



**Archival & Historical Committee
October 25, 2010
San Francisco, California**

**Interview with
Harold Thomas, DO, FACOFP
ACOFP President - 1990-1991**

Dr. Froelich: Dr. Thomas, we would like to welcome you here and we are very happy to have you with us today. Please start by telling us a little bit about how you came into osteopathic medicine, what your path was, and how you got there.

Dr. Thomas: I was in the Army in 1959, and when I was ready to leave in May or June of that year, one of my friends, Ron Espar, was in medical school. I went to visit him. We toured the school and he introduced me to the Dean. The next thing I knew, the Dean said, "Would you like to become a physician here?" I said "Really, I already have a job with the Army and I really should go home because that is the right thing for my family." The Dean asked me for my name and phone number and I went home. About two weeks later, I received a letter from KCOM and they had asked me to join them. I couldn't believe that they did that because I didn't do anything more than that to get accepted. That's really how it all began.

Committee Member: Where did you do your undergraduate work and did you have questions about whether you felt you were ready or not for medical school?

Dr. Thomas: I attended the University of Pittsburgh, and I finished in about three years. Since I finished by January, I did not have an issued diploma yet. I went home and my father said, "Don't you have *something* that says you graduated?" I said, "Well, no, but I suppose they will give me one later." Because of distance, I could not attend my formal graduation in the spring. When my father learned about that, he said, "Well

why aren't you there? Why didn't you go to graduation?. You didn't really finish school did you?" My father was like that, but he's a very nice guy. So I said, "Well no, I really did." He asked, "Well where's your little diploma?" I said, "Well I'm sure it's going to come one of these days." Finally after about a week or two, finally they sent it to me.

After I had the diploma, I started working in a hospital. I really enjoyed working for the hospitals. I worked in one of the laboratories with them for about a year and then the Army found out where I was and they sent me a letter to serve. The physician I was working for wanted me to sign a contract to come back and work for him, but I felt uneasy about it. I felt that it was best for me to serve and I went into the Army for two years.

Committee Member: What year about?

Dr. Thomas: 1959 to 1961.

Committee Member: When you went into the Army, did you go in as a physician, a medic, or anything medical?

Dr. Thomas: Nothing special.

Committee Member: Had you earned your degree by then?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, I finished my undergraduate degree the year before.

Committee Member: And where did you spend your military time?

Dr. Thomas: It was in Fort Bragg in North Carolina for the first eight weeks then later in Indiana and St. Louis.

Committee Member: What happened after your military service?

Dr. Thomas: After the military, I was not working, and I got my letter from KCOM. I think it was in September of '61. I moved to Kirksville and was in the process of finding a place to live.

Dr. Thomas: The first, second, and third years went very well.

Committee Member: Do you recall what tuition was back then?

Dr. Thomas: It was approximately \$600 to \$800, and then gradually it started going up.

Committee Member: What year did you graduate then from medical school?

Dr. Thomas: 1965. After that, I went to Richmond Heights Hospital in Cleveland. My family was in Pittsburgh but I didn't want to go into Pittsburgh. I felt that since I had become a physician, I had about 400 relatives in that area that would become patients. I said, "I'll never make a dollar." I'm serious, so I decided that I really wanted to stay in Cleveland.

I recall I did a lot of deliveries at that hospital. My prior experiences at a hospital in Michigan, as a third year student, really helped. I think I delivered about 30 babies in one month. In Cleveland I worked with two other doctors that really did not want to do deliveries, so I would do most of them. I remember on July the 4th, one doctor got to the point where, when I was on call, if I would call him and say, "This lady is ready. Would you come down as soon as possible?" He would say, "I'll get there." And of course *after* I did the delivery, he would knock on the door and come in. He eventually asked me if I could work with him. I did for about two and a half years. He was really a great doctor. He would see 40/50 patients a day.

Committee Member: Was he a DO?

Dr. Thomas: Yes. After about two and a half or three years of working with him, we went our separate ways. He was still very nice to me. We worked in the same building, just right across the way from him but there were plenty of patients. From that point, I started working by myself for about six or seven years. I became very overworked, working 12 to 18 hours out of a day and still doing deliveries. After about seven years, I was ready to quit. It was too much.

Committee Member: Was that seven days a week, 24-hour call?

