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Special Edition

Remembering the Good Old Dental Branch...

By Peggy O'Neill

Driving through the Medical Center and seeing the demolition of the old Dental Branch Building is like losing an old friend. I spent 37 years there starting as a postdoctoral fellow at the Dental Science Institute, faculty member teaching microbiology and immunology and doing research, dental student, clinical faculty and administration. Aside from all of the people and experiences, the building itself is quite unique in many aspects. The five story building was designed by Houston architects Mackie and Kamrath and built by Manhattan Construction, as was the original M.D. Anderson Hospital building. The exterior was clad in the beautiful pink marble from a quarry in Georgia, just like its sister institution next door. It was very modern and innovative for a dental school at that time, 1952, and was designed for the unique curriculum that was to come. Dr. Tom Wild remembers visiting the beautiful new school in 1959 in anticipation of becoming a student there and thinking "how fortunate I would be to be accepted at the DB".



The Dental Branch building under construction in 1954



Clinic treatment facilities and supporting operations were housed in the basement, and on the first and second floors with each dental hygiene, dental and advanced specialty student assigned a cubicle that resembled a small dental office. They were arranged in rows of twelve to be overseen by faculty. The basement also had a classroom, a preclinical laboratory, the bookstore, the testing room and for many years, a cafeteria, as well as the mechanical room for all utilities in the DB. Speaking of the basement, I remember well October 1994 when the remnants of a tropical storm dumped huge amounts of rain on Houston, and the basement had about 6 inches of water in it. As Vice Dean at the time, I had responsibility for facilities, and I remember slogging through the water in the dark with a flashlight and meeting

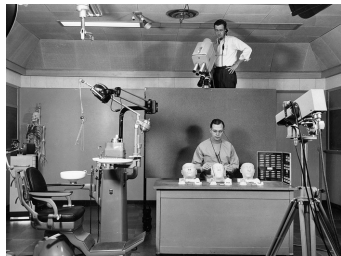
UT Health Science Center Executive Vice President Dr. Tom Burks there. Together we moved boxes of books and other supplies in the bookstore to higher ground. Fortunately, minimal damage was sustained. Les Fullerton reminded me that the basement had a "secret" tunnel that connected to M.D. Anderson Hospital. I don't know why it was there and I don't remember it being used when I was there as it was filled with electrical devices. The first floor, in addition to clinic space and support, had a classroom, the large waiting area and administrative offices, including dean's office, Student Affairs, Clinical Services, Registrar's Office, Business Office, and Audiovisual services. The dean's office suite consisted of several small offices and a large "apartment" space that was originally designed so that the dean could stay there if he desired (I say "he" because until 2005, all deans were "he" and only then did we have the first, and to date only, female dean of the DB). It contained a large office, a full kitchen and a full bath. As you walked into that office area, there were two narrow doors on the opposite wall. One was a closet and the other opened to a narrow, metal, spiral staircase with a single overhead bare light bulb (think murder mystery movies!) that led to a storage room in the basement.

There were cabinets of old files, ancient dental equipment, and treasures from bygone days, including a scantily clothed Greek statuette holding a lamp above her head, origin unknown, and a marble bust of Dr. Elliott that had been removed from in front of the building because of pigeon problems. The bust was later placed in the entryway of the building. The storeroom also was accessible from the basement side, and so the stairway was also a planned escape route should anything untoward occur in the dean's suite with a disgruntled patient, student or faculty. The first floor also housed the library which extended up to the second floor as well. And no student could forget the PAL Office (Patient Application Library), a small room on the first floor that held all of the applications from pre-screened prospective patients. Students would line up outside the door, waiting to be admitted two at a time to look for patients to treat.

