

“Dr. Seymore Pearley – Clay County’s First African American Dentist”

By Haley Vanderstel



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Dr. Seymore Pearley, the first African American dentist in Independence, Missouri, was born to Maggie and Henry Pearley on August 14, 1900 in Liberty, Missouri. He grew up in a large family, the third of nine children. Pearley graduated from the all-black Garrison school in Liberty, then moved on to attend the Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, where he played football from 1918-1920. Dr. Pearley then attended Howard University Medical School in Washington, D.C., and Meharry Medical College in Nashville, and received a degree in dentistry.

In 1928, Dr. Pearley set up his dental practice at 136 East Farmer in Independence in a small four-roomed house. As a patient entered the office, strains of the most popular current songs coming from the radio greeted him. He could peruse a magazine while Dr. Pearley went into one of the two back rooms, which served for patient records storage, to pull the patient’s chart: “All right, come on in,” he’d call, and the patient would proceed into the room which housed the dentist’s chair and medicine chest. Dr. Pearley would perform whatever operation was necessary—fillings, crowns, caps, lancing—all on his own, with no nurses or assistants. Dr. Pearley was not limited to the confines of his office—if a patient could not come to him for any reason, Dr. Pearley would go to the patient.

All dentists receive basic medical training before they begin to learn their specialty. At the time when Dr. Pearley began practicing, people of color were not allowed to visit white doctors (or dentists). Since Dr. Pearley was the only medically trained African American in the area, he would visit the rural counties around Independence to see if anyone needed medical care. According to Bill Curtis, Dr. Pearley’s close friend, “He provided an absolutely essential job when no one else had done it before.”

The Great Depression began the year after Dr. Pearley set up his practice. Throughout the Depression, he did not receive any money for his services; instead he was paid with chickens, eggs, or vegetables from his patient’s farms. This type of payment obviously did not improve his own financial status, but he was more concerned with the well-being of the community than with his personal gain. After the Depression, he was paid less than white dentists for the same services, simply because he was African American, but he continued to serve without complaint. He had patients of both races who would come to his office, although the majority of them were African American.

Dr. Pearley married Iona Doris Williams on December 21, 1935. The couple had two daughters, Doris and Mary, and one son, Henry. Iona served on the Mayor’s Advisory Committee, and was a schoolteacher at the all-black Hiram Young School, which was the highest working position that an African American woman could hold during the Great Depression.

Being a public servant and contributing to society were important to Dr. Pearley; therefore, he dedicated himself to serving the Independence community during his lifetime. Not only did he fulfill the community's dental and medical needs, but he founded the first African American Boy Scout troop in Independence – Troop 291, and was a member of the Board of Trustees at St. Paul A.M.E. Church. He coached boy's basketball at the Hiram Young School, and performed dental exams for the school children through the Independence Health Department. His son, Henry, said that his father was community and family oriented. He remembers one birthday, when he was attending a Boy Scout camp in Osceola, Missouri, that his father missed the bus to the camp. Dr. Pearley *walked* the entire distance (almost two hundred miles from Independence) to bring him a birthday cake. To quote Henry, "That was my dad."

His daughters, Mary Williams and Doris Harrison, also have fond memories of their father. Mary remembers that "he walked everywhere he went, and even Harry Truman knew my dad, and they would stop and talk." She once met President Truman while on a walk with her father. Doris recalls that every Christmas, her father made sure they had a Christmas tree: "We may not have gotten it until Christmas Eve, but we always had one." It was a special tradition for the family.

Dr. Pearley was an excellent dentist as well as an excellent community member and father; he received two Presidential awards from Meharry Medical College in recognition of his exceptional work, as well as the Governor's Award for Community Work as a dentist. In addition, he was honored with an award from the Concerned Citizens of Independence, and with a football award from the Lincoln Institute. He was a member of the American Dental Association, and a member of the Midwestern State Dental Association.

In 1978, Dr. Pearley retired after fifty years of practicing dentistry and serving the Independence community. He passed away five years later, on August 28, 1983, at the age of 83, and his family buried him in the Woodlawn Cemetery in Independence.

Dr. Pearley's children have followed his traditions and values. They are all involved in church; Henry has worked with the Boy Scouts, Mary educates individuals on becoming organ donors, and Doris worked many years with the Kiwanis organization.

Dr. Pearley's dedication to service is an example for us all. His love for his family, his love for his community, and his willingness to serve are all the qualities that made him a truly great man.

Works Cited

- Curtis, William. Telephone interview, Feb. 2007.
- Harrison, Doris. Telephone interview, Feb. 2007.
- Pearley, Henry. Telephone interview, Feb. 2007.
- Williams, Mary. Telephone interview, Feb. 2007.

