

Chapman Center for Rural Studies
Kansas State University

Small Town, Big-Time Doctor

Dr. Thomas Dechairo, Westmoreland, Kansas 1936-1986

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Figure 1: An oil painting of Dr. Dechairo donated to the Rock Creek Valley Historical Society. This painting was presented on December 16, 1960. It was presented by Margaret V. Dechairo Source: Rock Creek Valley Historical Society

This study focuses on the impact that Dr. Dechairo's Hospital had on the town of Westmoreland Kansas. The hospital was very advanced for its time and the doctor who ran it was entirely focused on his community. Research was performed at Rock Creek Valley Historical Society.

Small Town, Big Time Doctor:

Doctor Thomas Dechairo, or “Doc” as many called him, is the type of man who will not soon be forgotten. People came to him for his reputation for treating every patient as an individual who took the time to care for the person more than just in a medical sense. Dechairo Hospital was a home that was turned into a medical clinic; very modest by the standards of today’s hospitals however, it was incredibly ahead of the curve in medical advances. But Doctor Dechairo’s claim to fame was delivering babies, which he did hundreds of times with incredible skill. Many readers in the local area will recognize the name of Doctor Thomas Dechairo. He may have delivered your child, mother, or aunt, or the person reading this article! Doc lived in an era where local doctors still had a stake in people’s medical care, before large hospitals dominated the landscape and even when large scale hospitals came into being, his reputation still brought people knocking at Doc’s door, especially for the deliverance of babies. Thomas Dechairo came to Westmoreland, Kansas in 1937.¹ He had just graduated from Kansas University Medical School the year prior. He wasted no time in starting his own practice and opening up Dechairo Hospital shortly after in March of 1942.² By this time Doc had already begun to garner the respect of the community around him. It was in this community that Doc began to sink his roots and make a lasting impact. The reputation of his clinic began to grow with word of his work and his work in the community. Doc pursued any philanthropic endeavor he could for his community. Doc continued with this charitable spirit throughout his career and furthermore the rest of his life. He continued in his career as a medical professional and business philanthropist until 1986.³ He died shortly thereafter in 1988 at the age of 75.⁴

Doc brought the community together, using the local church and newspaper to provide updates on how patients were doing. It was not uncommon for Doc to stand up in church and

share which community members were in the hospital and how to pray for them.⁵ This tradition carried on for years and even made the Sunday paper every week beginning June 4, 1942, after the hospital opened in March, with a new section popped up in the *Westmoreland Recorder* once a week titled, "Hospital News."⁶ It informed the community on who was in the hospital, who was released from the hospital, when a child was born, or when an unfortunate soul passed away. This tradition continued well into the 1980's until Doc retired in 1986.⁷ The tradition continued until HIPPA privacy laws were passed. This can easily be overlooked however because Doc's intention with the "Hospital News" segment was always good. In all cases of the "Hospital News," Doc always asked his patients if they wanted to remain private before posting their names.⁸ In all cases, Doc sought patient's permission, always looking out for the well-being and wishes of his patients.

Dechairo Hospital was a marvel in the fact that it operated like a hospital in a much larger environment. The hospital was very modern for its time in the technology used. At the time Dechairo Hospital was in business, the cost to operate and furnish a hospital was increasing exponentially.⁹ The hospital was opened directly following a period many medical historians have called the "Golden Age of Medicine."¹⁰ This was a period in which medical knowledge and practices improved at a break-neck pace. It became increasingly difficult to become a doctor as more education was constantly needed to keep up with the advances, but also increased the standards of medicine and the public's belief in medicine.¹¹ Along with this wave of increased confidence came a rush of young adults jumping into the medical field. New positions were created seemingly every day with varying levels of education required for each. Doc rode this wave through medical school and into a career as a general practitioner, and a highly educated one at that.

Throughout his career Doctor Dechairo did his best to keep the hospital current with the times. The *Westmoreland Recorder* captures this effort in an article titled “Dechairo Hospital Gets a lot of Sincere Praise.” During an open house, a reporter wrote about how enthusiastic the community was about the hospital, stating “It was more than a dream for the citizens who came to oh and ah over an up-to-date hospital that would do justice to any city far larger than Westmoreland.”¹² This sentence perfectly captures the essence of Dechairo Hospital and the efforts of its doctor. While Dechairo worked tirelessly to improve the hospital, he himself thought it was not enough at the time. In the same article the reporter said, “We are all satisfied with the end results of the dream, but Dr. Dechairo is not. With the advancement of medicine and equipment there is a long way to go.”¹³ This still goes to show that no matter how hard Doc tried, he still had more in store for his community.

Dechairo Hospital was always up to date on medical technology. A great example of this is the incubator used at Dechairo Hospital. It was given to Doc by the Women’s Society of Christian Service (W.S.C.S.) in the 1950’s for use in the hospital.¹⁴ The incubator pictured below is not this incubator but a similarly advanced model used later by the hospital.



Figure 2: An image of an Incubator used at Dechairo Hospital in the 1960’s. This incubator was very advanced for its time, and they were normally used in much larger hospitals. SOURCE: Rock Creek Valley Historical Society.

