

14. William P. Wherry

As a physician he was much broader than his specialty.

HARRIS P. MOSHER, 1942

FOR 16 YEARS William P. Wherry was the Academy's program director, business manager, social planner and expansive host, commentator and critic, and reigning supervisor and general caretaker of all activities (Fig 35). For eight years he handled, as head of the Board of Secretaries, publication of the *TRANSACTIONS* and the *Bulletin* during a period when there was no editor.

It can be said that Dr Wherry wrote the job prospectus for an executive secretary-treasurer, and as he did everything, he did so with bold strokes. When people referred to "Bill Wherry's Academy," as they often did, he had a stock reply, "I am just a country boy trying to get along." Whatever he meant to imply—and colleagues said he was genuinely modest—he went nonstop throughout his life from childhood to early coronary failure at age 62. He ran the Academy as he ran the Board of Otolaryngology and his other activities, with the instincts of a politician, the talents of a legitimate promoter, and the skills of a top business executive.

His easy grasp of myriad details and his agility at organization and administration became a legend among those who worked with or under him, as did his work habits. Gordon Hoople, who served with Dr Wherry on the Board, remembered marking examinations until



Fig 35.—William Wherry, with his inscription to Bill Benedict.

four o'clock in the morning, "with Bill Wherry standing over us ready to crack the whip over a waning spirit. It was senseless but nobody questioned the schedule, for Bill would be working harder than any of the others."^{1(p162)}

Back home in Omaha, Dr Wherry reversed his schedule and often rose long before 4 AM to begin two or three hours of dictation into his

Edison Sound Recorder. His high-pressure daily protocol was dictated by the responsibilities on which he thrived. From 1927 to his death in 1942, he was secretary-treasurer of the Academy and the Board of Otolaryngology. He ran both operations right down to the minutiae of assigning Academy exhibit space and assigning each Board candidate to the different examiners.

He managed both operations from his Omaha office where he had an enormous practice that accounted for the bulk of each day. "He was never too busy," related his secretary of 27 years, Claire McGovern, "to give each patient, besides medical care, time for discussion and full understanding of the problem."^{1(p157)} That would have been in keeping with Dr Wherry's orientation in medicine which was that of the practitioner. He was neither an academic nor a research man, although such designations were less common in his day. Either description would have been far too small to fit a personality so colorful as Dr Wherry.

He commanded the respect of those with a far more academic bent and background—how he acquired his own specialty training is never recorded (probably by preceptorship). Like many men of his ilk, he had a penetrating ability to separate worth from window dressing. Those who sat with him on the Academy Program Committee said he had a comprehensive, and sometimes devastating, knowledge of the work of men throughout the country and its merit.² Those on the Board said he was uncanny in estimating a candidate's knowledge from his credentials.³ Letters of recommendation he considered almost worthless.

He viewed as the job of the Academy and the Board to provide incentive for the specialist to become as proficient as he could, to eliminate the substandard specialist, and to promote improvements in the obvious shortcomings of graduate medical education. If an organization had substandard men in it, he often insisted, it

was the fault of the organization and the responsibility of the organization to do something about it. He thought the Academy educational program, most particularly the instruction courses, offered both incentive and means for the specialist to improve himself.

A realist always, Dr Wherry knew that many undertrained men were practicing, would continue to practice, and were often the only source of medical care in their communities. For them, the goal was to prod and encourage them to read, attend medical meetings, and pool their knowledge in local medical meetings.⁴ In similar fashion, men who failed the Board examination were far from written off by Dr Wherry. They were, after all, going to practice anyway, and without Board certification they had no access to the Academy and other societies that would help upgrade their knowledge.

