

the doctor who never gave a patient a bi

by Tricia Hurst

Recently, while trying to get together receipts and cancelled checks in preparation for the next income tax hassle, I was astounded to see just how much I'd paid for medical bills this year and this was on top of my regular monthly payments for medical insurance. I was even more amazed at the number of physicians and their various specialties.

There were skin men, ear, nose and throat men, a neurologist, a kidney man, a liver person (who told me to go to the kidney man), an acupuncturist, two surgeons and a psychiatrist. I contacted the psychiatrist after having received the bills from all the others.

To top it off there were also dentist and optometrist bills and a number of checks with the notation written in the bottom left-hand corner reading, "ambulance," "clinic," "X-rays" and "prescriptions." Two hospitals also got into the act. It has been a busy year and we're not a particularly unhealthy family.

I couldn't help but remember a time, a few years ago, when almost all of these services came neatly packaged in one man. Isaac "Doc" Udell was what you'd call a small-town physician, a country doctor, one of the last of a dying species—the GP.

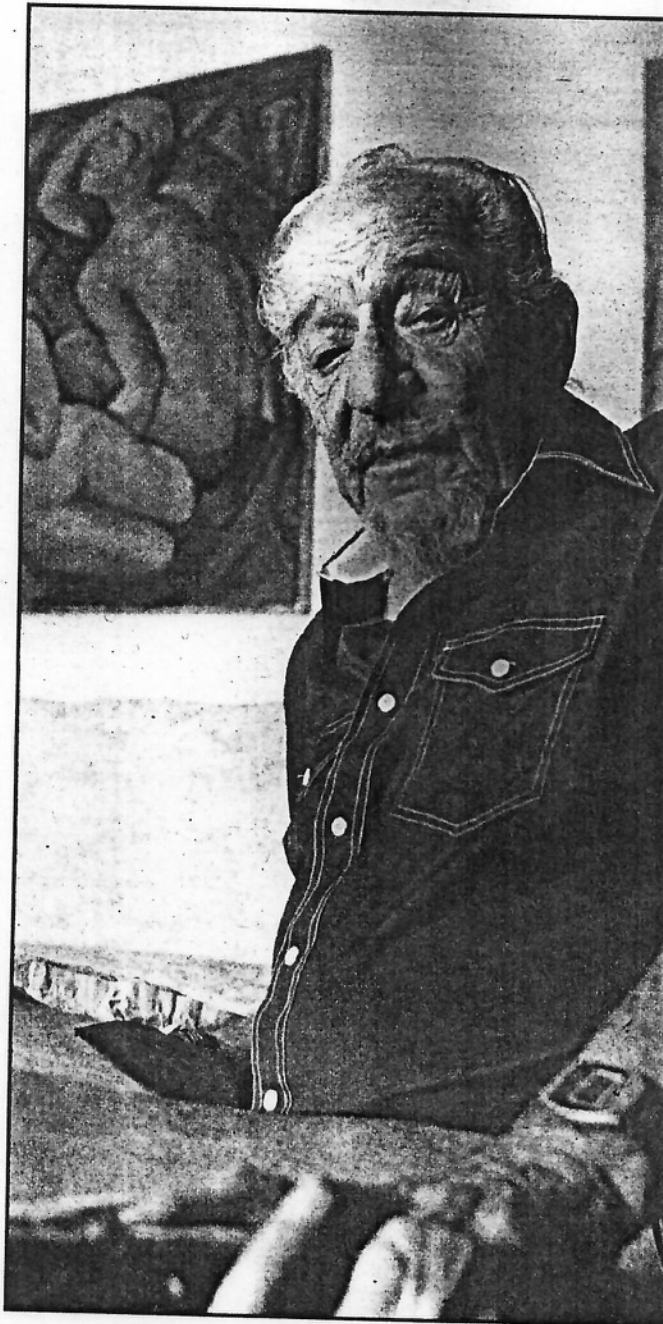
Today he is retired and living in Phoenix, the sun warming his old bones and giving back to him some of the energy he gave for so long to others in the little community in which I live in New Mexico.

