

News

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"The real Bill Ross" takes over
presidency of TMA.

DALLAS--Behind a facade of folksy sayings, cowboy clothes and disarming manner lies the real Bill Ross, a first-rate physician and politically astute intellectual who takes over this week as top hand in the Texas Medical Association corral.

"What do I do?

"I treat moles, colds and sore holes; five kinds of the fits and the blind staggers," he says in perfect deadpan fashion.

He is equally at home in the smoke-filled room as at the bedside as he champions the cause of the people in white smocks and stethoscopes.

While his tongue may trip glibly over "...he's the type that if he'd lived during the Civil war, he'd have fought for the West," William Ferdinand Ross, M.D., may well be making a differential diagnosis of someone's clout.

Ross, who will be installed as new TMA president May 30, is chairman of Family Practice Division at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas. In that capacity, he oversees the training of young doctors who often go to rural areas to treat everybody from baby Billy to Aunt Irene.

"He's perfect for that job," says Dr. Charles C. Sprague, president of The UT Health Science Center at Dallas.

"Bill has a genuine compassion for people. From the big to the small, he sees them all as individuals with special needs and wants and I think he imparts that caring attitude to the residents training in the family practice program," Sprague added.

The burly, barrel-chested Ross was the fourth member of his family to practice medicine in Mount Enterprise, Tex. His upbringing still prompts him to ask students at Southwestern Medical School: "What are you learning? Not in your class, in your life. Do you know your neighbor? What about where you buy your groceries? How do these people live and what are they doing?"

Ross, his wife Jane and their five children still have deep roots in East Texas and value time spent at Sugar Hill Ranch, the family home place.

"My father taught me the value of land and what comes from the land. His influence turned out to be more pronounced than I thought."

He is extremely proud of an award from the Texas Forestry Association naming him Outstanding Tree Farmer for 1974. Only when he and his family made the permanent move to the Dallas medical school did they sell their herd of Beefmaster cattle. He and his wife still walk over the pastures hunting rocks and fossils for polishing and mounting.

"I learned something else very valuable from my father," said Ross.

(over)

"That is--every person is a special human being. He was a wise man--he didn't try to teach me about medicine. He talked to me in general terms about people and land and everything on the land."

When Ross was a boy, the people in Mount Enterprise called him "Little Doc."

"I used to go with my dad on house calls and I played my guitar and sang for the patients. Later on I wanted to be a bass player."

At that point it didn't look as if a medical career were in the cards although brother Griff Jr. had followed in their father's footsteps. (Griff now is deputy director of the Clinical Center at the National Institutes of Health in Washington.)

Ross wound up in the Naval Air Force during World War II and spent three years as a rockets instructor. After that stint, he came home, looked around and moved in with Griff.

He was still picking around and thinking of music.

"Then I heard Eddie Safranski." (Safranski played bass with Stan Kenton when "Artistry in Rhythm" was at the top of the charts and was considered the ultimate.)

Ross enrolled in pre-medical studies at nearby Stephen F. Austin State College but he still kept his musical hand in--playing a number of dances with the college band.

Once out of college he entered Southwestern Medical School in Dallas and followed this with an internship at Parkland Memorial Hospital.

He had met Jane during their junior year at college. They were married in the campus chapel an hour after she graduated from Texas State College for Women. By the time they decided to head for new territory, they had two children.

The new territory was San Benito in South Texas near the Mexican border. The people and the climate were warm, and this country held them for 22 years until he accepted the challenge from the Dallas health science center. The doctor still speaks fondly of his former patients in the little South Texas town as "my neighbors, my friends."

Ross has a lot of house calls under his belt. In later years this became an oddity and there was one occasion when he inadvertently rang the wrong doorbell looking for a patient.

The man who appeared at the door looked startled.

"Is that a doctor bag?"

"Yep," said Ross.

"Would you mind waiting here a minute while I call my wife?"

"Sure."

"Honey, come here, there's something I want you to see: a real doctor making a house call."

There are a lot of other stories about Bill Ross who today strolls the "halls of ivy" in rumpled pants, black suspenders, western straw hat and bolo tie held by a chunk of turquoise and will either talk about "gittar pickin,'" Arthur Conan Doyle, Steinbeck, Lewis Thomas or even quote Wordsworth.

"He's a sly fox," says one medical associate. "An intellectual in a good ole boy suit."