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**Charlton Prather (CP):** We are privileged, this afternoon, to have with us Mr. Robert Schoonover, presently of upstate Pennsylvania. He tells me that he can throw a rock almost from his house into New York State. But he has come here to Tampa today to share with us the story of *Florida Health Notes*.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Schoonover was the longtime editor and writer for *Florida Health Notes*, which is a publication first initiated in 1898 by Florida's first state health officer, Dr. Jay Y. Porter<sup>2</sup>—he's got three names, Dr. Porter, anyway—and continued in essentially continuous, monthly publication through about 1976 with an interruption or two, here and there, because of money, I think, but we will ask Mr. Schoonover that.

Mr. Schoonover came to the State Board of Health<sup>3</sup> to take over the publication of this, but in the minds of many historians, has probably had more influence on the general health welfare of this state than any other single item. It was an educational, how-to publication: how to protect yourself from disease, how to live healthfully. Early copies were distributed in all libraries, and, I think, to all school districts of Florida, free of charge, and to virtually anybody who would want to get on the mailing list, a very widely read and widely used health-focused publication.

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<sup>1</sup>*Florida Health Notes* are a monthly publication of the Florida State Board of Health. They have been published, since 1892, as an educational periodical for laymen, physicians and public health professionals.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Yates Porter (1847-1927) was Florida's first public health officer serving from 1889-1917 and the 13th president of the Florida Medical Association. He was instrumental in eradicating Yellow Fever, identifying the mosquito as its source of transmission.

<sup>3</sup>The Florida State Board of Health was the forerunner to the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS). It was dissolved by the Florida Legislature in 1969, following the passing 1969 Reorganization Act, which consolidated 200 state agencies and boards into 23 departments.

And it is truly a pleasure, now, to have with us the longtime editor of that publication. Mr. Schoonover, let me say welcome and thank you so much for your willingness to come. And, on behalf of the College of Public Health and the University of South Florida—and all future students who are interested in matters of health education in the state will be reviewing this tape—and I say, thank you for coming.

Tell me, how was it a man that went to acting school, was in with a traveling troupe of actors, traveled around giving plays, I think you even did some photography, and suddenly you are the editor of Florida—what in the world brought you there?

**Robert Schoonover (RS):** Well, you see, I was a graduate of Temple University<sup>4</sup> with a degree in journalism—a bachelor's. And then, I had worked on the cultural record as sports editor, and then on the *Corning Leader*<sup>5</sup> as a reporter. And then, I decided to go to American University<sup>6</sup> in Washington to get a master's degree in journalism and public relations.

And my wife was a Navy nurse, and she was ordered to duty at Jacksonville Naval Hospital.<sup>7</sup> So, when I finished with my degree classwork, I came down here, wrote my thesis, went to the [Florida] *Times-Union*<sup>8</sup> to get a job and they said, Sorry, you are too highly qualified.

CP: To be a real reporter.

RS: And so, they said that there was an opening for a writer at the state board of health. And I went up there, and Elizabeth Reed (sic) hired me. And I guess I beat out a couple of other people. But I started in July of 1962 and walked right in the middle of a encephalitis<sup>9</sup> epidemic in St. Petersburg.

And that was one of my first stories that I wrote, was on encephalitis. I learned public health from the ground up because I didn't even know what it was. And so I started, and I

<sup>4</sup>Temple University is a comprehensive, private, research university in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The University was founded in 1884 by Russell Conwell.

<sup>5</sup>The Leader is an American daily newspaper published in Corning, New York.

<sup>6</sup>American University is a private research university in Washington, D.C., affiliated with the United Methodist Church, although the university's curriculum is secular.

<sup>7</sup>The Naval Hospital Jacksonville is a public health institution devoted exclusively to the care of active military personnel and their families.

<sup>8</sup>The *Florida Times-Union* is a major newspaper serving the Jacksonville area.

<sup>9</sup>Venezuelan equine encephalitis (VEE) is a zoonotic arboviral disease that can affect humans and equines in the Americas.

thoroughly enjoyed it, my twelve years doing it. I covered everything, from babies, alcoholism, to VD<sup>10</sup>, to nuclear medicines—

CP: Polio.<sup>11</sup>

RS: Pardon?

CP: Polio.

RS: Polio. That was near the end of the epidemics.

CP: Yeah, and I remember a particular *Health Notes* on America's first hospital<sup>12</sup>.

RS: Yeah, that was in St. Augustine,<sup>13</sup> on the east side of St. George Street.

CP: That is correct. How do you remember all of those details?

RS: I looked in the books.

CP: Good, good, good.

RS: And by 16—it was started shortly before 1600.

CP: Yes, that is correct.

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<sup>10</sup>The term “VD” is often used to refer to venereal diseases, more commonly known as sexually transmitted diseases. These are transmitted only through sexual contact and include diseases such as human papillomavirus infection (HPV), genital herpes, and chlamydia.

<sup>11</sup>Polio, often called infantile paralysis, is an infectious disease caused by the poliovirus. It mainly affects infants and children and may cause paralysis. There is no cure for polio, but it was virtually eradicated from the Western hemisphere in the second half of the twentieth century thanks to the development of the polio vaccine.