It was revealed after his death that he carried on a voluminous correspondence with those who failed the Board and sought assistance in passing the second or even third time around. He demanded that the Board never lower its standards, but he was fair as well as tough. Any examiner who gave failing marks to a candidate had to account for his questions to ensure that he was not "riding a hobby."³

Dr Wherry's responsibilities did not stop with his practice, the Academy, and the Board. In 1933 he helped found the Advisory Board for the Medical Specialties and served as vice-president until 1942. He was Nebraska's delegate to the AMA Council on Medical Education from 1936 to 1942 and a member of the Commission on Graduate Medical Education from 1938 to 1942. He was also professor and chairman of the Department of Otorhinolaryngology at the University of Nebraska College of Medicine.

The Omaha-Douglas County Medical Society elected Dr Wherry to his first post in organized medicine, the society presidency in 1917. He was president of the Medical Society of the Missouri Valley in 1932, chairman of the

AMA Section on Otolaryngology in 1934, first vice-president of the American Laryngological Association in 1936, and treasurer of the Omaha Mid-West Clinical Society from 1933 to 1942.

Wayne University in Detroit conferred an honorary doctor of science degree on Dr Wherry in 1941. In 1942 he assumed presidency of the Nebraska State Medical Society. Coronary trouble had first become evident two years earlier during a Board examination in New York. Friends said his presidency of the state society used up most of his remaining strength. During a Board examination in Philadelphia in June 1942 he had a severe coronary attack. He returned to Omaha and died a week later, June 13, 1942, at St. Catherine's Hospital, with which he had been associated for years and where he was honorary president of the staff.³

Perhaps one of the nicest as well as most revealing portrayals of Dr Wherry came from Harris P. Mosher, his longtime colleague in the Academy and on the Board. (As president of the Board, Dr Mosher* called himself Dr Wherry's "understudy."^{3(p28)}) "It has yet to come to light," rendered Dr Mosher, "that in any of the activities which he undertook he did not manage to get pleasure."^{3(p25)} Recounted Gordon Hoople, "If you knew Bill as secretary of the Academy only moderately well, you could not keep from being caught up by the whirlwind of his enthusiasm."^{1(p161)} It was his personality as much as his organizational ability that made him an effective leader.

William Penaluna Wherry was born June 16, 1880, in Omaha. His parents were from Cornwall, England. His father died before

*Harris P. Mosher was the first full-time—"hired man" as he called himself—professor of otolaryngology in the country. He devoted all his time to Harvard Medical School and associated hospitals. Dr Mosher was president of the Academy in 1929 and guest of honor in 1937. His numerous achievements earned him the title Dean of American Otolaryngologists.

Bill Wherry was old enough to retain any memory of him, and his mother died when he was 6. He went to live with a married sister who described him as "everlastingly busy."^{1(p155)} It was an assessment he never outgrew. To help with the slim family coffers, Bill Wherry worked most summers and after school.

He reveled in all his youthful occupations, as he seemed to with everything he did. In later life, Bill Wherry had a trait that could best be described as showmanship, both personally and in his ability to stage an event. He loved to plan and then be in the thick of the production (Fig 36). Some of his youthful activities either reflected this interest at an early age or perhaps promoted this quality.

For two summers he had a peanut concession with a traveling show called the "Cornell Concert Company Under Canvas." He also carried the flag in the parade that opened the nightly show. It must have been more fun than work for a young boy. At age 13 he traveled 500 miles alone to visit the World's Fair in Chicago. Another theatrical job was as an usher at the Boyd Opera House in Omaha.^{1,3}

His longest-running job was a more typical boyhood occupation, delivering newspapers, which he did throughout high school. It was not a job but a hobby that largely paid for the rest of his education. He became a serious stamp collector and was by nature a shrewd barterer. (It was said that he never left an Academy meeting without going over the bill, item by item, with the hotel manager and arguing about each expense he considered too high.) By trading in stamps, he paid his way through the University of Nebraska College of Medicine, graduating in 1903.³

Collecting stamps, in fact collecting memorabilia of all sorts, remained one of his greatest hobbies and pastimes. At his death, his stamp collection was valued in the thousands, and he had once told Harris Mosher that if medicine ever failed him he thought he could support himself through trading in stamps.³



Fig 36.—Dr Wherry and President-Elect Wells P. Eagleton look on as Guest of Honor Hans Lauber (seated left) discusses a point with 1934 President John M. Wheeler.

