



Profiles

Number 13 in a series
spotlighting interesting
people in Michigan dentistry.

Dr. Francis M. Schmitt

by Franziska Schoenfeld, D.D.S.

“When you’re retired, people think you’ve got nothing to do,” says Dr. Francis Schmitt, laughing, as he hands me a one-page printout from his Macintosh outlining his busy life.

After serving Garden City for 45 years as a family dentist, Dr. Schmitt, now age 82, continues to serve the community he loves as an active volunteer.

Dr. Schmitt lives alone, as a widower, in the family home where he and his wife Eileen raised 12 children. But it’s never lonely, since the Schmitt home now serves as temporary housing for city officials, exchange students, as well as for his children and their families when they return to visit.

Kiwanis Club activities keep Dr. Schmitt working with children in a Head Start Program, building ramps for handicapped people and editing and producing the club newsletter (only “temporarily,” he states adamantly.) As a “Friend of the Library” he has personally solicited over 60 new members.

Dr. Schmitt is active in his church, too. He says, “This is a time for improvement of my spiritual life. I have more time to pray now.” He goes to mass daily.

He has belonged to organized dentistry since he was a student member. An MDA *Journal* from 1936 is a prized possession. He still attends meetings of the Detroit Clinic Club, where he served as director of the Direct Restoration Section. After 30 years as a

member, he’s now been designated honorary president of the club.

“Many of the good things I learned were from club members,” he declares.

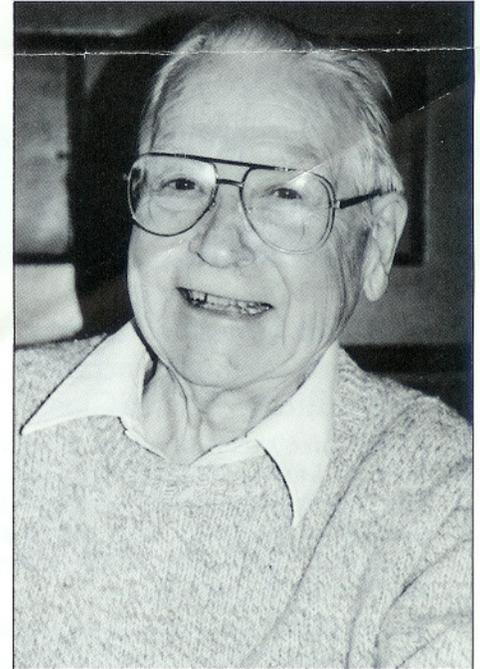
As our interview proceeded, Dr. Schmitt sped around his home, showing memorabilia from his past, tending a wood stove, and checking the vegetable soup that he planned to serve later. A triple bypass 13 years ago has not daunted him. “I call it borrowed time,” he says. “So I only ask for one day at a time now.”

From where does such energy come?

If bone-hard work during childhood is one factor, Francis Schmitt had that. Born in Mendon 25 miles south of Kalamazoo, he was the oldest of seven children. His parents were tenant farmers. “Dad never owned a farm and usually received a share of the crops,” he remembers. “Each time there was another child they moved to a better farm. Most of my life I was poor—I still am, I guess. But we kids didn’t know it.”

All the children had chores. Francis says, “We believed in child labor. That’s part of the trouble with kids today. They don’t have anything useful to do around home. And they don’t respect property lines. If you grew up in the country, you respected fences because you had animals. If your animals got out, you would soon lose the friendship of your neighbors. It’s an old saw that ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’”

In 1931 the Depression hit the fami-



Dr. Francis Schmitt: “Every day I learn something new and interesting.”

ly hard. “I can remember when my dad lost his tractor,” Francis says. “I was cultivating corn and this man from the implement dealer came out with my dad to where I was working. My dad said, ‘Let him have the tractor.’ That was a beautiful John Deere machine and it was important to our livelihood. I knew then that things were tough.”

Wheat was 33 cents a bushel, milk was five cents a quart and Francis stayed home after high school graduation to help keep the family alive. But a mysterious accident in 1934 changed his life. During haying season he

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climbed up into the hay mow and the next thing he remembers is waking up in the hospital. He fell 12 feet, was unconscious for three days, and suffered a fractured left arm. He still has no idea what happened.

The family doctor advised him that, since he couldn't work for a few months, he ought to go back to school. "He thought I should study dentistry because I was small in stature, and I guess he thought dentistry would be less strenuous than medicine. It was good advice," Francis says.

After two years at Western, Francis chose Marquette Dental School because his family's dentist, Dr. Morrison M. Heath, had studied there. Each semester Francis never knew whether he had enough money to return.

"That's a terrible way to go to school," he says. Francis scrubbed pots and pans, worked in a bowling alley, and his parents helped when they could.

At the beginning of the third year Dr. Heath asked him how things were going. Francis replied, "Well—I don't have enough money." Although Dr. Heath and his wife Eleanor hadn't much money either, they financed Francis' last two years.

One highlight of Francis' student days came in freshman dental anatomy class. The requirement was to carve a full set of Ivorene teeth and then articulate them. Francis not only articulated the teeth, he carved a hinge out of Ivorene to form an articulated study model. Then, he carved his name into the masterpiece.

"I always had kind of an inferiority complex," he admits. "But I got an A on this and I was the only guy with a hinge like that. It gave me a little self-assurance."

When Francis graduated in 1940, he enlisted in the Army Dental Reserve Corps, saw duty in a general hospital in England, and married his nurse

sweetheart from student days.

After the war Francis settled in Garden City, which had a population of 9,500 and needed a dentist badly. "I enjoyed every day of my practice," he says. "I loved being creative and building complex restorations."

The interview concludes and Dr. Schmitt leads me to the dining room table. The homemade vegetable soup is ready, and with it comes whole-wheat bread from his own oven. "This table was the heart of our home," he tells me.

His brown eyes glisten. "You know, every day I learn something new and interesting, and I keep adding to it."

I mumble a reply through a mouthful of food.

Later, as I say goodbye, Dr. Francis Schmitt tucks a fresh loaf of that yummy bread under my arm. What a delightful way to end my visit with this most estimable man! ◇

Dr. Schoenfeld serves as a contributing editor to the MDA Journal.

New Member Applicants

The following dentists have submitted applications for membership in the Michigan Dental Association. According to the MDA Bylaws, an applicant must first be accepted as a member in good standing of one of the component societies of this association as a condition of membership in the MDA. Any concerns should be expressed to both the component society and the MDA. The component society should advise the MDA of the applicant's component membership status as soon as possible.

Detroit: Gary Feucht;

Macomb: Gregory Pine;

Oakland County: James P. Boyd, Karla Dosch, Daniel Rangel, Michelle Bielefeld Speier;

Washtenaw: Martha Somerman. ◇