. Needles' name and monies he could borrow were the only resources.
3. If you ponder this for a moment you will realize that this will no doubt be the only building ever built in such a manner for optometric teaching. today grants are available—happily—from many sources, state legislatures to begin with.

It was dedicated in February, 1938, with fitting ceremony and festivities. One was a banquet at the Stevens Hotel in downtown Chicago—now known as the Conrad Hilton. About 1,500 were present. A large photo was made and sold to many who were there. Alas, I haven't seen one in years. It had every facility needed; classrooms, laboratories, assembly room, clinical spaces par excellence, etc., etc., even by today's standards.

But with the declaration of war in 1941 it did not bring all the triumphs he might have wished. I stepped into his office on the morning of December 8, 1941, where a number of the faculty had gathered to hear Franklin Roosevelt's address on the radio to the Congress and their affirmative vote for war, and I heard him remark, "Well, I can only hope it won't close us down as it did in 1917." But close him it very nearly did. From an enrollment of about 700 students on that date, the number dwindled to about forty students in all classes combined—even with student deferments of approximately twenty-four months as I remember—in 1944. This was the low. Dr. Grout and I with others remained as a skeleton crew, teaching long hours generally.

His financial creditors remained generally patient. Some confided later they considered their money lost, but as the war neared its close, discharged G.I.'s came to study optometry and to realize its benefits. In the four to five years after the surrender hundreds upon hundreds of G.I.'s sought entrance. I suppose during that five year span 10,000 applications were received. Every possible space was made available for as many as could be accepted. Too many actually and this brought problems of an entirely different nature. However, Dr. Needles lived long enough to see all of the debts paid off. On June 5, 1948, he died.

Sincerely,

Richard A. Needles, O.D.

PS. An addendum:

You might be interested in a glimpse from my earliest memories as to the humble nature of some of the first classrooms.

I can recall our home on the 3rd floor of a red brick dwelling in Kansas City, Missouri, not too far from the downtown area of the city. The school occupied the lower two floors. To the right of the entrance hall as you entered was a fairly large parlor used as a classroom holding chairs for perhaps 15 students. I remember seeing my father standing before them as he spoke.

I was three years old but can recall that one day I was playing outdoors and although I felt the need to go to the bathroom I delayed until the last possible minute. Finally I came in the front door, the class was in session, and as I started up the stairway directly behind the students but in full view of my father, nature insisted on having its way. I wet not only my pants but some of the stairs as well. I can remember not only some laughter but my father quickly coming to my side and hurrying me upstairs to my mother.

Of course something like that could happen today in a modern setting but it's not likely you will find a family household and teaching classrooms as close together again.

Gems in the trash pile:

"The Trash Collector" is how OHS member Eric P. Muth modestly mislabels himself and his biographical article in the July 1992 issue of Telicom, the journal of the International Society for Philosophical Enquiry, pp. 30-35. He describes himself as one who for many of his 25 years as an optician had been sending his

periodic accumulations of discarded silver and gold spectacle frames and other items of precious metals to the smelter for their recovery value. One day he happened to discover among them numerous items of "beauty and workmanship unparalleled by today's standards." Having a bent for history he began to locate appropriate reference books and found few, and "they were riddled with inconsistencies, misstatements and even contained hoaxes...."

His collection quickly grew to 750 vision aids, most obtained by purchase of small collections and from flea markets and international dealers. Eventually, to lower his fever, he donated his collection and more to the National Museum of American History, Medical Sciences Division, Smithsonian Institution. The overflow of this collection was transferred to the American Academy of Ophthalmology Foundation Museum in San Francisco.

Curator Audrey Davis of the Smithsonian then appointed Muth as a consultant and in that role he undertook to assemble information from experts, patents, trade cards, pictures, and visits to museum collections worldwide. In a book to serve as a museum catalog to be available to other major museums he comments, "Literally thousands of undocumented, unknown, and widely dispersed facts have been unearthed, assembled and placed into our document." Several are mentioned in the article.

Clever holiday spirit:

Dr. Gilbert Cohen's Happy Holidays greeting card for 1992 featured a photograph of a pair of very early, cord-retained, nose-pinching spectacles displayed on the open page of oriental printing. Under his name is the appeal, DATE THESE FOR ME!

