

Dr. Thurman Shipley

Mary Jo Denton
Herald-Citizen Staff

The way things were:

He was a boy passing by when workmen were clearing the woods on Dixie Avenue to build Dixie College, which later became Tennessee Tech.

He looked up into the sky at Halley's Comet in 1910.

Speaking to the Upper Cumberland Genealogical Society here in 1986 -- a few years before his death -- Dr. Thurman Shipley shared those and other memories, creating an eyewitness picture of the early 20th century in Putnam County.

His speech that day was recorded and is now among Genealogical Society papers preserved in the Tennessee Tech Library. Recently, when librarian Christine Jones came across the Shipley speech, she contacted the Herald-Citizen and recommended it as good reading for those interested in local history.

A physician serving the Upper Cumberland for over half a century, Shipley was in a unique position to comment on the many changes and improvements to life that occurred during his lifetime. He was born March 6, 1903, and died April 10, 1994.

Born in a log house on the Gainesboro Grade near the present-day Shipley Farm, Thurman Shipley was the 7th of Harvey Richard and Sally Welch Shipley's 10 children. He attended elementary school at the old Shipley School, where his oldest brother, Milburn, was his 7th and 8th grade teacher.

He graduated from the University of Tennessee College of Medicine at Memphis in 1932. In the summer of 1933, he opened his medical practice in Cookeville and doctored patients for more than 50 years, retiring in 1985.

Genealogical Society President Eleanor Mitchell in 1986 asked Shipley to speak to the Society "about some of the things that happened a long time ago."

"And in spite of my youth and inexperience, I promised to do so," Shipley told the audience that day.

Using as his theme the many improvements in the standard of living and life expectancy throughout history, the aging doctor recalled for the audience some details of life in Putnam County during the early part of the 20th century:

"I was born in 1903, the 7th of ten children, with three sisters and three brothers older and three brothers younger. Teddy Roosevelt was president, James B. Frazer was governor, and H.D. Whitson was County Judge.

"The railroad had been completed from Monterey to Harriman the year before I was born, and train service between Harriman and Nashville had started. Tennessee had celebrated its centennial six years before, and the governor of that time, Bob Taylor, had made a prophetic speech.

"He said, 'Soon we will pass over the threshold of the 20th century and the airplane will be perfected and the light-hearted society girl will fly through the starry sky, and behind some dark cloud where no one is allowed, she'll make love to the man in the moon.'

"I was born early enough to help Orville and Wilbur Wright get off the ground. But they dillydallied on the sands at Kitty Hawk until the 17th of December, and I had to be at home for my first Christmas.

The Shipley Homes

"The house we lived in consisted of two large rooms built of logs, and the log walls extended up about 15 feet high, built to give standing room on a second floor. But there was no ceiling. The front porch was full length. The kitchen and dining space was built behind the log rooms and was built of undressed lumber with a small window at each end of the space.

"Each room had an outside door and inside doors connecting the rooms. There were no screens. In the summer all outside doors were left open for light and ventilation. At meal time, it was necessary for one person to use a fly brush to keep the flies off the food and the people who were eating.

"For winter heat, there was a large fireplace at the west end of the house and a wood burning heater in the east log room. The cookstove was the only heat in the kitchen and dining space.

"In 1908, that old house was torn away room by room while a large two-story frame house was built with five bedrooms, a large dining room and kitchen, and three porches. All doors and windows were screened. It had two fireplaces and three of the bedrooms had heaters. Both fireplaces and stoves burned wood.

"It was considered the largest and best farm home in the county. But it was not insulated and had no bathrooms, no kitchen sink, and no running water. The water was carried from a spring in two and a half gallon cedar buckets. One bucket with a dipper sat in the kitchen, and one on the porch just outside of the dining room.

Making Soap

"The family laundry was done at the spring, except in very cold weather when it was done in the kitchen. Doing the laundry was an all-day job. Most all clothing and bedding were boiled in a big cast iron kettle. The chief cleaning agent was homemade soap.

"During the winter, we would carry the wood ashes from the fireplaces and heaters to an ash hopper in the garden. We then poured a tub of water over the ashes, and lye would run off from the bottom of the hopper.

"We butchered eight or 10 hogs a couple of times during the winter. When we trimmed the meat, some of the fat that was not desirable for lard was put into a kettle of lye and boiled for soap.

"We milked our own cows -- usually four -- strained the milk into crocks of two or three gallon capacity, put them in running water in the springhouse, and after about 12 hours, we skimmed off the cream and put it into a churn to make butter.

Dixie College Coming

"Most all families kept their own cow, or cows, to supply milk and butter. If they did not, they obtained it from a neighbor.

"In 1910, our father sold a milk cow to an attorney who lived on what is now Dixie Avenue just south of the railroad crossing. He sent me to deliver the cow.

"I came up by the old Burnt Stand, which stood near the north end of the Tech stadium, and headed south on Dixie Avenue.

"Walking along, I saw men in the woods to the west of the road cutting trees and digging up stumps. I later learned that they were clearing the ground for Dixie College.

Governor Candidates and a Horseless Carriage

"In the early autumn when the brick walls were already up about 25 feet, an announcement was made in the Putnam County paper and in the Nashville Democrat paper that Bob Taylor and Ben Hooper were to speak at Dixie College on the same afternoon. They were both candidates for governor.

"Mr. Chester Patton was the teacher at Shipley School that year, and he dismissed school so that everybody could go to hear the candidates for governor speak.

"The Shipley family went in the wagon, and we were there when the special train arrived bringing the candidates. The train was on the siding just south of the Dixie Avenue crossing, and many of the crowd walked down there to greet the visitors.