In those days, if you needed Doc you had to go and get him. No phone. If he was out on a call and you decided to wait, you could take your choice of entertainment. Sit outside in your car and read a book; wait in his neighbor's living room and have your cards read by a professional fortune-teller; return home and watch TV and try him again in an hour; or find another doctor. Few chose the latter.

At one time Doc had patients from three surrounding states waiting to see him and some checked into local motels while they waited. Taos resident John Yapple, who has known Doc since 1924, tells of the elderly couple who regularly drove two hundred miles so that the woman could have her back treated. She'd been blind for years and suddenly regained her sight returning home from a treatment. Doc had hit a nerve that effected the miracle.

Doctor Isaac Udell arrived in town when he was 23 and he didn't stop administering to the sick, poor and needy for over half a century.

Talking recently over the phone, he reminisced about the days that now seem to be almost



One patient told Dr. Isaac Udell he didn't even look like a respectable doctor.

Doc Udell wasn't much at keeping his accounts straight, but his love of people helped him care for the whole town

primitive, lived in a pioneer spirit.

"I remember I hadn't been in town an hour before I delivered my first baby," he recalled. "I mean, my first baby anywhere.

"The few MDs in town were over-worked and one just told me to get on with it. After over sixty years and some ten thousand babies I think I got the hang of it. That first delivery taught me something and I stuck to it throughout my practice. I never charged.

"Babies should never be paid for. What else in the world is there that's so free?"

Doc was on call 24 hours around the clock, seven days a week. His pay was not as often in the much needed dollars as it was in hogs, sheep, chickens, eggs, turkeys, vegetables, fruit, adobes, and sometimes just plain rocks and gravel.

One night he walked to a nearby neighbor's house to deliver their eighth offspring. After the happy event the father insisted on paying him then and there. The reward—a beaten-up horse. It was the last thing in the world Doc needed or wanted but, knowing how proud the man was and not wishing to offend him, Doc trudged home pulling the balky animal behind him.

They hadn't gone but a couple of hundred yards when Doc discovered that the unwillingness of the animal to follow him was not due to any particular personality conflict but because the mare had something urgent on her mind.

Doc accomplished his second delivery of the evening, a healthy colt.

Of all his cash-paying patients, Doc was most impressed with a total stranger who drove up to the house in an expensive foreign car one Sunday afternoon with a small child in tow. As was Doc's custom on Sunday, he was working in his yard attired in nothing but a ragged pair of cut-off blue jeans and sneakers.

The father of the child explained she had dislocated her shoulder and it was obvious she was in a great deal of pain. Doc adjusted the painful area within a matter of seconds. The stranger asked how much he owed and was told it would be three dollars.

"Three dollars," the man exclaimed. "You must be crazy or something. You don't even dress like a respectable doctor."

He peeled off a dollar bill from a large roll, handed it to Doc and, without another word, drove off.

The good doctor smiled to himself and pocketed the single bill. It was probably the first cash he'd seen all week.

He never sent out bills. He figured if you could afford to pay him you'd mail him a check or stick something under his front door. If you couldn't, well, life turns out that way sometimes. He never kept books and I don't think he had the slightest idea who owed him and who didn't. He didn't care.

I once returned a crutch I'd borrowed from him when my son broke his leg and, pushing open the kitchen door to place the crutch inside, I saw bills in a number of denominations scattered around on the floor. They had been pushed through the square opening in the door the household cat used as a private entrance. Doc was a man who believed that, given the chance, everyone was honest.

Wherever he went he always carried free medicines and samples in his old brown bag, and he'd rummage through it for five minutes trying to find the "right tonic" rather than write out a prescription he knew his patients couldn't afford.