Dr. Thomas: My wife, Margaret, sometimes at night at 10 or 11:00 o'clock, would drive me to the hospital and wait to take me back home. She continued driving me even after we had a baby.

My brother, George, eventually joined my practice in Cleveland. He was really good and it worked well for both of us. About four or five years later, one of my other brothers, Jim, came to Cleveland and started working with me and he really did well. It's funny, Jim was in Pennsylvania and wanted to run a restaurant. He did that for approximately a year and finally decided, "All right, I don't want to run a restaurant; I want to be a doctor." I said, "Are you sure?" "Yes.", he said

We were doing well but a couple years later, we were offered positions at another hospital, approximately 20 miles from our current location. They did not have one family doctor at all, and within six or eight weeks we set up a practice and started working there. Of course, the other doctors were all MD's. I don't think they even knew what a DO was or what we did. For a year or so they gave us a rough time. They noticed that we were doing OMT. One orthopedic physician, who was a very nice guy, became interested and would come in to observe. We even worked on him. He was really very good to us.

Committee Member: Did you bump into much discrimination in the early '60s?

Dr. Thomas: Absolutely.

Committee Member: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Dr. Thomas: In the beginning there really wasn't too much discrimination because the hospital was only two years old and they had about 60 physicians and they were all DOs. It really wasn't bad because I worked right by the hospital. Many patients who went to other physicians switched to our practice and they referred other people. So really most of the time, it wasn't really too bad for us. I had patients ask, "What are you?" I said, "I'm an osteopathic physician." One lady said, "Well I don't want to go to any

chiropractors. I want to go home." I said, "God bless you. Please go. But I will tell you, I'm not a chiropractor. I'm an osteopathic physician and I can do everything that an MD does and I can do everything that a chiropractor does. The chiropractors took our techniques" I continued, "So please, that's okay, you don't have to - - God bless you." She left but about five minutes later she' came right back in.

Committee Member: Were you allowed on staff in any of the MD hospitals?

Dr. Thomas: We didn't even try to go there, and this was back in 1967 - 1970. We were very busy with Richmond Heights Hospital. However, in 1970, I was asked to go to one hospital, but I had differences with the owner, so I did not join that staff.

One nurse suggested a new hospital that needed physicians. I visited there and within three or four weeks, I was there working.

Committee Member:: What was the name of that hospital?

Dr. Thomas: Booth Memorial Hospital. Dr. Sam Sheppard was there.

Dr. Thomas: I was the first osteopathic physician in the Cleveland area to go to an MD hospital and within six months, another hospital, Euclid General Hospital, asked us to join them. Again, we were doing obstetrics and deliveries at all the hospitals.

Committee Member: How did you come into leadership in the ACGP? What was your entrance into ACGP, and who were the people that supported you?

Dr. Thomas: I was friends with four or five really good physicians who, as we worked together, got me involved. I became involved in hospital politics, in local and state societies and different people urged me to go to AOA and ACGP meetings.

Dr. Thomas: In 1992/1993 they changed the name of ACGP to ACOFP. Dr. Joe Namey encouraged me to work with the ACGP.

Committee Member: What year did you start onto the board do you remember, about?

Dr. Thomas: I was Board certified in 1975 and became a fellow in 1981. I think it had to be in '85 or '86 when I started.

Committee Member: During your tenure on the board, what were some of the hotter or tougher issues that you had to deal with?

Dr. Thomas: When I got on that year, there were a lot of problems. They were losing money and they were down to \$30/40,000 and that's all they had. So when I got on the board I really just waited. I would just sit and watch what they were doing. Within about six or seven months, things started to get better. I became more involved and after a year they put me on the committee to do the conventions and I said, "Would you let me do what I want to do?" And they said, "Yes."

Previous meetings were held in cities downtown, like downtown LA. That was the first one that I went to, and they only had about 200 people. When I started working with the conventions, we went to other places and the meetings got better. The first one was in Del Coronado in San Diego. My wife, Margaret and I went and were able to let us in Del Coronado.

Dr. Thomas: It's one of the nicest places. It was on the ocean.

Committee Member: Were you the convention chairman for that one?

Dr. Thomas: Yes.

Committee Member: Did you help turnaround the finances with the convention?

Dr. Thomas: Well, within a few conventions. The first one, we had 600 physicians attend.