From high school on, Bill Wherry collected tickets, programs, announcements, anything related to events, and kept them in scrapbooks he dubbed his "memory books." He did the same for the Academy, and the archives he left contain many one-of-a-kind documents.

By natural disposition, Bill Wherry was a salesman and promoter. He had a pleasant, genial manner that welcomed others and a catching amount of enthusiasm for, and belief in, whatever he was doing. And he was an astute judge of men and markets. As business manager of his medical college newspaper, he turned the paper into such a money-maker, through advertising sales, that authorities took it out of student hands.³ He financed programs and brochures for the Academy's instruction

courses (for the first few years) in much the same way, although advertising merely covered costs.

His natural attributes served him well in eliciting the necessary work and support from his colleagues, and his sales acumen served well the cause of medical education, programs, and ideas. "He had the knack," characterized William Benedict, "of making useful things desirable and the ability to make desirable things available."⁴ Amidst all the discussion of what was needed for specialists in training and in practice, Dr Wherry had a keen understanding of what the market would bear. He was what is called a "bottom liner." "In the gross sales department of any organization," he observed, "it is what have you sold."^{5(p22)}

His goal was to slip in as much education as possible in the most palatable form possible. Only once did his judgment prove faulty. He was not particularly enthusiastic about his old friend Harry Gradle's idea of home study courses in the basic sciences. He did not give reasons, but as head of the Academy, he was probably wary about the society moving in on the domain of graduate education, and the basic sciences were hardly popular subjects.

Under the influence of Dr Wherry, the Board of Secretaries increased the entertainment quotient at meetings, and Dr Wherry personally planned for premeeting and postmeeting gatherings. Although part of the reason was simply to make the whole affair more pleasant, another part was a deliberate attempt to bring together members and cultivate the inevitable friendships and medical discussions that he believed were important adjuncts to the formal education of classroom or meeting hall. Talking shop, he said, helped men digest and make practical use of what they had learned.

While most men detested a long and tedious train trip to meetings, Dr Wherry thoroughly enjoyed railroad travel. As a young doctor, he had made some fundamental observations on the efficiency of various track signals for the Union Pacific Railroad. This had sparked a fascination with railroading that he never lost.

He became an ophthalmology consultant for the Union Pacific and Chicago and Northwestern railroads.¹ Through his railroad connections, he organized a Transportation Committee, with railroad and Academy representatives in all regions of the country, to make arrangements for group travel in private cars or special trains to the Academy's convention city.⁶

Three postconvention cruises were planned by Dr Wherry, two to the Caribbean in 1929

and 1938, and one to Bermuda after the 1936 meeting (Fig 37 and 38). A golf tournament, first held at the 1924 meeting, became an annual affair under Dr Wherry who was an avid golfer (Fig 39). He also inaugurated "Evenings of Diversion," affairs with entertainment and a less staid atmosphere than the annual banquet (Fig 40 and 41). And card tournaments, formal and informal, became Dr Wherry's trademark. It was said he wore many a table to the quick, not to mention his opponents, over a game of cribbage, pinochle, hearts, or gin rummy.

Academy morale ran high during Dr Wherry's tenure. If he overworked those around him, and himself, he also knew how to pat them on the back and make the work interesting and rewarding. It was undoubtedly he who suggested an Academy honor group for those who taught year after year at meetings. This suggestion, as many other of his suggestions, was couched anonymously in a section called "Introspection," which appeared in the *Academy Bulletin* during the thirties and then in the bimonthly *TRANSACTIONS*. Sandwiched between his frequent title, "Thinking Ahead," and his concluding line, "Let's think it over," were his thoughts and critiques on medicine and the Academy.