The second floor had the large auditorium in addition to clinics. The third and fourth floors each had a classroom and faculty offices and labs down each outside hallway. The center of each of those floors held the unique "unit laboratories". These were home to first and second year dental students, and were designed for performing all of their didactic and preclinical activities. Each lab accommodated four students. There were granite-topped desks in each corner, a chemical hood, a centrifuge and tanks for casting gold, and a large silver vat in the center of the room. This vat held the cadaver, in preservative, that the students would dissect over the year. In the 80's, cadavers were no longer housed at the dental school, and students used facilities at the medical school. The only cadavers still utilized in the building were for graduate advanced head and neck anatomy and were housed in a small lab on the third floor. There was a secret dumb waiter type elevator from that lab directly to the basement so that cadavers could be moved in and out of the building without going through main spaces.

The fifth floor housed the vivarium and support space where research was conducted utilizing a variety of animals, e.g., beagle dogs for periodontal research; mice and a large centrifuge for research on bone development in excess gravity. Charlotte Childress mentions elevator problems in her memories of the DB building, and those were frequent. I remember that students were not allowed to use the elevators, so we got our exercise every day by climbing the stairs.

The unique dental curriculum was self-paced and self-directed, with very few lectures and with written modules for each course that a student would study on their own and then take a test on the material. There was a testing room in the basement where students would sign up for the test they wanted to take and then go there to complete it. There were security cameras everywhere in that room as monitors, and I can remember the whirl of their movement when taking a test there. You knew you were being watched! Because of the curriculum design, faculty needed to record lectures, demonstrations, lab exercises, etc. so there was a TV studio on the second floor and technicians to do the recording on 16 mm tape. There were TV viewing stations all over the building, and students would check out tapes from the film library to view assignments. Because of administrative nightmares, this curriculum was changed in 1994.



Renovations to the old building were very difficult because most walls were concrete and six inches thick. There was asbestos in the ceilings and walls. In the late 80's, part of the basement was remodeled to build a large, modern preclinical laboratory. In the early 2000's a space on the first floor was remodeled to house the UTDentists faculty practice. It was an expensive operation because of the sturdy construction of the building.

An annex to the original building was opened in 1988. This housed offices and laboratories moved from the Dental Science Institute. There were also clinical facilities. Dr. Jim Vogel was assigned as the liaison from the Dental Science Institute to oversee the move and remembers the rush to complete everything in time for the dedication. There were problems with the new annex such as no floor drains or high voltage outlets in areas requiring them, wall plug coverings with no wiring behind them, no facilities in generic designed labs for tissue culture hoods. And there was the humidity issue where we did not dare leave papers on our desks overnight because they would be soggy by morning. I remember Jim Vogel climbing into the ceiling crawl space over our offices at one time in an attempt to remedy some of the air conditioning problems. Dr. Vogel also remembers the great research that he and others were involved in and the innovative courses designed for the dental students.

In 2012, the long searched-for time capsule from 1952 was found. A number of people knew it was there but no one still living knew exactly where it had been placed. It was found in the library area which had originally been a main entrance to the DB building. It was encased in large slabs of pink marble lined with a metal casing. It took a crane to get it out and a heavy-duty truck to move it to the South Campus. It was opened during a ceremony conducted by Dean Valenza to reveal a plethora of interesting publications and objects from that era.

As of 2012, there is a new, modern, beautiful dental school building on the South Campus. The facilities are probably the best in the country and designed for an innovative curriculum, patient treatment and continuing education. There are walls covered with the pink marble from the old building on the first and second floors of the new building. Upon moving to the new building, Tom Wild reiterated his thoughts from 1959 – "how fortunate a student would be to attend this school". But no matter how beautiful or modern or wonderful the new building may be, it will never replace the "pink palace", the Dental Branch building that holds great memories for many of us who spent a good part of our lives there and the spirits of those who came before us.

Many thanks to Brian Schnupp, for the photographs and to those who contributed memories..

I am probably being overly sentimental, but I am really saddened by demolition of the old Dental Branch Building. I spent a large portion of my life in that building, and I have lots of good memories about the building and of course all of its people. There are probably lots of ghosts still walking those halls.