Dr. Thomas: Right, at the convention. And the second one was at the Sheraton in Everest, [what state?] . There were 800 attendees, and by the third one we had a thousand and that's when we went from \$50,000 to \$1,400,000.

Committee Member: Who were some of the other characters on the ACGP Board?

Dr. Thomas: Raymond Saloom, he was one the best, best people because he's the one that kept the money, Joe Namey, Wilbur Hill, and Joseph Stella. These are all really great people.

Committee Member: What year were you president of the ACGP (ACOF)?

Dr. Thomas: '90. I believe it was '90.

Committee Member: 1990/1991. What was the particular theme you had for your presidency or what was it that was sort of something that you wanted to accomplish? Was ACOFP was in good financial order by then?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, we were, we really were, and we wanted to keep it that way. We wanted to get more so we could keep going with our events and objectives. I hate to say, but really we just tried everything that we could to keep as much money for the organization, so we could make the ACOFP better. We kept going to places which were very good. When we went to Florida and I was installed as President, attendance was approximately 1,000 to 1,100 physicians. My guests included 30 MD friends and about 70 of my family.

Committee Member: Do you remember in what capacity you were traveling in 1988 when PCOM started their ACGP chapter? You were our first guest there. What capacity were you in '88? I thought you were president by then.

Dr. Thomas: No, I don't think so. I think I went just to attend the conference. And while I was there, and I spoke a little bit. I was on the Board but I wasn't President just yet.

Committee Member: Tell them about your interest in the building? You were instrumental in getting that thing going?

Dr. Thomas: That was again another thing that we really had a problem with. In 1988, we started making some money and put it away for a building. Joe Namey, Wilbur Hill, Raymond Saloom and Joseph Stella were really helpful and great. John Sevastos was the first one to really work on that and he helped us. He's the one who put the first nickel down and said, "All right, let's put in some money," and he started the process. We worked very hard to make sure that we got the building in the area that we wanted. In fact we tried to get the AOA to give us an old building after they went into a new building. I asked them, "Let me buy that for us." And they wouldn't do it.

Committee Member: The AOA wouldn't sell you the building?

Dr. Thomas: No.

Committee Member: Did they give a reason why?

Dr. Thomas: No, I don't think so. They said that they were going to do something with it, I really don't know, but that's when we got out and found our building.

Committee Member: Was the executive director friendly at that time? The executive director at that time was an internist who wasn't too friendly I understand.

Committee Member: Ed Crow*.

Committee Member: He really fought our organization.

Committee Member: I wondered. I didn't know whether that had anything to do with it.

Dr. Thomas: A lot.

Dr. Thomas: I don't want to say any more about those things.

Committee Member: The Burnett's were very active, right?

Dr. Thomas: Yes, Joe Namey and John Burnett, both of them; they really did a great job. The helped me tremendously. And by '90, we bought the building.

Dr. Froelich: Does the Committee have any other questions?

Committee Member: Just one other. Do you remember any discussion about having the headquarters in the Sunbelt as opposed to Chicago? Were there divisions among the board at that time?

Dr. Thomas: I don't think so. I don't remember it really. I think they liked the area when they saw where it was, but I don't remember that they wanted to go somewhere else to be honest.

Committee Member: I have a question to ask you: Was a contemporary of your time, Dr. Sheppard, in the area were?

Dr. Thomas: When I really first knew about him and his history was in 1955.

Committee Member: Sam Shepherd, DO?

Dr. Thomas: Yes.

Committee Member: His son came to the meetings to speak for him.

[Samuel Holmes Sheppard, D.O. was accused of killing his pregnant wife in 1954. Sheppard served in the Ohio Penitentiary from his 1954 conviction until 1966 when he was acquitted in a new trial. It has been long said that the TV series, "The Fugitive", was modeled after him and his trial. In 2000, his son,

Sam Reese Sheppard, who was seven years old at the time of his mother's murder, sued the State of Ohio for his father's alleged wrongful imprisonment. He lost his case. Sam Reese Sheppard spoke to the Cleveland Academy of Osteopathic Medicine at its annual seminar a few years ago]

Committee Member: Any more questions for Dr. Thomas? Harold, thank you for being here today and thank you for your example and your service to the ACOFP and the entire osteopathic profession. We appreciate you being here today.