<sup>12</sup>America's first hospital, Our Lady of Solitude (Nuestra Señora de La Soledad), was founded in 1598 by Spanish Governor Gonzalo de Mendez de Canzo. It was located on St. George Street, St. Augustine, Florida.

<sup>13</sup>St. Augustine, located in the northeastern coast of the Florida, is the oldest city in the state of Florida.

RS: And then they had the little problem with—maybe a hurricane or something. And by 1600, it was defunct, but I think there was a commander. I think his name was Méndez—

CP: All right. I can't confirm nor deny that.

RS: —came and started it with help from the royal treasury, and it was dedicated to Saint Barbara.<sup>14</sup> And for years, it was on and off again, finally gone again, because according to money and according to how much health they had. In fact, they even bought a slave<sup>15</sup> to help with the care of the patients and take care of the cleaning of the place and cooking their meals. And there isn't much I know about what happened to it afterwards.

CP: Well, I'd have to get your *Health Notes* and reread to confirm from what all you just said. You remember too much of that.

RS: And then, of course, after the start of the public health in Florida in 1888—and I never could figure out what was fomites.<sup>16</sup> It was something that they thought, maybe, carried yellow fever<sup>17</sup>.

CP: Yes, yellow fever transmitted by fomites, which is an inanimate object.

RS: Well, I am glad that Walter Reed<sup>18</sup> found the cause of yellow fever because that helped Florida grow. Once they found the cause of yellow fever and—

CP: Once they could control mosquitos, I say. If we had never learned to control mosquitos, we wouldn't have a Florida as we know it.

<sup>14</sup>Just one year after La Soledad opened, its chapel became the temporary home of the local Franciscan friars when their monastery burned in 1599. With the hospital overpopulated by the friars, Mendez decided to build a second hospital, dedicated to Saint Barbara.

<sup>15</sup>Governor Mendez assigned a slave to tend to the various needs of the hospital. Additionally, the primary caregivers at the hospital were retired, elderly soldiers, female black slaves, and convicts sent to St. Augustine to complete their sentence.

<sup>16</sup>A fomite is any object or substance capable of carrying infectious organisms, such as germs or parasites, and hence transferring them from one individual to another.

<sup>17</sup>In 1888, Jacksonville, Florida, experienced a yellow fever epidemic. This event prompted state leaders to create the Florida State Board of Health on February 20, 1889, which was forerunner to the Florida Department of Health.

<sup>18</sup>Walter Reed, MD, (September 13, 1851 – November 22, 1902) was a physician in the US Army. In 1901, he and his team confirmed the transmission of yellow fever via the *Anopheles* mosquito. His work was a catalyst for the development of epidemiology and biomedicine, along with the completion of the Panama Canal by the US.

RS: Well, I think if it wasn't for the mosquito control programs, there wouldn't be.

CP: Yeah, there wouldn't even be a University of South Florida here in Tampa. Mosquitos would keep them ate up.

RS: And, even today, my niece out there in Palm Harbor says sitting out in the early evening is impossible.

CP: It is still, today.

RS: It is still, today. And that—

CP: I can't imagine what it used to be.

RS: I can't either. And, you know, there is something else about Florida's public health.

CP: What's that?

RS: They started in 1888, but it wasn't until 1913 they hired their first nurses.

CP: Speak to that. Did you write about this in some of your *Health Notes*?

RS: Yes. There were three nurses, hired in 1913, to take care of TB<sup>19</sup> patients, but in three years, they had 13 nurses. But in 1915, the legislature passed a law that schoolchildren had to be checked and—

CS: For what?

RS: For disease and health.

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<sup>19</sup>The abbreviation TB refers to tuberculosis, an infection caused by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and is typically symptomized by respiratory inflammation and tussis.

CP: That was in 1915?

RS: Nineteen fifteen. No nurses to do it! So they had to find nurses, but there was one thing about the health department—up and down went the money, the tax. There was one administration that gotten into office with the idea that it would cut taxes. And do you know where the money came from, that they cut?

CP: Out of the health department.

RS: Sure.

CP: Yeah, because we weren't very tangible.

RS: It wasn't until really in 1944, when Dr. Sowder<sup>20</sup> came, that there was a change.

CP: Consistent sort of funding?

RS: Consistent. And there was the County Health Department Enabling Law in 1931<sup>21</sup> that was supposed to enable the county health departments to have health programs. See, I think—

CP: And the county commissions, then, were mandated to put money into it?

RS: I think so. And Taylor County was the first one to have one<sup>22</sup>.

CP: Over in Perry, Florida.

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<sup>20</sup>Dr. Wilson T. Sowder was a prominent figure in Florida's public health system for over 30 years. His dedication to Florida's health began in the 1940s, when he served as a venereal disease control officer with the US Public Health Service. Under his tenure as a Florida state health officer, he developed health departments in each of Florida's counties. Dr. Sowder was interviewed as part of the Florida Public Health Oral History Project on June 24, 1997.

<sup>21</sup>In 1931, the state legislature authorized the state board of health and county commissions to establish county health units. The legislation allowed county governments to consolidate private and public health programs and utilize state and federal resources to meet local needs.

<sup>22</sup>Taylor County established Florida's first county health unit in 1930, but due to lack of funding, the unit was not actively in operation from 1933-35.

RS: And then Escambia<sup>23</sup> had one, but Taylor's didn't last too long. But it wasn't until after World War II that they really got going.