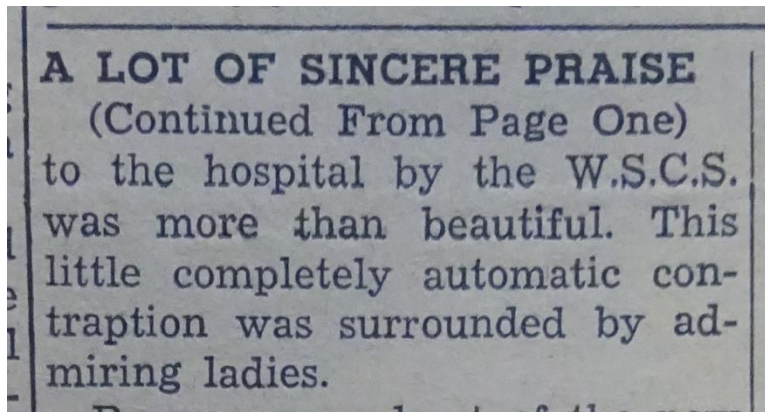


Figure 3: A newspaper clip written by Don Tyner, thanking the W.S.C.S. for their generous gift. The Incubator was admired with awe during an open house at the hospital in 1956. SOURCE: *Westmoreland Recorder*.

Incubators at that time were not commonplace in hospitals. They were a symbol of status and normally only seen in large hospitals in major cities.¹⁵ However, Doc had one in the small town of Westmoreland, Kansas. Dechairo Hospital never fell behind modern medicine but was a fully functioning medical hospital complete with a clinic, a testing lab and operating rooms, where the doctor performed major surgeries. In 1976, renovation added a testing lab.¹⁶ On top of just having advanced technology, Doc was described as a man who kept on top of current medical studies and was well versed in modern medical knowledge.¹⁷

Doc was famous for having a pleasant bedside manner, something that you cannot learn in school. Many medical doctors advance far into their schooling or careers before they realize that it is not something they are skilled in.¹⁸ This was never an issue for Doc. When new employees were hired at the clinic they were given a handbook, and in the handbook the first thing it said was “The patient is King.”¹⁹ Doc lived out this motto and made sure his employees worked in the same manner.

Doc gained local fame for his medical practices; in particular, he was famous for delivering babies and his work on dealing with minor heart attacks.²⁰ Throughout his career Doc was well known for his ability to deliver babies. Early in his practice, he had a travelling table that he would take with him. He could deliver a baby just about anywhere he went, the hospital, the mother's home, or even in an office building. Early in his career he would deliver babies almost anywhere, however later he took care of this work solely at the hospital. Later, his experience in delivering the babies made him well renowned for appeasing to the mother's desires. He delivered hundreds of babies throughout his career and people came from miles away to have him deliver their baby.



Figure 4: One of the delivery tables Doc would travel around with. It had handles to the sides at the top and bottom for the mothers to grab onto. In the 1930's and early 40's Doc would famously bring this table with him and then sit and play cards with the husband until the mother was ready to give birth. Source: Rock Creek Valley Historical Society.

Patients suffering from heart attacks would also travel miles for Dr. Dechairo's medical expertise. One man was having a heart attack and his wife drove all the way through Topeka, passing several larger hospitals. He purposefully headed for Dechairo Hospital because of the stories he had heard about Dr. Dechairo and his knowledge.²¹

Above all else Doc cared about the community he lived in and the people who surrounded him. He was highly focused on any and all philanthropic endeavors including Boy Scouts, the local PTA, his church and several others.²² He was a very wise medical doctor, but also a business man, his work just happened to benefit his entire community. Through this spirit and his day-to-day actions, he garnered a great respect from the community of Westmoreland, Kansas. These stories and details are intended to capture the fulfilling life that Doctor Thomas Dechairo lived.

I would also like to personally thank Jenni Moore, Nola Wilkerson, Lois Vining, and Dorothy Campbell for assisting me with my research and talking with me about Doctor Dechairo and the legacy that he left behind. They truly helped me learn a lot about Doc and appreciate all he did for the beautiful community of Westmoreland, Kansas.

End Notes

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- ¹ Jenni Moore, Interview, May 5, 2017.
 - ² Unknown Author, "Dechairo Hospital Opening," *Westmoreland Recorder*, March 19, 1942.
 - ³ Wall Poster, Thomas Dechairo Exhibit, Rock Creek Valley Historical Society, Westmoreland, Kansas.
 - ⁴ Topeka Tom, "Dr. Thomas Dechairo," Find a Grave, January 11, 2014, Accessed May 4, 2017, findagrave.com.
 - ⁵ Jenni Moore, Interview, May 5, 2017.
 - ⁶ Unknown Author, "Hospital News," *Westmoreland Recorder*, June 4, 1942.
 - ⁷ Unknown Author, "Hospital News," *Westmoreland Recorder*, January 5, 1984
 - ⁸ Dorothy Campbell, Interview, May 5, 2017
 - ⁹ George Rosen, *The Hospital in Modern Society*, ed. Eliot Friedson (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), Pg. 31.
 - ¹⁰ Allan Brandt and Martha Gardner, *Medicine in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Roger Cooter and John Pickstone, (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 2000) Pg. 21-22.
 - ¹¹ Ibid.
 - ¹² Don Tyner, "Dechairo Hospital Gets A lot of Sincere Praise," *Westmoreland Recorder*, May 10, 1956.
 - ¹³ Ibid.
 - ¹⁴ Ibid.
 - ¹⁵ Russell Viner and Janet Golden, *Medicine in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Roger Cooter and John Pickstone, (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 2000) pg. 585.
 - ¹⁶ Don Tyner, "The Dechairo Hospital, and Clinic to Have Open House this Sunday," *Westmoreland Recorder*, June 17, 1976.
 - ¹⁷ Dorothy Campbell, Interview, May 5, 2017
 - ¹⁸ Ruth Purtilo, *Health Professional/ Patient Interaction*, (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1984), pg. 13-15
 - ¹⁹ Dorothy Campbell, Interview, May 5, 2017.
 - ²⁰ Ibid.
 - ²¹ Dorothy Campbell, Interview, May 5, 2017.
 - ²² Ibid.