Lord only knows what was hidden away in that beaten up old bag but it did include a toothbrush, comb, and an old-fashioned straight razor. He was often gone long enough on a call to make use of all of them.

One time a man who lived far up the canyon arrived in the middle of the night. His wife was very sick and "hot." There were severe cases of flu going around so Doc packed his bag accordingly.

When he arrived at the little mountain cabin he found the woman covered from head to toe with forming blisters. She had spilled a large pan of boiling water over her entire body. She was, indeed, very "hot."

When he was about to leave Doc noticed all six of the children huddled in their beds. Not one of them had made a sound during his visit and he sensed something was wrong. He examined the first child and then asked the husband how long they'd all been sick.

"Not very long, doctor," the man replied, "but don't worry, they didn't get any water poured over them. My old uncle tells me they just got something you call the smallpox."

Doc stayed for three days.

Isaac Udell became physician in

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"Babies should never be paid for. What else in the world is there that's so free?"

residence to the community and, also, somewhat of a legend around the countryside. Most of the stories and reports about him went from mouth to mouth, neighbor to neighbor. He never had much to say about himself, never bragged or gossiped, and his dry humor cured more malingerers and hypochondriacs than any psychotherapist.

I once asked him why, as a doctor, he didn't have a phone. After all, it was a drag to go and get him if you had someone sick at home. His reply was typical of the man.

"Most of the people are very poor in this area and they don't have phones. If I had one, and they still had to come and get me, it might embarrass them. This way, we're all sort of in it together."

A big teddy-bear-type man, with a huge head of white hair, his eyes are still his most outstanding feature. They belong to someone who knows his fellow human beings well and still loves them.

During the years he practiced he did not suffer fools easily. He could, without moving a muscle, disappear into another space in time while others babbled on to and at the physical force and facade he had left behind. He had little patience with small talk and while those around him spoke empty about doing,



"Here's one for \$38,000. It's what's known as tent city."

To Doc's way of thinking, if you called yourself by a name your credentials had better be intact. He didn't care if you didn't know about something but he did ask that you at least make an attempt to find out as much as possible about whatever it was you lay claim to being involved in. No pretension, no pomposity—no excuses.

He could quietly remove himself from the company of those who suffer from illusions of adequacy and he was capable of becoming irritated and restless with others whose negativity and lack of confident questing

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had forced them into that crowded corner where dreams are lived out in rancor and not-so-quiet desperation.

Because of his innate curiosity he was a man who structured his thinking around inquiry and discovery and these are the conversations he chose to pursue in life, both with himself and with others.

Doc is getting on in years now and he is by no means a rich man in the sense we use the word today. Standards have plummeted to such depths that their validity can no longer be considered acceptable by many. In his eighties, he suffers from arthritis and other ailments afflicting the elderly, and doesn't get out of his little house in Phoenix.

He gave himself as a healer, a human being and, little known, as a writer and painter. He quietly went about doing what he felt he had to do in all four areas.

In New Mexico he became known for his series of Penitente paintings. The Penitentes were an early religious group, of Spanish origin, found in the southwestern part of the United States and practiced until the mid 1940s. Of these works the famous artist Ben Shawn said, "They stand on their own feet as a great and moving epic. However weak they may be technically—and they are that—I prefer them a thousandfold to the technically glib and humanly empty work which we see in such profusion today."

Doc says that he only hopes the story of the Penitente brotherhood will be received with understanding, charity and human kindness in return for a knowledge of a people whose heritage is rich in bravery and daring, whose faith is deep and unquestioning, and whose conviction is sure.

Today, Isaac Udell is sometimes frustrated with time misused, as he calls it, time lost forever, and the time that will never be, that space in which he will not be included.

To those of us who have known him for so many years he will always remain Doc, a man who owns his own soul and who, in an ever emerging world of specialization, was a person who cared about *all* of you.

And if you couldn't afford to pay? Well, you just stuck a couple of dollars under the door when things started to look up. □