CP: Ah, yes. And I am gathering that all of these are subjects of *Health Notes*. That's where you are getting all of this history?

RS: You would be surprised about the digging I've been doing out of those books I have.

CP: Great.

RS: In fact, I wrote a 30 page speech, put it on tape—

CP: For today?

RS: For today.

CP: I'm glad you didn't bring it.

RS: Well, I put it on tape and listened to it, and it was a boring thing I—

CP: No, that's because you were familiar with the data. You were familiar with what you were saying, so it would be boring to you, but it won't be to us.

RS: Well, you know, the years that I have worked with *Health Notes*, it was a tremendous—I didn't know I was writing history, doing history.

CP: I think a lot of us didn't know that you were doing that.

RS: I was just doing the job that I loved. And we didn't use very many names.

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<sup>23</sup>Escambia County, Florida, was the third county to develop a county health unit in 1932.



CP: I know. You rarely used a name.

RS: There were three names that we used. One issue was dedicated to Dr. Cato,<sup>24</sup> down in Miami, after he passed away. And then there was Dr. Womback from Palm Beach, and he was with Dr. Covington<sup>25</sup> of the small county type and we compared the two types of counties.

CP: And you named names.

RS: That one issue had names. But the—

CP: Well, the names weren't important to the mission of what you were doing.

RS: No, but I did several issues on the county health departments, and, one I particularly am fond of, was one that covered the three important people in the health department. In this small county, there was the clerk, the nurse, the sanitarian. Now, every county had a clerk and a nurse; sometimes, they shared the sanitarian.

CP: Yes, yes. The small counties.

RS: The small, very small counties. And I came across a list of questions that a clerk would get. Such as, "Oh dear, my boyfriend and I—I think I am pregnant. What do I do now?" And another one from a young man who said, "I've got a sore. I think the doctor ought to see it."

And there was a girl—a mother called in. She said, "My boy has been bit by a raccoon, and the raccoon died. What do we do?" And there was another person called in and said, "We are going on a trip. What immunizations do we need?"

There was a nurse called in into the health department and said, "I have a child who is not doing well, and I think the nurse ought to visit the home." In another case, there was a big

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<sup>24</sup>Dr. Turner Elam Cato worked in Florida's public health system for 27 years, serving as director of the Dade County Department of Public Health from 1942 until 1967. Volume 59, No. 10, of the *Florida Health Notes* was published in remembrance of Dr. Cato and his many contributions to public health in Dade County.

<sup>25</sup>Dr. A. Y. Covington served as health officer of the Bradford-Clay-Union.

burly man, walked into the clinic, took a number, sat down in a chair, but he didn't notice the sign said family planning.

CP: Well, he probably needed some help.

RS: He probably did.

CP: Now, how did you get all of those—this was research for *Health Notes*?

RS: Research, I didn't—well, I went out, made acquaintances in the county health departments and talked to people and asked them questions—

CP: Like a real reporter, or even one with a master's degree.

RS: —like a real reporter. I also took all the photographs. Sometimes I used people from the health department, I used some of my friends, I even used a picture of a little boy from next door. He was squatting in the bushes—an issue on hookworm.<sup>26</sup>

Oh, I had a lot of fun. It is really the essence of—I have to dig back way back in my memories to—memory banks—to get all of this.

CP: Well, that is okay.

RS: Because—

CP: I can't imagine you would carry that in the forefront, anyway.

RS: The ones—on venereal disease was the most touching.

CP: Oh, really? How come? Because it was taboo to talk about such things?

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<sup>26</sup>Florida was one of the first states to effectively treat and eradicate hookworm by establishing more stringent regulations to ensure sanitary drinking water supplies were available to impoverished urban areas, which were particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of hookworm.

RS: It was.

CP: Ah yes.

RS: People were scared of it.

CP: Apparently they weren't too scared because the rates were sky high.

RS: Well, they didn't know. There was one issue that carried the story of an investigator and what he went through to find the victims. For instance, we know that when somebody came in and was diagnosed with syphilis<sup>27</sup>, they would be asked for their contacts. And this investigator was given a name of—now, this was a fictitious name—Barbara.

And he went, called her—he went to call several times before he found her—and he asked her about her personal life, and she denied any problem with it. And, finally, she got kind of worried, so she went to the health department and was examined, found out she was positive, and named more names and the investigation went on and on and on, spreading like wildfire.

CP: Yeah, yeah. That's syphilis.

RS: And we had several issues that just touched on this so frequently that—and it is still going on today. When I was with *Health Notes*, at first, we didn't have anything on drugs, and then we got started—we had two or three before I left.

CP: On drug abuse? On street drugs?

RS: On drug abuse. Then that was something else. We didn't get into all the fine details that they do today because we just—

CP: You probably couldn't find it.

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<sup>27</sup>Syphilis is a chronic venereal disease caused by *Treponema palideum* and produces rashes and lesions in a course of three stages.

RS: Well, it wasn't in publication. It wasn't in literature or anything. And then there were the restaurants. Oh, man, did I have a ball with those.

CP: How is that? Did the restaurateurs give you a free meal for coming in and interviewing?

RS: No, I never got a free meal, but I got a lot of information.

CP: All right.

