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A Sketch of Walter H. Swartz

The death of a family member or close acquaintance causes great sorrow, but sudden death during the prime of life is particularly difficult for the survivors to accept. Such is the case in the untimely death of Dr. Walter H. Swartz, who died on January 13, 1976. He was 53.

Since he began teaching in 1945, over 2,000 students had received some form of instruction in complete denture prosthodontics from Dr. Swartz. Because of his long service to our school and his popularity with Michigan dental students, it was thought that a sketch of Walter Swartz's life would be more appropriate in this publication than a conventional obituary.

Mrs. Swartz graciously allowed the editor to visit with her about her husband, and provided most of the information and photographs used in this article.

The Swartz family has roots in western Michigan that go back to 1842 when Frederick Swartz came from Pennsylvania to claim government land near Moore-Park.

In October 1914, Frederick's grandson Harry married Leslie Glee Walters, and their son, Walter Henry Swartz, was born on February 19, 1922; he was to be the only child.

An autobiography written for a school project when he was a student.

Walter H. Swartz 1922–1976
at Marcellus High School reveals that his boyhood on a farm was a happy experience. He tended the chores common to all young farm children, and had intense pride in his own horse and dog. He learned that hard work was expected of him and developed a sense of responsibility and goal attainment that characterized his later life.

With the help of his parents, Walt wrote a brief description of their early years:

"My father was determined to own a farm from his boyhood days so
when he grew up and married he bought our farm from William Shoenight, a well-known resident of Marcellus.

My mother taught school and my father would get up about five o'clock, do his chores, and go to the fields. His noon hour was just long enough for his horses to eat.

Their motto was 'where there's a will there's a way' and they stuck to it.'

When Walt was 15 years old, his father suffered from pneumonia and was close to death. He turned his pocketbook over to Walt and said, "You take over the responsibilities of the farm." Harry Swartz recovered from his illness and survives his son. His mother, Leslie Glee, passed away in December 1974 at the age of 82.

Mrs. Laurene Swartz ("Skip") recalls that Walt always had a genuine love and respect for his parents.

As much as Walt loved the farm, he had his mind made up to become a doctor by the time he reached high school. He wrote in a high school
English assignment that he liked the kind of life a doctor has, and that the pay was not a disagreeable feature of the "vocation."

Walter Swartz was an excellent student at the small high school in Marcellus. He was the star football center (captain of the team his senior year), and had the lead role in both the junior and senior plays. He was valedictorian of his 34-member class and presented his address at the graduation ceremonies on May 23, 1940.

Walt had grown into manhood rapidly; he had always seemed "big for

Skip and Walt visit Chicago with the senior class in 1940.
his age.” We remember him as a tall, handsome, distinguished, well-groomed man. The woman of his life, however, observed these future characteristics of Walt when they were classmates in the first grade. In fact, Laurene O. Chubbuck had her eye on Walter Swartz when they were pre-schoolers in a Methodist Church Sunday school class.

Although Walt usually kept close to the farm and his work there, the wanderlust in his personality surfaced in the summer of 1939, when he and a friend hitch-hiked to visit the New York World’s Fair. His mother, in retrospect, often wondered how she let her 17-year-old son go to such a place in such a manner with little money and no adult guidance.

Skip and Walt began dating during their junior year, and had decided to get married at some later date by the time they graduated from high school.

For his outstanding abilities as a student and athlete, Walt received a scholarship covering full tuition costs for the first year at Western Michigan College of Education (now Western Michigan University) in nearby Kalamazoo. Skip thought it would be best to be separated during the first year of college, so she enrolled at Michigan State College.

When Walt enrolled at Western in the fall of 1940, he decided not to play football because of the time it consumed. As he left for the campus, his father asked him how much money he wanted. Walt said, “ten dollars.” Although his parents were able and willing to support him, he was determined to see his own way through college.

During his first year, he worked odd hours and Saturdays at a grocery store. The second year found Walt working at a better-paying, but more strenuous job loading semi-trailers at Associated Truck Lines. The regular workers tagged the part-timers, “the college crew.”

During his second year at Western, Walt met Bill Creason (Dr. William M. Creason, ’45d) in his biology and physics classes; it was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. According to Dr. Creason, Walt suggested that they look into dentistry as a profession for them to pursue. He recalls that Walt admired a dentist in Marcellus and spoke of the good image, the direct contact with people, the fact that dentists work with their hands, and that they act as their own boss as desirable features of dentistry.

On Walt’s urging, they traveled to Ann Arbor in a Model A Ford, walked around the campus, and met with Dean Russell Bunting. They returned for a second interview with Dr. Bunting two weeks later and applied for admission.

The School of Dentistry’s accelerated war program was in effect when Walt began his freshman year on October 5, 1942. Under this program, the subject content of the curriculum remained the same as that of the four-year program, but by eliminating vacations, the program was completed in a little less than three calendar years.
Walt made application for enlistment in the Medical Administrative Corps of the U.S. Army, which meant that if he was successful in his studies, he would not be subject to the Selective Service Draft Board regulations, and would be eligible for a commission in the Army Dental Corps after graduation.

