



The Tunbridge Docs

BY CAROLYN SHAPIRO

One small town, four lives in medicine

The Town of Tunbridge is known for its bucolic landscape and breathtaking fall colors, as well as its annual “World’s Fair,” but this Vermont enclave of about a thousand residents boasts another distinction.

It produced four doctors who got their early education in its one-room schoolhouses and went on to medical school at the University of Vermont. All four grew up on family farms, milking cows and pitching hay, and developing a strong work ethic. All of them ended up practicing medicine in small communities, translating the cohesive experience of rural life to their careers.

“I just made the assumption that people took care of other people,” says **John Ouellette, M.D. ’60**, who now, at age 84, lives near Madison, Wis. He did four years of residency in internal medicine at The University of Wisconsin Hospitals, and subsequently practiced as an allergist and immunologist, opening clinics all over the state.

At UVM he followed in the footsteps of Tunbridge natives **Royal Whitney, M.D. ’30**, and of **Harry Howe, M.D.**, and **Luke Howe, M.D.**, first cousins who both graduated in 1952.

Ouellette credits his mother, Dora Ouellette, with his interest in medicine. She worked as a nurse practitioner and midwife, seeing nearly every Tunbridge resident at some point, alongside longtime local physician William Mitchell. They handled home births, including the delivery of Harry Howe in 1921.

“She would ride in the ambulance” with a patient going to the hospital, Ouellette says today of his mother. “She would stay with people who were sick and dying or getting better.”

All four Tunbridge-raised doctors possessed that same passion for hands-on patient care. Royal Whitney was the youngest of nine children. His father was “a quintessential Vermont farmer” who wanted his sons to follow in the family business, says Whitney’s niece, Dorothy Yamashita.

Her uncle wanted to go to college at UVM, but his father expressed skepticism. “Grandpa gave Uncle Roy a dollar and said, ‘Good luck,’” she says. Somehow Whitney found the money, and, after graduating medical school opened a family practice in White River Junction. People Yamashita meets from the Upper Valley often will tell her that her uncle delivered them.



John Ouellette, M.D.'60 standing amidst the trees on his Wisconsin tree farm.

Over the years, Yamashita heard stories about her uncle's equitable and compassionate approach to his patients. "He would treat you even if you didn't have any money," she says. "He got paid in potatoes many times in his early years."

Whitney served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps during World War II. He practiced medicine into his 80s and died in 1998 at age 91. His son, Phil Whitney, also became a physician and attended the College of Medicine in Ouellette's class.

Harry Howe and Luke Howe, like Royal Whitney, went to UVM as undergraduates. Harry then served in the Army during World War II, was captured as a German prisoner and released at the end of the war, in 1945. His older brother, Ernest, lost both legs on D-Day.

Harry married his sweetheart, Theo, and taught high school math and science before applying to the College of Medicine in 1948. According to letters he included in his book, *A Journey from Tunbridge*, then-Dean W.E. Brown, M.D., expressed doubts about Harry's ability to pass a prerequisite course in organic chemistry with at least a B grade during his summer break, in order to qualify for admission. Harry passed as required and joined the first-year medical students that fall.



The interns and residents of Burlington's Mary Fletcher Hospital, circa 1952. Harry Howe, M.D.'52 in back row, far right, and his cousin Luke Howe, M.D.'52 in front row, far right.

Luke is four years younger than Harry. The Howe cousins did their post-graduate internship — a requirement before residency back then — at Mary Fletcher Hospital, a precursor to UVM Medical Center. Harry Howe discovered he loved surgery, and stayed at Mary Fletcher for his general surgical residency.

"As in each specialty with which we became involved, we worked directly with the attending physicians, including the chief of the service," he wrote in his book, a substantial memoir he published in 2012. "This, I believe, is an advantage in training with a smaller medical center as compared to the large center where there is little or no contact with the top-level physicians."