RS: Sanitarians, who I always went with, was very kind, very alpha. They would pose with the cooks and the waiters and everybody for pictures. They would check the shelves to see if everything was copacetic on the shelves. Sometimes they would find a bottle of alcohol along with the sauces or a bottle of—what is the—

CP: Bleach?

RS: Bleach or ammonia.

CP: Ammonia. Yeah, that is a good one, ammonia.

RS: My wife had an incident, and she went to a restaurant in southern New York. And she asked for a salad with oil and vinegar, and she was brought a bottle of ammonia.

CP: Oh, man. That's personal.

RS: They knew right away that it wasn't right.

CP: As soon as she opened it?

RS: No—well, they could smell it. They sent it back, and they left the restaurant.

CP: Did you do much travel in your research?

RS: Oh yes. I used the state car and everything from Pensacola to Key West. And, of course, I have always contacted the health departments before I came and—

CP: They were helpful to you?

RS: They were very helpful. I had some good friends among the sanitarians and the clerks, nurses. In fact, there was one nurse that I knew in Tampa that had been a Navy nurse with my wife in Bainbridge, Maryland, Martha Long. And I think she is still alive, but—

CP: No, no she isn't. I would like for her to sit in that chair some if she were available.

RS: She was a very capable lady nurse. I don't think she retired from the Navy, but I know I saw her a couple of times in Tampa.

CP: She became director of nurses for the Hillsborough County Health Department, are you aware of that?

RS: Well, I am glad to hear that.

CP: And, for your general knowledge, she developed Alzheimer's, and it was very sad. She was symptomatic for several years and lived with her daughter.

RS: Well, my wife will be interested in hearing that.

CP: Yeah, tell her. And Martha—it has been six, seven, or eight years ago since she died.

RS: But I never stopped to play along the way because I was always getting back to Jacksonville to write my stories. And one thing that I was very conscious of was deadlines.

CP: That's a characteristic of reporters, isn't it?

RS: Well, yes. Especially those who are trying to publish something on a schedule. Dr. Sowder and I would work out a schedule of subjects, usually in September or October, for the following year.

CP: That was going to be a question. How did you select your subjects? With consultations with Dr. Sowder?

RS: Yeah, and I would suggest a list, and he would cross out some and add some. And together, we would get a list. And then I would ask for bids—each year, we had to ask for bids. I wrote rights—

CP: For printing?

RS: For printing. And I would write to the qualifications, I mean, the specifications of what we wanted and the size, type, approximate number of pages; and then, we would have sealed bids. And one time we had a printer in Tallahassee that got the bid, and the manuscripts and proofs and everything came back and forth by Greyhound.<sup>28</sup>

But meeting the deadlines was the thing that I had to do. Once, I had a boss that didn't realize what deadlines were. And I would keep asking him for a manuscript, keep asking him for the manuscript, so I could pass it on to Dr. Ford and Dr. Sowder, and I, sometimes, almost had to wring his neck.

CP: That is too bad. You had access to Dr. Sowder. Why didn't you ask Dr. Sowder, "Tell him that we got deadlines to meet?" Get that back off his desk.

RS: Well, Jerry Conger fixed that; he was on Dr. Sowder's staff. And since they knew that my degree was in journalism and public relations, they wanted me up there. So they invited me up on Dr. Sowder's staff. And I said that if I come, I want to take *Health Notes* with me, so they okayed that.

CP: Were you in health education?

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<sup>28</sup>The Greyhound Bus Line is an intercity transportation service that runs throughout most of the continental United States, Canada, and Mexico.

RS: Yeah.

CP: You were in health education, but you were writing *Health Notes*?

RS: I was writing *Health Notes*.

CP: And that was all you really ever did was write *Health Notes*?

RS: Well, no, I did a lot of pamphlets.

CP: Oh yes, okay.

RS: And I also helped with the annual report.

CP: Yeah, the editorializing of it.

RS: Frequently, we had a problem with annual reports because, although doctors are nice people, and sometimes they think they can write, but they—sometimes, they don't know what an antecedent is.

CP: I know some of those.

RS: So we always had trouble. And they would be verbose in their writing, so we had to cut them back.

CP: And it would make them mad.

RS: Pardon?

CP: It would make them mad.

RS: It would make them mad, and they would call and say, Why are you taking this out? And I would say, “Because you repeated it someplace else,” and that was always a big problem. And then we print—also, I helped with the monographs<sup>29</sup> and—

CP: Anything that had to do with writing and editing you were involved.

RS: Yes.

CP: Yeah, that is good. But your prime responsibility was *Health Notes*. Can you speak to the history of *Health Notes* a little? Why did Dr. Porter start them?

RS: Well, the reason Dr. Porter started it was for education.

CP: Yes, this was in 1889. He put out his first—

RS: Eighteen ninety-two.

CP: Eighteen ninety-two, sorry.

RS: And it was printed until about 19—almost 1900. And then it was stopped for six years because of shortage of staff that could help with it and money, and then it started again in about 1906. And it was printed until about 1919. And then, for some reason, it stopped for three years, and then it picked up again and would continue, then, until 1976. And I always felt that it was a publication that was worthwhile.

It was written at about a tenth grade level. And it was used throughout the state in schools, colleges, in their health education classes, and we sent a lot to other health departments too. I had a friend in Virginia who works for the health department, and he tried to start one up there in Virginia, but he didn’t get very far with it. But he always admired what we did.