Some of his last published commentaries urged support of the war effort. At his death, a memorial committee suggested a Wherry Memorial Fund of \$16,000, raised through voluntary contributions, which would be used to purchase war bonds. Interest from the bonds would defray expenses of a fitting memorial to Dr Wherry—a paid up Life Membership in the Academy granted annually to the outstanding candidate selected by the American Board of Otolaryngology.^{7,8} The project proved too ambitious for the times. In its stead, the Wherry Memorial Lecture, first prepared in 1945, served as a yearly tribute to Bill Wherry.



Fig 37.—Cover and inside page from program for 1936 postconvention cruise.

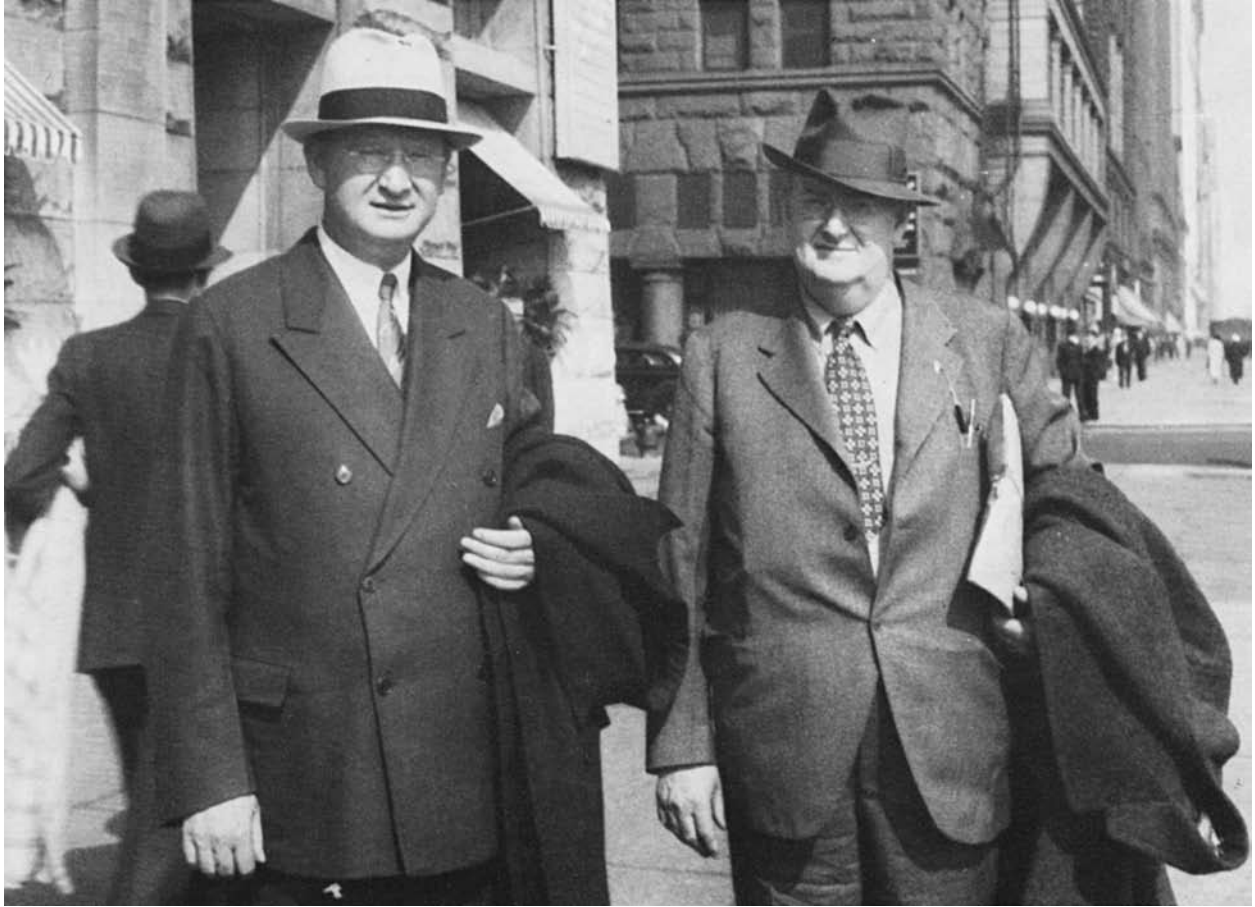


Fig 38.—Drs Benedict (left) and Wherry (right) as they leave New York's Waldorf-Astoria after 1936 meeting to embark on cruise.