I can still remember the first time that I saw that beautiful old building. I had come for an interview back in April, 1972. I had driven in early that morning from Austin, and I was hot and tired. I had never seen any building before that was made from that gorgeous pink Georgian marble and I thought "I like this place". That was further confirmed when I was met with the cool A/C air and the warm hospitality.

Fortunately, I got the job and I was assigned to the physiology department where I became a colleague of 4 great guys with whom I spent the next 36 years. We shared the Southeast corner of the fourth floor with the biochemistry and pharmacology departments. Our three departments became a very close-knit family and our laboratory spaces often became places to celebrate birthdays, holidays and plan for extracurricular activities such as the annual chili cookoffs.

My first private office was made out of what used to be a "constant temperature" room and it was located next to the cold room. Both rooms had large wooden doors that looked like meat lockers. Luckily they did remove the large door to my office and replace it with a "normal" door, but they left the 12" wide door frames and the control panel. I can't tell you how many people would stop at by door and ask "what the heck is this room?" Maybe they thought that I was a part of an experiment. Of course with its thick solid walls, it was probably the safest room in the building.

One of my first assignments was to teach Dental Hygiene Students a long list of various science topics. Dental Hygiene's lab and lecture space was housed in the basement. Needless to say, there were no windows. The students often referred to themselves as mushrooms. They indicated that they were kept in the dark and fed a lot of sh___. I guess that I was responsible for much of the feeding.

After 36 years, I probably walked every inch of that building from the basement to the 5TH floor where the animals were housed. There are many special features that I still remember; some nice and some not so nice. I loved the cork floors and the beautiful blonde wood in the clinical cubicles. They were both removed later in the "name of progress". Another feature that I remember well was that the building was obviously built by men and for men. There were very few women restrooms. There were also very few windows. You had special bragging rights if you were lucky enough to have one.

The old Dental Branch has been replaced by the nice new shiny School of Dentistry, but I still love that old UTDB.

Rita Zachariasen

I look back at the University of Texas Dental Branch, UTDB as it was affectionately and formerly known, both as a 1982 Graduate of the school of Dental Hygiene and as an employee for 6 years from 1988 to 1994.

Student

As a newly accepted student to UTDB in 1980, my only real knowledge of the school was the basement. The classes for dental Hygiene were scheduled from 8 AM to 5 PM, five days a week. I was one of a few "older" students at the time and I lived with my family in far Northwest Houston. Because of my daily commute to the Medical Center, I had to leave my home around 5:30 each morning to traverse the unimproved highways that were Hwy 290 and the 610 Loop to make sure I arrived early enough to prepare for my long day of classes and clinic.

After parking in the "Brown Lot" and waiting for the lonely commuter bus to the dental school, I would finally enter the building and make my way down into the bowels of the basement. Each class was scheduled back to back with a short window for a quick lunch to be eaten in the laboratory so I could have time to study for an exam or to catch up on a lecture from the day before. Yes, I was one of those students who "recorded" the lectures...but that's another whole story!!

Due to the efficiency of having everything "dental hygiene" in the basement, there were so many days I would arrive in the dark and leave in the dark without seeing any daylight whatsoever. Needless to say, I relished each weekend so I could enjoy the sunlight with my kids before embarking on another week feeling like a mushroom!

Employee

After years in private practice, I was hired by Dr. Kenneth Porter to work in the Continuing Education Department at the school. As a Department, we offered classes to Dentists, Hygienists and Dental Assistants as part of their annual mandatory obligation to further their education.

These classes were offered on weekends to accommodate the work schedules of the participants. Because of this, Dr Porter and I were often the only people working at the school during these days and the school was empty. On one Saturday, dr. Porter left right after the lunch break and I was left alone to prepare the afternoon snacks to bring to our classes. Because our office was on the second floor, I had to assemble the treats onto rolling carts and navigate them onto the elevator to get them to the first floor.