CP: From your memory, did not you or the state board of health provide copies for free to who all, do you remember? Who all got free copies on a routine basis?

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<sup>29</sup>A monograph, in journalism, is a detailed, written study of a single specialized subject or person.



RS: Well, we had a mailing list of probably 25 to 30,000 each month.

CP: You did? Wow.

RS: And Earl Holly, who manned the addressograph<sup>30</sup> room, mailed them all out, and sometimes we'd been mailing *Health Notes* to an address for years, and all of a sudden, the post office would return it and say, No such address. We had a lot of fun with the post office, because I think sometimes they just didn't want to work.

CP: They just didn't want to mess with them.

RS: No, but it was a—I wish, today, it was still going. And if they would ask me to come back and help work with it, at 80, I'd come back.

CP: Well, I don't see it in the immediate future, but I see it. I see a facsimile of—and I would want to call it the *Florida Health Notes*. It would be a continuity of those and for the same purpose.

RS: Well, you know, the state—after I left, I would get publications from the health department for professionals, but there wasn't anything for the public.

CP: That is correct, and there still isn't.

RS: The people on the streets, in the schools, in their homes, they need something they can read that would help them—

CP: That is trustworthy and from a reliable source. I totally agree.

RS: And I was so sorry to hear the health department get into trouble, and I hope it can survive somehow.

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<sup>30</sup>An addressograph is a machine used for printing addresses on envelopes.

CP: It is. We got a new state department of health<sup>31</sup> now. It is not a state board of health, but it is a department of state government and reports directly to the governor, and the health officer is called a secretary now—the secretary of department of health, who is appointed by the governor. And with every gubernatorial change since we've had such a department, we have changed secretaries also.

RS: Yeah, well, I wish Dr. Sowder was around to help.

CP: Yeah, he is here. Physically, he is doing very well. I haven't seen him in a good while. I hope to see him before long.

RS: But if they get another man to run *Health Notes*, make sure they get a well-trained journalist.

CP: I agree. He'll know how to get the data. We don't need a professional nurse, unless she has got a degree in journalism.

RS: Or a doctor.

CP: That's—oh, forbid the thought.

RS: But the thing is that if *Health Notes* were still around, I would love to help with it.

CP: Go back to Dr. Porter's days. Did you have much opportunity to read much of his? I am recalling that his—he just kind of wrote whatever came to mind, and, during your tenure, the *Health Notes* became single subject issues.

RS: Well, up until 1944, there were little items in each issue; there were no singular subjects. And they covered things like hookworm, which was greatly helped by the Rockefeller Foundation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>The Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) was created in 1969 after the State Board of Health was abolished. County health departments were transferred to HRS under the Division of Health.

<sup>32</sup>The Rockefeller Foundation was founded in 1913 by the Rockefeller family with the goal of promoting the wellbeing of humanity throughout the world, and it is one of the most influential NGOs in the world. The Rockefeller Foundation established the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health and The Harvard School of Public Health and is credited with developing the vaccine for yellow fever

CP: Yes, yes, they provided many—

RS: And there was one article on women's corsets. It just blasted women's fashion because he said the corsets squeezed the women's organs together, and they were damaged by that.

CP: This is Dr. Porter?

RS: Dr. Porter, yeah. And—

CP: Yeah, he had a sharp pen. But he made points through the *Health Notes*. He made very practical, helpful, living points.

RS: And he—I have to admire him because he did such a great job, started the *Health Notes*—

CP: And he wrote it.

RS: Yeah, and something else that was interesting, or is interesting, is the fact that we didn't start keeping vital statistics<sup>33</sup> until 1917. And that was so important because people need to know when they were born, how they died, and—

CP: How do you do good planning without those data?

RS: You can't. And some people I know can't even find their ancestry because there's no record.

CP: Oh, you are one of those genealogists, and so you are complaining because you can't trace the genealogy. Yeah, I would be complaining on the birth records because of death rates.

RS: Because of what?

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<sup>33</sup>Vital statistics consists of official records of birth, death, fetal death, marriage, and dissolution of marriage.

CP: Death rates.

RS: Death rates.

CP: Yeah, as a part of the vital statistic system, the profiles of communities. The underweight verse needs to be recorded, and they tend to cluster—or if they do cluster, we need to know it.

RS: Each year, I get a copy of the *Book of Facts*<sup>34</sup> put out by the *New York Times*. And I check the different nations to see what their mortality is among the infants, and some of them, especially in Africa, are very high. I had a friend who was a missionary in Mali, and she said that most babies die—eight out of ten die before they are ten years old because when one baby was born, the mother would nurse it. When another baby came along, there wasn't enough food for the first one, and so that baby would die.

CP: Oh, me, Bob.

RS: And your point about death mortality, infant mortality, and causes of why people die, my wife says that she hopes that when she dies, they just don't put "cardiac arrest" on her birth certificate.

CP: Well, we started in 1917, and it is my impression that there were only a very few states that were recording vital statistics in 1917.

RS: Well, I think Florida was the forerunner on many things, and I loved working with the sanitarians because we—I got into a lot of places. One time, I was going downstate and I stopped at a restaurant to have something to eat. I went to the restroom. It was flooded. I went and told the manager, "You better get ahold of the sanitarian or somebody. Fix that bathroom."