Walt and Bill Creason roomed together in Ann Arbor until Walt's acceptance into the Army Student Training Program. Bill joined the U.S. Navy's program.

Following the third term, Skip and Walt were married on October 17, 1943. Bill Creason served as best man.

When the Class of 1945 graduated on June 23, World War II was over. Walter Swartz had become a dentist in only five years following his graduation from high school; the future looked bright for Skip and Walt.

Dr. Sid Williams (of the Complete Denture Department) observed Walt's native ability and interest in prosthetics as a student, and advised and encouraged him to enroll in the graduate program in denture prosthetics.

Dr. Swartz's penchant for hard work is demonstrated by his schedule as a young dentist. He joined the school's faculty as a clinical instructor in the Complete Denture Department, he was a graduate student, and he practiced dentistry evenings and Saturdays in the office of Dr. Sid Williams. He received a Master of Science degree in February 1947.

Through the efforts of his teachers, Dr. Richard Kingery and Dr. Corwin Wright, Dr. Swartz became a regular member of the department's staff and rose steadily through the ranks. He was promoted to instructor in 1948, to assistant professor in 1950, to associate professor in 1957, and to full professor in 1961.

David Scott Swartz, Skip and Walt's first child, was born in June, 1947. In August of the following year, their daughter Laurie Glee was born.

The Swartzs' life was interrupted in 1953 when Walt was called to active duty in the Dental Corps of the U.S. Army. Most of the two years of duty was spent by the family at Fort Ord, California.

Upon returning to Ann Arbor in 1955, Walt resumed his duties at the school and continued his part-time practice. His busy professional life did not prevent him from participating in other activities. A member of Ann Arbor's First United Methodist Church, he served as its head usher beginning in 1961. He belonged to the local Kiwanis Club and served on the board of the Ann Arbor YMCA. He was also a member of the U-M Civic Club.

Dr. Swartz was active in many professional organizations. He was president of the Washtenaw District Dental Society in 1957 and became a fellow of the American College of Dentists in 1959. In 1964, he joined
Walt in uniform as a member of the Army Student Training Program during his
dental school years.

Mr. Harry Swartz and his dentist son pose after graduation ceremonies on
June 23, 1945.
Walt with David and Laurie in 1949.

The Swartz family at Fort Ord, California, in December 1953.
the Dental Materials Section of the IADR. He was made a Fellow of The Academy of Denture Prosthetics in 1969.

Walt served on various committees at the School of Dentistry. For many years, he acted as secretary-treasurer of Chi Chapter, Omicron Kappa Upsilon, and served in the same capacity for the Richard Kingery Prosthetic Group since the sudden death of his colleague Paul Gibbons in 1964.

Walt Swartz was interested in dental research and was assisted in many of his projects by his good friend Dr. Kamal Asgar. Some of his studies included denture retention, the measurement of contour surfaces, measuring pressure during impression making, and palateless dentures. His last project was an investigation of the tissue fit of various denture base materials. In 1974, he became a member of the newly formed Prosthodontic Section of the IADR.

Walt derived satisfaction from his accomplishments, but also showed genuine pleasure in the accomplishments of others. His son, David, graduated from Central Michigan University in 1969, and from the Case Western Reserve Law School in 1972. He now serves as an assistant prosecutor for Washtenaw County. David’s wife, Mindy (Moe), teaches English at Wayne Westland Junior High School.

Laurie graduated from Eastern Michigan University in 1971 and resides in Owosso, Michigan, where her husband Scott (Shear) is employed as personnel manager of Universal Electric Co.

One of Walt’s greatest joys was the hours he spent working in his
beautiful garden and lawn. He also loved to travel. History was another interest and he and Skip enjoyed visiting museums during their travels. The Swartzes' planned to do much traveling during their retirement years.

Dr. Swartz's popularity among the dental students was demonstrated by the fact that he was the only faculty member to receive the School's Paul Gibbons Award for "outstanding teaching" (an award presented by the senior class) three times. His wife recalls that Walt often said, "I cannot help but feel that every graduating senior takes a little of me with them."

Walt's last year was a happy one. He spent the months from September to December on a sabbatical leave from the University. During this
period, he visited new dental schools throughout the country, studying teaching objectives, student preparation and accomplishments, and clinical evaluation procedures in his subject area of complete denture prosthodontics.

It was during this period that Walt and Skip were anticipating the birth of their first grandchild. On November 8, 1975, a grandson, Jeffrey David Shear, was born in Owosso, Michigan.

Dr. Swartz resumed his teaching duties following the holidays in January, 1976. He had been there only two weeks when he was stricken.

Associate Dean Robert E. Doerr expressed the sorrow caused by the death of Walter Swartz with these words:

"He was at the height of a distinguished career in academic dentistry and private practice, and was one of the best liked members of the faculty, and a leader in school programs. His passing leaves a tremendous void in the program of our school, and in the minds and hearts of its faculty, staff, and students. Dr. Swartz's premature death was a tragic occurrence and represents a huge loss for his family and friends."

C. C. K.

The last photo of Walt was made on North University Avenue in December 1975. Walt's 30-year professional career was spent only a short distance from this location—his private dental office and the School of Dentistry are on North University Avenue.