Dr. Charles Letocha's card featured a photograph of the SMALL & SONS engraved on the inside of the right temple of a pair of spectacles, meaning, of course, that they came from George Small & Sons, York hardware merchants, 1825-1833. Letocha penned a postscript saying that they were probably made by McAllister. They are therefore a rare domestic product.

Seven generations of family management:

The 175 year survival of an ophthalmic optical firm through a variety of political regimes in Halle, Germany, is described by editor Dieter Baust on pages 12-14 of the 20 August 1992 issue of Deutsche Optiker Zeitung, vol. 47, no. 8.

On June 14, 1817, Johann Willhelm Trothe, a machinist and optician, opened his place of business in Halle to provide drafting instruments, compasses, pens, and all sorts of spectacles, frames, lorgnettes, binoculars, and barometers. In 1845 his son Carl W. Trothe took over, followed in 1884 by Carl's son Rudolf, both

trained as opticians. Following Rudolf's early death, Carl brought in Erich Norgall, an optician, as manager in 1905. Erich Norgall took over sole proprietorship in 1928, later assisted by his daughter, also an optician, who died in 1947, and whose son Dietrich Kloevekorn-Norgall, another optician, took over the firm in 1969. Erich died in 1970. Dietrich is presently in charge and his daughter is studying at the optometry school in Aalen.

The firm retains its original name, Firma Trothe-Optik.

Eye, eyebrow, eyelash, and eyelid:

These three ocular features, though readily distinguishable at a glance, are clearly labeled in our English language. Some Romans quite clearly had easy labels for eyebrow (supercilium) and eyelid (palpebra) but struggled a bit with eyelash by calling it palpebrarum pilus, meaning "eyelids' hair." To complicate matters, other Romans also used the plural of eyebrow (supercilia) to mean eyelashes. The term cilium meant "upper eyelid" to Pliny the Elder, but a few centuries later it referred ambiguously to eyebrow, eyelash, and eyelid.

Subsequently the Latin confusion plagued the terminology in the French, Italian, and Portuguese languages. The details are described by Robert A. Fawkes in an article entitled "Eyebrows and Lowbrows" in the Winter, 1993 issue of Verbatim, The Language Quarterly, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 12-13. He also identifies the equivalents of the three terms in a dozen other languages, including Greek.

The crossed cylinders lens:

In the May 1993 issue of the Journal of the American Optometric Association, Vol. 64, No. 5, pp. 329-331, Dr. Kenneth Brookman reviewed historically the clinical utilization of the crossed cylinders lens as introduced and promoted in America in the mid-19th century by ophthalmologist Edward Jackson.

In the same issue, page 304, editor John Potter, in response to a student showing lack of historical perspective, noted that, "We tend to look only at a brief period of time in our evaluation of how we are doing as a profession"

IAB History:

Under the heading "International Association of Boards of Examiners in Optometry—75 Years of Optometric History" in the Spring 1994 issue of Optometric Education, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 73-74, two of the IAB's past presidents, Drs. Mary Freitag and Donald Gordon, give an extremely brief historical synopsis.

A welcome addition:

What promises to be another internationally significant ophthalmic repository was established in 1993 as the Eric Muth Library and Museum by the Opticians Association of American Foundation. The address is 10341 Democracy Lane, Fairfax, Virginia 22030.

Its holdings include the entire library of Eric Muth, Ph.D., and a collection of vision aids donated by him, plus an assemblage of almost 12,000 photocopies of pages of illustrations of vision aids and of patents, materials, instruments, equipment, advertisements, and people of historical significance to vision aids. Dr. Muth anticipates that by 1996 he will have completed a 2500-page text entitled "Vision Aids in History," the first copy of which is committed to the Smithsonian Institution. Another copy will go to the newly established Eric Muth Library and Museum, and additional copies will be supplied to a number of archival institutions around the world.

Friends and collectors are invited to send contributions of related museum and archival items as well as cash directly to the Eric Muth Library and Museum as tax deductible gifts.

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