And, another time, I was driving the state car up [U.S. Route] 301.<sup>35</sup> And I was going just about the speed limit, and some foreign—some car from out of state zoomed by me. So I

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<sup>34</sup>*The World Almanac and Book of Facts* is an American reference book released annually.

<sup>35</sup>US Route 301 (US 301) is a spur of US Route 1 running through the South Atlantic states from Delaware down to Sarasota, Florida.

sped up and got up beside it on the four-lane highway and motioned for the person to slow down, and then I drove on.

CP: Did they slow down?

RS: Pardon?

CP: Did they slow down? Did you have a seal on the side of your car?

RS: Yeah. It wasn't a state trooper, but—

CP: It still had a Florida seal on it.

RS: Yeah, and we had a lot of fun. And I can remember when you came back from public health school in North Carolina and was assistant director of epidemiology or preventable diseases and that was the first time I knew you.

CP: Uh-oh. Well, don't tell anybody about that.

RS: And the books I brought back with me, has a nice picture of you on an issue on examinations, and you were talking to a patient—

CP: I had hair, too, probably.

RS: No, you didn't have hair.

CP: Oh, I didn't have any hair. That's too bad.

RS: And all through the book, you examine this—he was an employee of the health department, and I wish I knew his name—I can't remember his name. I used to know him quite well, but my foggy brain doesn't work that way anymore.

CP: Yeah, I am not even remembering the issue, Bob, the issue of the *Health Notes*.

RS: It was in 1968.

CP: Yeah, I have trouble remembering that far back.

RS: Well, I wasn't remembering until I looked if I hadn't seen it.

CP: Let me refocus you to Dr. Porter's days. Just what do you remember about the *Health Notes*, the early *Health Notes*. Let me tell you, just for your knowledge, that the journal of public health, the *Florida Journal of Public Health*,<sup>36</sup> now has a regular feature in every issue entitled "Yesteryear." And the most of the articles published in this "Yesteryear" regular column are copies of early *Health Notes*, of Dr. Porter's writings.

RS: No kidding.

CP: Yeah, they are. Yeah, they are—some of those pearls. Some of those pearls that Porter penned are now being republished in every issue.

RS: Well, I hope people pay attention to them.

CP: I think they do. I think they do. I thoroughly enjoy them, myself.

RS: Well, I just wish it was back the way we were 30 years ago.

CP: I don't think we will ever get back there, but I see nothing but bright futures for public health in Florida.

RS: Well, back in those days, the Florida Health Department was one of the top five, or at the top of the heap of health departments in the country.

CP: I wouldn't say one of the top five. I would say the top in the world.

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<sup>36</sup>The *Florida Journal of Public Health* is a periodical published by The Florida Public Health Association (FPHA).

RS: Well, anyhow, and I know it was internationally known because people like Ms. Reed and other people went to work with the World Health Organization.<sup>37</sup>

CP: But we had many foreign health dignitaries come to us for learning. I remember the commissioner of health—what would be the commissioner of health—for India, for the country of India. Public health service, to learn something about the function of local health departments, invited Florida to host him. And he stayed at my house a week—he was a houseguest at my home for a week—the guy who was health commissioner for the nation of India.

That's one. There was a number of others who were inviting foreigners who public health service, the World Health Organization, sent them to Florida for some learning. Largely around, there was one or two on communicable disease control. That is highly complimentary to have the CDC<sup>38</sup> to refer somebody for communicable disease control.

RS: Well, I can remember that whenever the American Public Health Association<sup>39</sup> wanted a meeting they held it down in Miami or Ft. Lauderdale in one of those big hotels. I think they delighted in coming to Florida.

CP: I think they do. I think they do. But it is kind of expensive to hold a national meeting in South Florida because everybody has got to go a long distance to get there.

RS: Yeah, which reminds me, one time I was working on a story I went up to the welcome station up above Fernandina and—

CP: Yeah, that's in Yulee.

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<sup>37</sup>The World Health Organization is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) that is concerned with promoting international public health through humanitarian initiatives.

<sup>38</sup>CDC stands for Centers for Disease Control; the CDC is the leading national public health institute of the United States. The goal of the CDC is to protect public health and safety through the control and prevention of disease, injury, and disability. The CDC focuses national attention on developing and applying disease control and prevention.

<sup>39</sup>The American Public Health Association (APHA) is a professional organization for public health professionals in the United States and is composed of over 25,000 members. It is the only health organization that influences federal policy.

RS: —on [Interstate] 95,<sup>40</sup> and I was listening to the people as they came in, inquiring about things, and they would be shocked to find that they got into Florida and they still had a day's journey to get to Miami.

CP: Still another 550 miles to go.

RS: They thought, once they were in Florida, they were there.

CP: I am afraid too many of our northern friends equate Florida and Miami; the two are the same thing. But, today, it is becoming Orlando and Florida. You know, we have them stop in Tallahassee, figuratively speaking, and say, How do you get to Disney World from here? What do you mean? I am in Florida! Where is it? I know what you are talking about.

RS: Speaking of Disney World, I went with the sanitarians to Disney World when it was nothing more than a hole in the ground. They were building the cellar that went under the Magic Kingdom,<sup>41</sup> and then I was back later to go backstage and take pictures of the cooks and the bakers and all the other things.

