

SCHOLAR ATHLETE AND PHYSICIAN

F. Tremaine Billings, Jr.

Editor: The Glimpses of Classmates published in these Newsletters the past five years certainly would be incomplete without an account of the life of Josh Billings. His contributions to the world around him - to Choate School, to Princeton, to his Class, to the world of Medicine as a teacher, researcher, practitioner, administrator and author of numerous scientific papers - have been and still are, legion. As a roommate and lifelong friend I have undertaken with Josh's permission, to put together a picture of our illustrious classmate. (Bob Keidel)

It is October 20, 1978. The newspaper headlines proclaim that it is "Josh Billings Day" in Nashville, Tennessee. State and city officials, prominent physicians from around the country, old friends and classmates and a host of friends and grateful patients gather to pay tribute to him for "outstanding and dedicated service" to his community and to the medical profession. Giff Agnew, Bob Gwinn, Bert Brush and I were there to witness an outpouring of gratitude and affection from those assembled. The program began with "An Appreciation of Josh Billings and His Contributions to Vanderbilt University School of Medicine", with speeches and citations. Then followed Grand Rounds at Vanderbilt Hospital for the visiting physician friends, a clinico-pathological conference and finally a Testimonial Dinner with addresses by prominent physicians from around the country. One might expect such an event to occur at the end of an illustrious career, but in the case of Josh it was just another milestone in a life of doing what he loves best - teaching, medicine, and caring for the sick - all of which, 15 years later, he still does full time.

John Wilbur, Yale 1932 football captain, had this to say in his letter of regret when he was unable to attend the event: "Though I have little knowledge of Josh's vast medical talents . . . I know much of his character, his courage, his integrity . . . and his warm friendship. I played football against him for 7 years [includes Choate vs. Deerfield] and he was a TIGER. I use the word advisedly, because he gave no quarter, nor did he ask for any. . . . He was ferocious." [Even so, our friendship since] "has been a wondrous thing to behold. Atheline and I have had more fun with Josh and Ann in more out of the way places than almost any other couple we know."

Some quotes from Dr. John H. Griscom's talk entitled "20 years of Practise with Josh Billings. - - - Josh has never been one to prescribe much medicine. Long an advocate of 'take two aspirins and go to bed', medical science is just getting around to proving why Josh's patients live so long. - - - His thesis - patients will remember you most for the time you



give them. - - - He insists that you leave nothing to chance. Make sure your patients know exactly what you want them to do. Not long ago I walked past his office door. Josh was reared back in his chair with one leg on the desk and another straddled over the arm of the chair. I learned later that he was demonstrating to an 80 year old spinster lady how to give a douche. - - - He is available to his patients. Josh tells every patient 'call me anytime - day or night, weekend or holiday' and he means it. - - - It has been my privilege for 20 years to practise medicine in the shadow of greatness, humility, and a rare blend of intellect and common sense."

Another tribute on the occasion was a letter from Dr. Harvie Branscomb, the now 97 year old Chancellor Emeritus of Vanderbilt University and still a patient of Josh's. "During the last 5 decades I have attended many 'tribute' dinners, but never one like the one in your honor. It was a great outpouring of people who admired and loved you who, apparently, had been waiting for a chance to say so publicly! And the best part of it all was that they were not praising you for some worthy achievement or institutional

connection, but rather for being the person you are." - - - From a general practitioner in Muscle Shoals, Alabama who had referred patients to Josh over the years, in a letter to the Chairman, Department of Medicine, Vanderbilt University: "You do not know me, but I wanted to write you after reading about 'Josh Billings Day' in *The Tennessean* . . . By way of many, many referrals, I came to know Dr. Billings to be a truly great man. I did not meet him until 1977 and did not know of his eminence until I read *The Tennessean* article. However, every patient I sent to him over a 25 year period returned convinced that they had been to the best and received the best medicine had to offer. Without exception, they volunteered gratefulness for the fringe benefits of gentleness, tact, and true compassion that I have learned automatically come with his professional services. Dr. Billings is truly a super human being, and I wanted those people who still treasure ethics, honesty, and a long list of other spiritual virtues to know that this country doctor considers this to be an unqualified fact. If there were more doctors like Josh Billings, the profession and the world would be more attractive."