After residency, Harry started his practice in Massena, N.Y., far north on the St. Lawrence River, hoping to improve care in a rural area that needed skilled physicians. About a year later, he moved with his wife and two children to Canton, N.Y., where he practiced for almost 30 years before retiring. He and his wife traveled all over the world, bought a farm in Louisville, N.Y., then returned to Vermont to be closer to their grown children.

Luke Howe started a family practice in Chelsea, Vt., with classmate and close friend Brewster Martin, M.D.'52. During medical school, Martin and his wife lived upstairs in Harry and Theo Howe's house in Burlington. Martin and Luke Howe also founded the Chelsea Nursing Home, which became the Home for the Aged in Chelsea Village.

For four years, Luke served as director of health for the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, now known as the Federated States of Micronesia. Back in the States, he practiced in Newfane, Vt. His wife, Pat, was his office nurse and bookkeeper. He served as a U.S. Coast Guard staff physician in Connecticut and Maryland and eventually retired with his wife to Florida.

Luke Howe had a sharp sense of humor, Yamashita says. When she asked him about practicing medicine, "He would be flippant and say, 'That's why they call it a practice, because we don't know what we're doing!'" she recalls.

Yamashita has a connection to all four physicians. Luke Howe is her first cousin; his mother is her father's and Royal Whitney's sister.

Yamashita and Harry Howe attended the same one-room school, South Tunbridge, where he was several grades ahead of her. Today, both the Howe cousins and Yamashita live at Harvest Hill Retirement Community in Lebanon, N.H., which Royal Whitney helped to establish in the 1980s.

In 1945, after Yamashita's sophomore year in college, she took a teaching job at Tunbridge one-room school Number Three, where Ouellette was in eighth grade. Ouellette had polio at age 2, temporarily paralyzing his left side and leaving his left leg shorter than his right. What he lacked in stature he overcame with intellect, Yamashita says.

"His brain was so advanced," she says. "Any assignment I gave him, he had it done before it was due. ... And then he would help the other kids, which is what you do in a one-room school."

At age 10, Ouellette would trudge down the road in the morning to light the wood stove that heated his school. He figured he'd spend his life as a farmer, but by his teen years, the physical difficulties from polio became apparent. "I was smaller. I was weaker," he says. "I couldn't do the job."



Above, cousins Luke Howe, M.D.'52 and Harry Howe, M.D.'52, in the late 1990s. At right, the UVM yearbook page of Royal Whitney, M.D.'50. Below right, The one-room "School No. 3" John Ouellette, M.D.'60 attended in his youth.

Three of the four doctors attended the nearby South Royalton High School. Ouellette played the saxophone and considered becoming a jazz musician. His music teacher and a local priest, though, pushed him toward college.

"People who were educated saw something in me that my parents had no way of knowing," he says. "I never thought of myself as being smart."

The priest helped him get into St. Michael's College in Winooski, Vt. During his pre-med undergraduate years, Ouellette worked nights in a laboratory at Fanny Allen Hospital, now part of the UVM Medical Center, and lived at the hospital with interns and residents. He says he never considered studying medicine elsewhere.

"I had to toe the line, because it was a very demanding medical school," he says, noting that only 40 of 50 original students in his class graduated. "We worked hard."

In his first year of a four-year residency in internal medicine, Ouellette met a nationally renowned allergist, Charles Reed, who awoke his interest in that specialty. "I loved the key functions," he says. "I loved the anatomy and the physiology of the lung."

Ouellette completed a two-year fellowship in his specialty, then served a two-year military requirement at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Back in Wisconsin, he expanded his allergy and asthma clinic to 22 satellite offices and joined the University of Wisconsin medical school faculty. Later, Ouellette became an expert in building science and environmental air quality."

After retiring at age 69, Ouellette and his wife have devoted themselves to raising prized black walnut trees on their Dayton Ridge Tree Farm. He remains close — "like brothers" — with his medical school roommate, Dick Caldwell, a general surgeon in Chicago, and classmate John "Jack" Stetson, M.D.'60, who helped Ouellette during his recent knee replacement. For Ouellette, that modern medical miracle is just another reason to be thankful.

"Just look at what medicine has done for me," he says. **WM**