CP: And the cabinetmakers?

RS: And the Fort Wilderness,<sup>42</sup> where they had the camping. And Disney World was quite, quite helpful.

CP: It was? They freely let you in and out?

RS: Pardon?

CP: They freely let you come and go?

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<sup>40</sup>Interstate 95, often called I-95 or simply 95, is the main Interstate highway on the east coast of the United States, running from Maine to Florida. In Florida, its north end is located in Jacksonville, and its south end is located in Miami.

<sup>41</sup>Mr. Schoonover is referring to Disney's utilidors (short for utility corridors), an underground utility system that runs, primarily, underneath the Magic Kingdom Resort. These utilidors allow park employees to perform a variety of operations, from trash removal to costuming and food service, away from the eye of the public. The utilidors span about nine acres of land.

<sup>42</sup>Fort Wilderness Resort and Campground is a themed camping resort located inside of the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, FL.



RS: Yeah.

CP: Did you do *Health Notes* on these or something else?

RS: They were incorporated in with other stories like sanitation and their sewage systems and the cooks and baking, all that in with the restaurant.

CP: Yeah, including management. Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh. Well, you got to go to some interesting places, didn't you?

RS: Yeah.

CP: But investigative reporters always do, don't they?

RS: And one thing I stayed away from, though, was Tallahassee.

CP: Now, why would you do that? That is where all policy was made.

RS: I would let other people go to Tallahassee to talk to the legislators. I would stay away from them because I had a few run-ins with a politician or two. One time, we had an issue on nutrition, and we said that milk was good for people—and I still believe it is—but this politician wrote and said, “Why did you put that in there? Because milk is not good for people.”

CP: Whoops. How did Sowder react to that?

RS: Well—

CP: He let you manage it?

RS: He just laughed it off, and I think we let the head nutritionist answer it.

CP: Ah, okay. That was Ms. Kaufman, probably.

RS: Yeah, Ms. Kaufman, and so—but it was—I am thinking about the relationship of the county health departments to the state health department.

CP: What are you thinking? Go ahead.

RS: Well, the heads of the county health departments were always hired by the commissioners, the county commissioners, after being suggested by the state health department. And then they had their staffs that they selected, and they had direct access to all the departments in the state health department for help or information. And some of the funding went that way, and they were—it was a big cooperating body.

CP: One big cooperating family, all with a common mission. One mission. Yeah, go ahead.

RS: That was one thing I admired about them—about the whole situation.

CP: Yeah, this was the model for the nation, our county health department system. I think we are still, today, the only state in the nation that has an organized public health presence in each governmental area—in each county.

RS: Well, I have lived in Pennsylvania for the last 27 years. I have had no contact with the county health department, if there is one.

CP: Oh, that is terrible.

RS: I called one time up and told them who I was and if they had any kind of publication or anything—never heard from them again.

CP: Didn't even respond? Did you write to the headquarters in Ashburn?

RS: No, maybe I should have. Maybe I still will. But I have a nephew that has a restaurant, and I know he is inspected by, I think, the health department.

CP: Yeah, and I wonder if it is the local or the state?

RS: Pardon?

CP: I wonder whether it is the local health department or—

RS: I don't know. It might be regional.

CP: Yeah, in many states that would be true. There is no local health authority that would do that sort of thing.

RS: But he maintains a good restaurant.

CP: What does he think of the Pennsylvania Health Department?

RS: I was going to ask him before I came down here, but I forgot to.

CP: Okay.

RS: But I think the relationship between the counties and all the workers in the counties—they, incidentally, the clerks or somebody in the county was a registrar of vital records.

CS: That is right, the formal registrar, by law, the formal registrar.

RS: And that was something that really to me was interesting. I did an issue on vital statistics, and my great nephew, who was born in Jacksonville, has his picture up here in the magazine with a full complete birth date.

CP: Yes. Birth certificate.

RS: Birth certificate.

CP: You were being very selective there.

RS: I know, but nobody knew him from Adam.

CP: No, totally acceptable for—

RS: But I saw him Sunday night.

CP: Oh, you did? Did y'all come through Jacksonville? You came down 95?

RS: No, I came down through Wellington Springs, where he lives now.

CP: Oh, okay.

RS: And he has his wife and a ten-month-old baby girl. She is a joy to behold. She was kissing—all of ten months old—she is already learning how to kiss.

CP: This little girl learning how to kiss at ten years of age. I worry about her future.

RS: Ten months.

CP: Ten months of age. Yeah, well, that is marvelous. Were they glad to see you?

RS: Oh, yeah, more than glad.

CP: And you hadn't seen them in a long time.

RS: Well, our niece, who was the mother of this boy, comes to Pennsylvania every summer for a couple of months because she is getting the farm and all the property up there. She is the only one in the family.

CP: So she comes over to see her parents?

RS: Well, her father and mother are both gone.

CP: Aw, too bad.

RS: But her aunt, my wife, and myself are there. She still has some friends in the area, and she always comes up and has a good time.

CP: Great, great, great. Okay, let me carry you back to Dr. Porter's days now, and just what can you tell me about *Health Notes* during Dr. Porter's time?

RS: Well, I don't remember reading about too much.

CP: Yeah, you didn't write any of those, now. I know that.