On this particular day, I had two classes and managed to get the carts onto the elevator without any issue. However, shortly after the elevator started to move, the car came to a very abrupt stop between the floors. Now typically when this happened on a normal workday, you would press the emergency button and there was always someone around to get help. But not on this day... I spent the next thirty minutes trapped and hoping someone from one of the classes would be looking for me. The elevator suddenly started its decent to the first floor. Once I finally managed to get to the classroom to set up the snacks, I was met, not with concern for where I had been, but to let me know that I was really late with the snacks! *Charlotte Childress*

Some More Memories...

As you know I talk too much and do not write enough, but here are my memories.

I first saw the DB building being completed in 1955 around some pine trees when I was in high school in Houston. We would take dates to the Baylor Medical School across the street to sneak into the anatomy lab to see cadavers. This proved how brave we were, but it scared me. Little did I know how really scared I would be to enter dental school in 1961.

The building was small compared to M D Anderson, but a beautiful design with the pink Georgia marble. In 1961, student parking was on the west side library entrance. A green space was also available for flag football games. The first two years were spent in the four-person student labs on the 3rd and 4th floors with enough distancing that would even be safe today. Both sides of the two clinic floors had windows, but the south side was closed when the 1988 addition was completed. So much for progress! There was a small cafeteria on the second floor for a number of years. The Parents' Association converted it into a student lounge.

The basement was converted to labs, teaching facilities, and offices over the years as class size changed. A few of us knew about the secret tunnel that went to MDA.

So now after 65 years, I have seen the first constructed building designed for dental education, the Texas Dental College, demolished and now the second beloved Dental Branch Building being leveled. Great memories! Time and progress marches on!

Les Fullerton '65

I've been trying to think of specific things about the old building. Unfortunately, I don't think I have any pictures from the old building. One of the things I do remember is that when I visited other dental schools around the country when I was on the ADEA Council of Faculties, I was impressed at how modern our building was compared to many of those around the country. Even though it was 25 or 30 years old at the time, it was still very modern looking. I also remember when we had a deck built on the west side of the building and dedicated it to Dr. Olson. We had many good times and many good students in that old building. I'll keep thinking of things that may be of interest.

Cheers, Ted

Ps. I remember you and I and Kathy Gibson sitting in our back lab working on the Bylaws for the DB Faculty Senate.

Ted Pate

When I was in the process of applying to the DB a junior student, Neil Perry (knew him from Pasadena High School) gave me a tour of the DB. This was in 1959 (DB was only several years old at that time). My only thought at that time was "how fortunate I would be to be accepted at the DB". Fast forward to the new DB. When I moved my office from the old DB to the new DB my thought was "how fortunate a student would be to attend this school".

Tom Wild, class of '65

When the new wing was added in 1988, the DSI was moved to a south east area on the 4th floor. In addition to an office suite and conference room only eight generic laboratories were made available to the DSI faculty. Fortunately, Anatomical Sciences was also located on the 4th floor. Sharing laboratory space allowed the creation of service labs such as a tissue culture lab, chromatography/electrophoresis lab and an electron microscopy suite. Being in the building, I was able to do more teaching in the biochemistry modules. Dr. Butler and I added a module on the biochemistry of mineralized tissues that was received very well by the students.

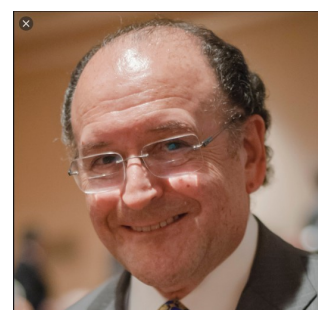
Jim Vogel



Dr. John Victor Olson 1952-1982



Dr. Don L. Allen 1982-1992



Dr. Raul G. Caffesse 1992-1996



Dr. Ron Johnson 1996-2002

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Dr. Catherine M. Flaitz 2002-2009

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Dr. John A. Valenza 2009 - present