Can Ophthalmologists Keep Eye on Ball? Hold Tourney Today

Out at Olympia Fields Country club today the golf balls are going to get the jitters and by evening will probably be sticking out their tongues and saying "A-a-a-a!" . .

For promptly at 1 o'clock several members of the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology (eye, ear, nose and throat specialists to you) will tee off in the association's golf tournament, a feature of the national convention being held in the Hotel Sherman.

Golf Slip

Listen youse guys, who make a living playing golf — find someone who will swear with you that your handicap is as is hereinafter noted.

For crying out loud — try to be honest!

MY CLUB

MY HANDICAP

SWORN TO BY.....

NAME.....

Give to Harry sometime Sunday . . . not later than Monday

Fig 39.—Top, left to right: Drs Wherry, Mullin, Benedict, and Gradle during 1932 tournament in Montreal. Bottom left, Chicago newspaper takes note of 1934 tournament. Bottom right, Handicap declaration form for 1936 tournament.

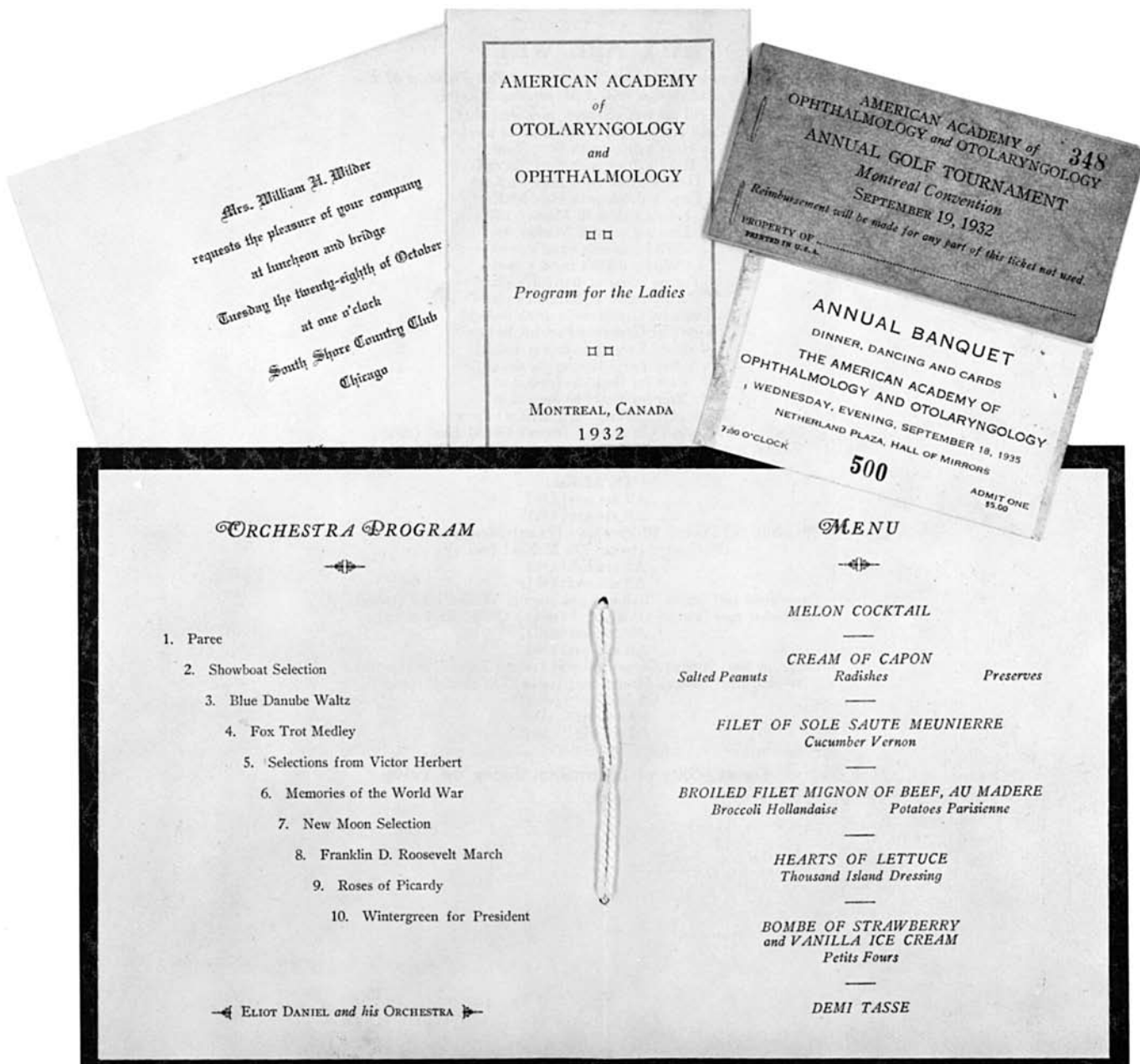


Fig 40.—Sampling of social side of meetings. Clockwise from left: Formal invitation from President William Wilder's wife in 1930; first ladies' program in 1932; golf ticket book for 1932; banquet ticket in 1935; banquet program for Boston meeting in 1933 (dinner cost about \$2.50 a plate). Banquet program runs eight pages, including pictures of Massachusetts General Hospital and the Guest of Honor, Surgeon General Robert U. Patterson, a list of after-dinner speakers and of selections to be sung by a male chorus.

