

1970s Optometry In Lancaster County

By Dr. Harry Wertsch

I started practicing optometry in Sept. 1971. Having spent my last "free" summer working as a mate on a party fishing boat in Ocean City, New Jersey, I was finally persuaded into coming home to join my father, Dr. Chester L. Wertsch, in his optometric practice in my hometown of Lititz, Pa.

My father started his practice in a small room in the back of his father's jewelry store on Main St., in Lititz in 1931. My grandfather, Harry R. Wertsch, was a jeweler since the early 1900's, and was probably instrumental in guiding my father into the optometric profession, since that's where it historically originated.

My father also worked at Appel & Weber's Jewelry store in Lancaster. I recall him mentioning Mr. Perth Appel as an owner. Later, my father decided to start his own independent practice and bought a property at 126 E. Main St, Lititz, which was near the Moravian Church. The family lived in the rear of the building with an apartment upstairs. He practiced there for many years, then purchased a historical building at 65 E. Main St. in 1964, which is where the practice remains to this day.

My younger sister, Dr. Karen Wertsch Malleus, joined the practice in 1981 when we became Wertsch Vision Associates. All three of us graduated from Pennsylvania College of Optometry in Philadelphia.

I was president of the Lancaster County Optometric Society for most of the 1970's, and was fortunate enough to be introduced to most of the current practicing optometrists by my father. They included: Dr. John Forrey and his son Dr. John "Jack" Forrey Jr., Dr. Albert "Buddy" Wascou, Dr. David Ganse, Dr. Mike Rollo, Dr. John "Jack" Stauffer (Millersville), Dr. Melvin Neff (Ephrata - my cousin!), Dr. Robert Jones (Ephrata), Dr. Louis Himes, Dr. Robert Brubaker (Lititz), Dr. Charles "Cappy" Hammaker, and Dr. Melvin Brubaker,

Lancaster County was certainly supported by the Ophthalmological doctors. I recall my father mentioning Dr. Fulton. I believe his practice was acquired by Dr. Paul Ripple, who was a delightful and colorful gentleman, but politically, not supportive of optometry. I enjoyed sitting with him at professional gatherings. He was quite the storyteller and just passed away at nearly 100 yrs. of age. Dr. John Bowman was quite prominent and was probably the most influential person to recognize the benefits of our two professions working together for the benefit of the patients. His colleague, Dr. Ken Nase (Reading), was also very supportive and we started to have numerous joint seminars, which were both educational and enjoyable.

Representing the opticians in Lancaster County at that time, there was no one more prominent than Berk's Optical Company. Their main lab was on East Orange St. and they also

had a satellite office on S. Duke St. In my early years, the lab was managed by Mr. “Jake” Allison who was a good friend of my father’s. I’m told he was a rather strict manager. After his death, the company was managed by Mr. Chet Schoenberger, who was a delightful gentleman and was very well known in Lancaster County. He was very active with the East Petersburg Fire Dept. His company helped me purchase my ophthalmic equipment and allowed me to pay it off at zero interest! After Berk’s Optical closed, he became an employee at our office! He just recently passed away.

As president of the Lancaster County Optometric Association, I recall being nicknamed “Banquet Harry” because we celebrated a number of optometrists achieving 50 years of practicing in Lancaster County. Those doctors included my father, Dr. Chester L. Wertsch, Dr. Louis Himes, and Dr. John Forrey. We would organize a recognition banquet, contact our local congressman for a Declaration of Achievement of Service to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and have a photographer from the Lancaster Newspaper to memorialize the event.

I retired in 2013, having practiced for 42 years in Lititz. I cherish the opportunity I had to practice with my father! He guided me and introduced me to all the “old timers” who were practicing for more years than I was destined to do. I have seen optometry evolve into a much more medically integrated health care profession. The collaboration of eye care professional practices in Lancaster County in recent years has been a delight to see. It certainly has had tremendous benefits to the patients of Lancaster County.

Dr. Harry Wertsch