John Kuratli (1897-1961)

There were many pioneers of the gold-casting technique in dentistry, but one of the most proficient early Oregon experts was John J. Kuratli Jr. Gold casting is the process of making a *crown* to cap an unhealthy tooth or a *bridge* to span the gap created by missing teeth. In dentistry's early days, the technique required multiple, time-consuming steps. It also required extreme patience, exactness, and excellent hand skills. Dr. Kuratli possessed all three traits, and had the leadership and passion for dentistry to inspire others.

Born in Portland on March 23, 1897, Kuratli was a 1919 graduate of the North Pacific Dental College (NPDC), the precursor to the OHSU School of Dentistry. From the moment he graduated from dental school, he “steadily climbed to national prominence through his own persistent efforts,” organizing clinics throughout the United States, according to Dr. Paul Kunkel Sr. in 1947.

Kuratli began teaching at NPDC in the Crown and Bridge Department in the fall of 1937, officially joining the faculty as an assistant professor in 1941. Described as “warm and friendly…with a genial nature," he reportedly was so devoted to teaching dentistry that he hiked through snowstorms to get to his class on time.

Kuratli was an avid supporter of study clubs—dental groups that met regularly to discuss and practice the latest techniques—as a way to help dentists share knowledge with each other. He founded his first study club, the ten-member Crown and Bridge Study Club, in February of 1945, and was master clinician (leader) to three other crown-and-bridge study clubs.

Kuratli actively participated in organized dentistry and was president of the Portland District Dental Society, the Oregon State Dental Association, the Oregon State Board of Dental Examiners, and the dental school’s alumni association. He was one of many OSDA sponsors who worked for the passage of HB 313, a measure that transferred the dental school to the state in July 1945 to ensure the school's accreditation and to strengthen its financial footing. He was also a member of the Delta Sigma Delta dental fraternity, Omicron Kappa Upsilon Honorary Dental Fraternity, the American Academy of Crown and Bridge, and the American Academy of Restorative Dentistry and a fellow of the International College of Dentists.

A World War I veteran, Kuratli was married and had two children. His brother Reuben H. Kuratli was also a dentist, graduating from NPDC in 1934.

John Kuratli died on April 29, 1961. The dental school's alumni association created the John Kuratli Memorial Exhibit—a large glass cabinet featuring a photo of Kuratli and many cases of the restorations representing his workmanship, as well as the equipment needed to make them (during the early 1980s, someone broke the glass and stole the gold work). The exhibit was intended to build interest in the John Kuratli Memorial Fund, initiated by an alumnus to help dental students with their loans.

Written by Sydney Clevenger

Further Reading:

Caementum 18:2 (December 1961): 13.

North Pacific College of Oregon School of Dentistry Announcements, 1937-1941.

Copyright © 2008-2014 Portland State University