ALL ARE WET!

(Sung to the tune of "Alouette," in honor of Past President McKee of Montreal, at 4:00 A.M. on Mount Royal)

All are wet, oh, very, very wet! oh,
All are wet, oh, see them all at play!
Have a drink with Burt Shurly!
Have a drink with Burt Shurly!
Have a drink with Han McKee!
Have a drink with Han McKee!
Here's a toast to Mosher, too!
Here's a toast to Mosher, too!
Wilder doesn't mind a few!
Wilder doesn't mind a few!
Put no booze at Barnhill's plate!
Put no booze at Barnhill's plate!
Don't let Greenwood's drink be late!
Don't let Greenwood's drink be late!
Secord Large laps up the dough!
Secord Large laps up the dough!
Beer for Beck! he loves it so!
Beer for Beck! he loves it so!
Oh Shurly! (twice) Oh McKee! (twice)
Mosher too! (twice) Oh Shurly! (twice) Oh McKee! (twice)
Wilder, few! (twice) Mosher too! (twice) Oh Shurly! (twice)
Oh McKee!
Oh McKee!
All are wet! Oh!
All are wet! Oh!
Barnhill, no! (twice) Wilder, few! (twice) Mosher too! (twice)
Oh Shurly! (twice) Oh McKee! (twice)
All are wet! Oh!
All are wet! Oh!
Greenwood yes! (twice) Barnhill, no! (twice) Wilder, few! (twice)
Mosher too! (twice) Oh Shurly! (twice) Oh McKee! (twice)
All are wet! Oh!
All are wet! Oh!
Large lies low! (twice) Greenwood yes! (twice) Barnhill no! (twice)
Wilder, few! (twice) Mosher too! (twice) Oh Shurly! (twice)
Oh McKee! (twice)
All are wet! Ah!
All are wet! Ah!

Fig 41.--Slice of fraternalism during the 1930s.