

Crusading Doctor

His work made Taylor
a better place for all people

Museum, historical marker to honor civil leader



Dr. James Dickey, with his wife Magnolia Fowler Dickey and son James Lee Dickey, made countless positive changes in the small town of Taylor during the days of segregation.

Photo courtesy Williamson County Historical Museum

A lengthy effort is under way to get Dr. James Dickey a Texas State Historical marker to be placed at the site of a planned museum in Taylor. The Taylor Conservation & Heritage Society, The Blackshear/O.L. Price Ex-Students Association of Taylor and The Williamson County Historical Commission contributed to the project. A historical narrative compiled by Clara Scarbrough of Georgetown, Jennifer Harris of Taylor and Bob Brinkman, historian with the Texas Historical Commission, was recently submitted for the historical marker. It will take at least six months before the marker will be placed on site, according to Chris Dyer, Historical Marker Chair for the Williamson County Historical Commission.

The following is Dr. Dickey's story, written by Mrs. Scarbrough, who knew him years ago in Taylor.

By CLARA STEARNS SCARBROUGH

The successful work by Dr. James Lee Dickey to stem an outbreak of typhoid fever in Taylor, not only ensured vital health care for local African-Americans, but caused improvements for his race and other fellow human beings far beyond its borders.

Dr. Dickey became nationally known in 1953, when he was honored as Taylor's Citizen of the Year. Print and broadcast media throughout the United States revealed the unusual accomplishments of this small town black doctor in the south during those years of racial segregation. The honor to Dr. Dickey could be taken as yet another of his many contributions to Taylor that in turn became an inspiration throughout the country as his story spread.

That same year, the Lone Star State Medical, Dental, and Pharmaceutical Association named him General Practitioner of the Year.

Born near Waco on November 12, 1893, Dr. Dickey graduated in 1916 from Tillotson College (now Huston-Tillotson College) in Austin. He taught industrial arts in Marlin for a short time before enrolling at Meharry Medical

College in Nashville, where he graduated in 1921. Shortly before his graduation, his father died in an accident and left his mother with eight other children. Dr. Dickey decided to practice near Waco to be near them.

This brought Dr. Dickey to Taylor to talk to a fellow African-American, Dr. J. Richard Moore. Upon arriving there he learned that Dr. Moore had recently moved to San Antonio, and as one-fifth of Taylor's 9,017 residents were black, the town clearly needed a doctor of color. Dr. Dickey became the only African-American physician in Williamson County and one of only 130 in Texas.

Dr. Dickey married Magnolia Fowler of Nashville on November 29, 1922. The couple lived together in Taylor and were active in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, working together on many community projects.

"The hand of destiny guided me to Taylor," Dr. Dickey later said. "I came to stay a few years; I remained to do my life's work."

An outbreak of typhoid fever hit Taylor's black population in 1933.

Dr. Dickey went through the community giving injections to everyone he could convince to take them. Those who could not afford his services and medication received treatment nevertheless.

Besides applying his medical skills, Dr. Dickey found through conversations with his patients that they used the water from Bull Branch for drinking and other uses. He determined that their inability to obtain clean water contributed to the spread of the deadly disease. His patients couldn't afford the \$1.30 a month water bill, so used water from Bull Branch

instead. He worked with the town leaders to provide a city water hydrant in each section of the town where it was needed so residents could fill buckets from the hydrants to have clean water.

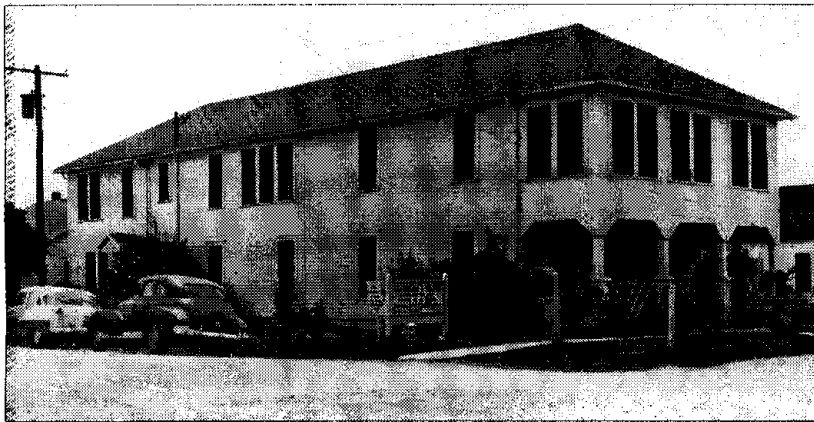
Bull Branch also separated the children from their school. They were forced to cross it on an often slippery log as they walked to school each day. Falling into Bull Branch was a common occurrence. The only other crossing was over a railroad trestle, dangerous in its own right. Dr. Dickey convinced city leaders to build a bridge over Bull Branch to provide safe passage for the children.

In those days of segregation, blacks would have to wait outside the hospital emergency room until whites had been cleared before getting access to care at the facility. Blacks who needed hospitalization were placed in an antiquated shack, separate from the hospital.

Dr. Dickey gained permission to use a vacant rooming house on Bland Street for his patients during the typhoid fever outbreak. Later, this same facility would become Dr. Dickey's 15-bed hospital and clinic, the only one in Williamson County to serve the health needs of the African-American community. Many white patients also called him their doctor.

In addition to his successful quelling of the typhoid fever outbreak, providing clean water where needed, the bridge over the dirty water of Bull Branch, and the opening of the black hospital and clinic, there were many other accomplishments. Dr. Dickey's influence brought recreational facilities for youth, a park for African-Americans, and a balcony that allowed blacks to attend movies.

Dr. Dickey also lent his time and expertise to his alma mater, Tillotson College, through service on the board of trustees from 1951 until his death on May 18, 1959. The science building is named for him and Theodore K. Lawless, a dermatologist.



Photos courtesy Williamson County Historical Museum

The Dickey Clinic, a 15-bed, two-story hospital with modern surgical and obstetrical facilities, served primarily African-Americans, but was open to all needy patients from Williamson, Lee, Travis, Milam, Bell and Bastrop counties.



Dr. James Dickey

DICKEY

Named 1953 Taylor Citizen of the Year

Continued from Page 1B

In accepting his Citizen of the Year honor at the 1953 banquet, Dr. Dickey faced those he had frequently engaged in forceful negotiations with good humor, while maintaining his leadership stature among his fellow African-Americans.

"I don't know how you selected

me for this honor," he told the group. "I've tried to be vigilant without being rude. I have also tried as far as possible to keep from embarrassing my white friends, yet it's often been necessary for me to harry them with the problems of my people.

"I will have to do something now to prove to my people I still belong to them," he said. "I'll have to think of something to ask you for. And if I don't get it, I'll have to talk real rough. When it looks like I'm mad at the white folks, I'll be back in my people's good graces.

"Let me just say that if you're ever inclined to lose patience with my people, imagine, if you can,

what any Negro parent goes through. I understand segregation. My wife understands segregation. But did you ever try to explain it to a 6-year-old child?"

After thanking those present for their show of friendship, Dr. Dickey sat down.

The short visit to Taylor has blossomed into a career unmatched by others of this time. Dr. James Lee Dickey is buried in Taylor City Cemetery.

This information came from Dr. Dickey's son, James Lee Dickey, who provided it to the author. He lives and works in Austin.