"Bill Brown was there in his 1909 Model T touring car to transport the candidates up to the speaker's platform, which was on the east side of the wall of what is now Derryberry Hall, and the wall served as shade for the speakers on a very warm autumn afternoon.

"I was very interested in that horseless carriage with its polished brass radiator shell that looked like pure gold. The two large carbide headlights were also brightly decorated.

"When the candidates were settled into the cushioned seats of the vehicle, I stepped up on the running board and rode to the speakers platform with them -- a distance of approximately 100 yards, but it was my first automobile ride.

"Governor Taylor wore a little straw hat that had both sides rolled up until the brim almost came to a point in front. When he mounted the platform, he took a split bottomed chair to the back of the platform and leaned back against the wall -- the coolest spot to be had -- and sat there with that little bitty straw hat on until he was called to speak.

"When he was introduced, he took that hat off as he walked toward the front of the platform, and with that hat in his hand, he waved it high at the crowd and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I am up here on a Special (train) with my chin over the moon and my tail over the stars; never been beaten by a racehorse, let alone a plug.'

"This prophecy was not quite so accurate as the one he had made at the Centennial about the airplane. Ben Hooper did beat him.

Halley's Comet

"It was also in 1910 that Halley's Comet was visible. As I recall, it was in late October or November that we could see it best. Usually, the star was bright with a circle of lesser density about it and a long tail that widened as the length increased until it gradually faded into invisibility. Other stars would be visible through the tail.

"A neighbor woman became mentally disturbed about it. She was convinced that it was signaling the end of time. Our mother said that regardless of what it was signaling, she would see it that year since she could not wait around 76 years for it to come back.

William Jennings Bryan Comes to Cookeville

"On June 8, 1917, William Jennings Bryan, a three-time candidate for president, spoke in Cookeville. He was accompanied by Gov. Tom C. Rye, and they were the guests of Mr. and Mrs. Rutledge Smith on Washington Avenue.

"Eight years later, Bryan was again in Tennessee when he came to Dayton in Rhea County to argue against teaching the theory of evolution in the schools.

"He opposed Clarence Darrow of Chicago in the famed Scopes Monkey Trial. Actually, Scopes was the school's math teacher, but while the biology teacher was sick, Scopes taught his class.

Dixie College Becomes

Tennessee Tech

"In 1915, Tennessee Tech was created by an act of the legislature, and it took over Dixie College, which was at that time really the county high school. They built East Hall for a girls' dormitory and West Hall for a boys' dormitory, and in addition to the high school, two years of college were added.

"In 1919, they expanded extensively in order to teach World War I veterans. In addition to high school classes and college courses, these veterans were taught trades, including shoe repair, barbering, carpentry, cabinet making, machine shop, mechanical drawing, and automobile repair.

"Because of the increased enrollment at the college, the city water supply was inadequate for its needs, and the quality of water did not meet federal requirements for an institution training veterans. This necessitated an independent water system for the school.

"A water line was extended out North Dixie Avenue about two miles to an elevated water tank on the east side of Dixie, then down the hill to a spring. An electric pump was installed at the spring which automatically kept the tank filled. This system provided water for the school for about 20 years until the city built a dam on Falling Water and a filter plant out there east of town.

"The institution's demand for power exceeded what the city could supply, and about 1921, Tech built its own power plant just south of the shop building on North Peachtree. It consisted of a 60 kw generator driven by a single cylinder diesel engine. It operated about 10 years.

"Then the capacity of the city's Burgess Falls power plant was increased and took care of the power needs. In the meantime, the Tennessee Power Co. built a plant at Rock Island utilizing both the Collins and Caney Fork Rivers and surrounded the town of Cookeville with power lines and also supplied other nearby towns with power.

Improving Living Conditions

"In the mid-1930's, the County Physician visited the schools annually and immunized the children and the teachers to typhoid, diphtheria, and smallpox unless they had previously been immunized by their private physicians.

"During the same period, the WPA built pit-toilets for every family that did not build their own. The few families that were fortunate enough to have running water and an inside bathroom with septic tank did not need one.

"These toilets were made fly-proof and this broke the cycle of the main source of food and water contamination as it greatly reduced the possibility of flies carrying germs from the toilets to the general food and water supplies.

"Education programs were also carried on, showing people how to protect their springs and wells from surface water sometimes laden with disease germs and intestinal parasites.

"Refrigeration has increased tremendously -- even during the last 25 years. I do not recall being in a home in the last five years where there was not refrigeration, and many people, even low-income people, have freezers in which to store food. Most families now have at least one window air conditioner, and in this section, almost 100 percent of families now have running water with kitchen sinks and indoor bathrooms.

"The Agricultural Extension Service has promoted better gardens, better livestock, improved food supply and methods of food preservation.

"In 1900, the average life expectancy was 47.3 years. In 1983, it had increased to 74.7 years. With the close inspection of food and water supplies by governmental agencies and the immunization of most of the population to infectious diseases, death from infectious diseases is practically eliminated. These include diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, meningitis, mumps, typhoid, tuberculosis, pneumonia, and smallpox.

"The number one cause of death today is the cardiovascular diseases, and the second greatest cause of death is cancer, both of which are related to an increased length of life and the use of tobacco products and a diet high in sugar and fats."

Editor's note: Dr. Thurman Shipley was the father of Cookeville orthodontist Dr. William T. Shipley and Martha Helen Shipley Chen of Birmingham, Ala. He was the husband of the late Helen Shipley.

Published February 19, 2001 12:21 PM CST: Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN

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