Finally, these excerpts from a letter to Bert Brush from Mrs. Tommie Denson, Administrator of the Children's Hospital of Vanderbilt University. "Josh has tremendously loyal patients, students, peers, staff members, and just about everyone else who knows him at all. The very thought of his retiring sends most of his patients into a panic. . . . [He] is without doubt one of the best diagnosticians anyone could ask for. . . . He could also be labeled an extremely able psychologist, if not psychiatrist. Most of my office visits through 28 years have been talking sessions. He used to say to me, 'Tommie, there's nothing wrong with you except a lot of bad habits.' (and he was right). One of my sayings about him is that he would hesitate to give me an aspirin on my death bed. Josh doesn't like to prescribe much in the way of medication. . . . As you may guess, my gratitude to him as both physician and friend is enormous." Along these lines, from Bob Gwinn's wife, Betty, "Bob was Josh's first patient. We used to call him our 'Christian Science Doctor' because he never prescribed any medicine."

Leadership comes naturally to some. We remember Josh at Princeton as Class Officer, football captain, Chairman of the Undergraduate Council, winner of the Pyne Prize, varsity wrestler and still able to make Phi Beta Kappa. Harry Garrett recalls what a superb job he did as Senior Counselor running Princeton's summer camp for inner city kids at Blairstown. As his roommate, I marveled that he always seemed to get top grades when, more often than not, he would be at the movies while I was slaving at the books.

It was a combination of fierce concentration and a prodigious memory that did it. It was similar at Choate — football, wrestling, crew, class V.P., student council, School Seal Prize (similar to Princeton's Pyne Prize). He was totally consumed at Princeton, however, by his pre-med courses so that he gave short shrift to some of his electives, even skipping the lectures and just cramming with the text book the day before the exam. Al Whitman claims that the only reason Josh didn't flunk Philosophy of Christianity, known as a "gut course", was because of Whitman's last minute tutoring. But it was no surprise to any of us when he was appointed a Rhodes Scholar.

Our mint julep parties in those days were made possible because President Hibben had a mint garden at Prospect, behind a spiked wrought iron fence. Josh and Whitman became a committee of two to get the mint. Josh still has a scar in his back from doing a Tarzan act from an overhanging tree branch after dark and impaling himself on a spike. It's funny how the important things stand out in your memory.

In the summer of 1933 a group of us, including Whitman, Sexton, Glazebrook, Purnell, Garrett, Geer, and Boice, mostly his roommates from the 8th entry of Blair, gathered to give him a send off to Oxford that turned into a riotous weekend in Darien. After the first year at Oxford, he took a course in anatomy at the University of Heidelberg before boarding the *Staatendam* for a visit home. On board ship he became deathly ill, he suspects from a bug picked up swimming in Germany. The ship's doctor told him he had polio. Harry Garrett, living in Princeton at the time and unaware of this, went to meet his boat in Hoboken. He was shocked to see Josh brought down the gangplank in a wheel chair. Josh's mother and cousin, Lemoyne Page, were also there, and together they got him to the railroad station and on to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. To avoid being held up in quarantine, the ship's doctor had made a diagnosis of hysteria. Paralyzed from the waist down, he spent the next 4 to 5 months struggling to overcome the ravages of this dread disease, and eventually made a remarkable recovery. Josh recalls: "During this time I had a chance to read voluminously about polio and diseases like it. The doctors eventually let me accompany them in a wheel chair making rounds to see other patients. It was one of the most wonderful experiences I ever had." In the spring of 1935 he was back at Oxford for two more years before returning to medical school at Hopkins in the fall of 1936. Two other classmates were also at Oxford then as Rhodes Scholars - Bob Pflaumer and Al Weinrich. (*Ed: See a Glimpse of Bob's life on page 30 of this issue.*)