RS: I know, but I went through some of them, trying to get information to complete the story and there was—I just don't remember much.

CP: That's okay. I don't either. I don't either. But did you ever get any feedback from—particularly through survey systems—of the impact, the benefit of *Health Notes*?

RS: Once in a while we would send out an inquiry if people wanted to continue it, and we never got any refusals.

CP: Oh really?

RS: No.

CP: Who all did you send them to? Just, kind of, tick them off the best you can remember.

RS: Schools, colleges—

CP: Colleges to the library or to the president's office?

RS: Both, the library and the president's office and especially to homes and health departments who usually got a supply to use in their work. And everybody who wrote in —

CP: Anybody who wanted to be on the mailing list, could be.

RS: And, late, after I had been there awhile, we had to put in each issue how much it cost to produce that issue.

CP: Yeah, I remember that. My mother—just want you to know—got the *Florida Health Notes* for years and years and years when I was in high school, and she continued to get them. I didn't ask her to save them, but during your tenure, I think.

I think I wrote you a formal note that said, "Take my mother's name off the list. She has quit reading them. She has no particular use for them, and she just throws them in the trash when they arrive. So take her off the mailing list."

RS: I don't remember that.

CP: I don't know how she got on that mailing list. She doesn't know either. She doesn't know how she ever got on that mailing list. She is now gone. And that is years ago.

RS: And did she still live in Jasper?

CP: Yes and no. Yes and no. At the time of her death, she lived in Tallahassee with us, which is—she died in 1990, at the ripe age of 94.

RS: Well, what else do you want to know?

CP: We just had a time element put on us. Well, what have we left out, Bob?

RS: Well, campgrounds, trailer parks—we carried two or three issues on those, and I always found it interesting that people would live in their trailers or their mobile homes year-round and travel from place to place and always come back to the same nesting area in Florida.

CP: Yes, yes, for the winter.

RS: For the winter. And that was something that really surprised me—how many campgrounds there were in the state. Oh, there were thousands.

CP: I bet you it is up 500 percent since then—since you were here.

RS: Well, when I was driving down last week, the northbound lanes of Interstate 81<sup>43</sup> and 77<sup>44</sup> were jammed.

CP: With campers going north.

RS: Snowbirds were returning.

CP: Going home for the summer and getting out of that hot Florida. That's right, snowbirds going home. But they will be back before long.

RS: Oh yeah. In fact, I remember an advertisement that was run in the paper. It said, "Visit Florida, and bring your green."

CP: That is right. "Keep Florida—I always said, "Come to Florida to keep it green, and help keep it green. Bring money." What have we left out now of the *Health Notes* story? We can go long.

For the record, that Mr. Schoonover has brought us 13 or 14 years of bound *Health Notes* by volume that he is giving to the new, to-be Museum of Medicine and Public Health in

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<sup>43</sup>Interstate 81, or I-81, is a north-south interstate highway that runs from New York to Tennessee.

<sup>44</sup>Interstate 77, abbreviated I-77, is a north-south interstate highway that runs from Ohio to South Carolina.

Florida,<sup>45</sup> which will be housed in the original building of the state board of health, what we call the Julia Street building. To put a non-paid political announcement, Bob, that building, by acts of the legislature, has been named the Wilson T. Sowder Building; and thus, it will be the Florida Medicine and Public Health Museum in Jacksonville—housed in the Wilson T. Sowder Building. And I think that—and your *Health Notes* will be there.

RS: Well, I have had them for 27 years, and they have been on my shelf. And I tried to give them to our local library, and they never even unpacked them.

CP: They didn't have the slightest idea of what they were and had no use to them.

RS: So I asked for them back and to bring down here.

CP: And you told them they would go into a museum. One of my personal projects is trying to collect all issues of *Florida Health Notes* from Porter's time on. And I have got some inquiries to selected libraries that if they still got them, would they consider giving them to the museum.

RS: They had a long, big list of them in the library they had there on Pearl Street.

CP: Yes, we still got those, but there is not a complete set. There is not a complete set in our library, but those are available. Okay, because of the tape film—let me draw us to a close by saying, Mr. Schoonover, that the College of Public Health and the university and, particularly, I, are terribly grateful that you would come all the way from Pennsylvania just to bring us some books and to let future students of public health, particularly public health education—public education, yeah, health education—have the benefit of this piece of history and to hear you talk and to see who you are. I just thank you so much, Bob, for sharing this with us.

RS: Well—

CP: And as a token of thank you, the library will send you a copy of the tape after they have edited and the final version. Do you have any final comments?

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<sup>45</sup>The Florida Museum of Medicine and Public Health is to be housed in what is now named the Wilson T. Sowder, MD Building in Jacksonville, Florida. This building once served as the headquarters for the Florida State Board of Health.



RS: No, except I just enjoyed being here and doing this and seeing you again, after all these years.

CP: Good, good. I am glad to see that you are doing so well too.

RS: And you are invited—you and your wife—to come up and visit us and the Finger Lakes and the Corning Museum [of Glass].

CP: We are coming late summer, before the snow, after the students go back to school. And we will buy your dinner at that time.

RS: Okay.

CP: And let me say that I am Skeeter Prather. Today is April 23, 2002, and we are in the conference room of the dean of the College of Public Health.

***End of Interview***