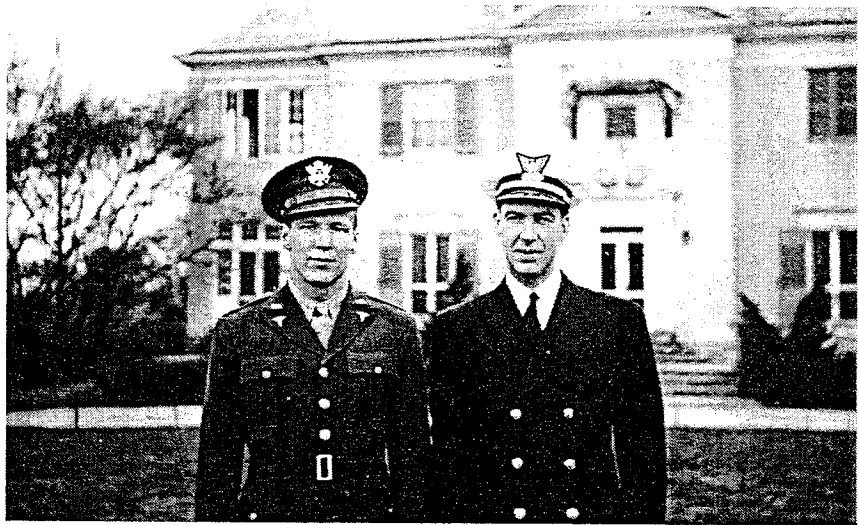
I first got to know Josh in the summer after Freshman year at a boys' camp in New Hampshire where we worked like dogs for 25 cents an hour. We hauled gravel, repaired the roads, dug ditches, cleared the forest for a ball field, and slopped hogs with the daily garbage. Josh remembers: "It was there that I learned my first practical medical technique, one which has stood me in good stead ever since. We chopped wood a lot of the time with an ancient local woodsman, who was also on the payroll. One day Bob got the hiccoughs and couldn't stop. Our woodsman friend made him start drinking out of our gallon water jug while he grabbed him by the throat so he could hardly swallow. Presto, no hiccoughs. Squeezing the esophagus apparently relaxed whatever muscles were being spastic. I later used this technique to cure patients who came to the Emergency Clinic at Hopkins after they had been hiccoughing for days. It always worked."

In 1938 Josh received his M.D. from Hopkins, returned to Oxford to make up months lost due to the polio attack, and then began an internship at Hopkins. The next year he arranged a transfer to Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville, as he says: "to see how medicine was practised elsewhere". Then back as Assistant Resident in Medicine at Hopkins in 1940. Finally returning again to Vanderbilt in 1941, Josh found his niche in Tennessee and also his wife of now 51 years, Ann Howe. Theirs has been a wonderful marriage, producing three great children - Ann Howe who lives nearby with their first two grandchildren; Frederick III, an oncologist in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and John, a chemistry graduate now a brewmaster for the Pittsburgh Brewing Company. The ceremony was performed in February 1942 by the Reverend Shrimp Glazebrook, as the country was gearing for war. Bull Hancock and I were among the ushers. After the festivities Bull invited Shrimp and me to stop at the famous Claiborne Farm in Paris, Kentucky, on our way home. It was a memorable visit. (Ed: See Josh's article about Bull in our 1989 Summer Newsletter).

As a Captain in the U. S. Army and a member of the Johns Hopkins 118 General Hospital, Josh was off to the Southwest Pacific within a few months for what he describes as "three years of astonishing medical experience". He writes: "In 1945 after three years away one wonders whether one will ever get home. I lucked home by bringing 2000 snails

infected with schistosomiasis to the Public Health Service for study regarding the nature of the disease and more effective treatment. I received 'A' priority air travel arriving in Washington in 36 hours." After the war he spent a year in the Office of the Surgeon General in Washington, Chief of the General Medicine Branch of the Medical Consultants Division.

In 1946 he was back at Vanderbilt as an Instructor in Medicine, Assistant Professor in 1949, Associate Professor in 1953, Dean of Medical students in 1960 and Clinical Professor of Medicine in 1964. All this while he was deeply involved in administrative duties at the Hospital and Medical School as well as carrying on a busy private



A couple of newly suited military men, about to report for duty in 1942, hardly knowing how to act. Josh recalls crossing the street whenever he saw an enlisted man approaching because he wasn't sure how to return a salute.

medical practise. Also, during this time, with the encouragement of his superiors, he became interested in Meharry Medical College, made rounds there, served as Chairman of their Department of Medicine for 8 years, and as Trustee for 27 years.

He found time, working with the Vanderbilt Center for Health Services, to initiate a health program for poor rural areas in Appalachia. Using teams of medical students, they visited isolated communities, teaching basic health practises, giving immunizations, identifying and educating the residents about unhealthy conditions, which were rampant. This program is still active today. In a paper given before the American Clinical and Climatological Association in 1968, he painted a dramatic picture, drawn from these experiences, of health conditions, their background and self-perpetuating causes, in what he describes as this "rural

ghetto". He finds no easy solution, but urges steps to reduce the isolation, to stimulate the young through education and increased exposure to the outside world as a way to begin the reversal of what has been a self-perpetuating process of retardation, not only for Appalachia, but also for other underprivileged people condemned by an unfavorable environment.

He worried about the quality of health care in nursing homes and organized another project using students in which they "adopted" 32 patients in a large local Home, visiting them twice a week for five years, catering to their medical needs, and seeking to create an awareness in the medical community of the low level of care in nursing homes, and working for its improvement.

In addition to serving as Trustee of Princeton, 1956-1960; Trustee of Choate School, 1966-1976; Board of Directors of Association of American Rhodes Scholars and its Tennessee Selection Committee, Josh found time, among other things, to serve as Visiting Professor at Western Pennsylvania Hospital, Pittsburgh and at General Hospital, Bethlehem, Pa.; as Lecturer at University of Maryland School of Medicine, and as a member of the Official United States Health Delegation to Russia in 1970 — The purpose of that trip was to find out if there had been any breakthroughs in Russian medicine that we could learn from. According to Josh, the delegation was most impressed with the speed and efficiency of the ambulance service. They got patients to hospitals in record time. What happened to them after they got there was less impressive.

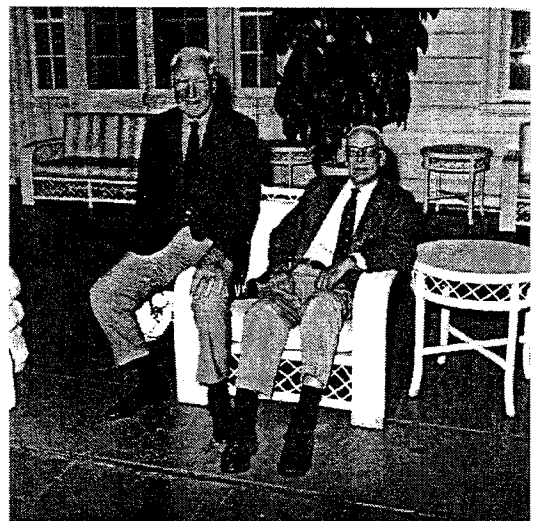
His written works include some 58 articles published in a wide variety of medical journals from 1936 to 1988, plus chapters in several books written by others. His presidential address to the American Clinical and Climatological Association in 1969 was a paper entitled "The Anatomy of a Conscience", in which he expressed some thoughts about the role of conscience in the practise of medicine. Recognizing that proper medical care should be the right of everyone and not just the privileged few, he chided the medical profession for having consistently opposed the financing of medical care whether by private insurance or by government assistance. He suggested that the conscience of many of these physicians should be pricked by this knowledge as well as by the realization that many of them have become wealthy through government supported medical programs. He urged the medical profession to provide imaginative leadership for a more equitable delivery of medical care to the population as a whole and observed that dues paid to the American Medical Association might

be better spent sponsoring volunteers in remote areas and setting up clinics to support their efforts than hiring lobbyists in Washington. His observations were prescient. Today, almost twenty-five years later, the availability of affordable health care has worsened to the point of crisis in this country. Perhaps the national conscience is now ready to do something constructive about it.

Josh's current thoughts on this subject: "And now, 24 years later, I still worry about the doctor's conscience. When huge fortunes can be made in the "health industry" while middle class Americans are wrung financially dry by the costs of their illnesses, something is wrong. Some doctors charge too much, procedures cost too much, too many procedures are ordered (either because the doctor is reimbursed for them or because the patient insists on them). Malpractice suits are rampant. There seems to be an antagonistic doctor-patient relationship. It is dreadful to think that the medical profession and the "industry" may have to be monitored financially like the stock exchange. I hope some wise medical statesman imbued with compassion and understanding of the art of medicine is sitting beside Hillary Rodham Clinton."

During the discussions we have had putting this account together, Josh wanted me to tell the story of the French general, who was adorned with many medals: "I got dees one by mistake and I got dees one and dees one and dees one because I got ze first one." But in the case of Dr. Billings I don't know of any that were not fully earned.

When I asked Ann what Josh's hobbies are, she said: "I'm his hobby."



At Greenbrier mini-reunion, Oct. 1992