

Oh, My Aching Teeth, Gums, Bottom . . .

An Untypical Visit To The Dentist

By RICH NICHOLS

This was not the typical visit to the dentist. It lasted 16 hours, spanned two days and, untypically, was free.

I had volunteered as a patient for my neighbor who was taking his State Board Dental examinations.

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an exacting four-day practical and written test given annually by the North Carolina State Board of Dental Examiners. All dentists seeking to practice in this State must pass. I was the practical part of the exam.

I arrived at the University Dental School's clinic at 8 a.m. The huge room, filled with a tangle of dentist's chairs, was already buzzing with the low voices of aspiring, perspiring dentists.

They weaved through the jungle of chairs and at the head of the band were two men dressed in white—the examiners.

Before beginning to operate, the dentists had their patients' teeth and X-rays checked over. Sixty-four dentists waited for 64 patients to get the okay from two examiners.

After the check, my neighbor, normally a jovial fellow, fidgeted with his drill. No quips, no slap on the back.

I settled back in the chair. Then the paper bib, and the "foot-long" novocain needle. My neighbor, whose name had been converted to a number pinned on his smock, began to drill just as the cold numbness of the novocain seeped into my gums.

Usually a dentist will drill out the decay in one or two efforts, but after just completing four years of dental school and only the Army waiting if there's a mistake, the dentist grinds away bit by little bit.

For two hours I sat, jaws locked. When the excavation was nearly completed, my friend called on of the men in white.

"Okie doke," was all the examiner said after the check.

After going downstairs to extract two teeth from another patient for the surgery part of the test, my neighbor returned. This time he propped my mouth open with a rubber mask-type gadget. Again

the drill whistled and again the pick picked and the mirror mirrored what must have been a chasm.

A little wad of silver alloy plugged the cavity. And it was time for a tomato soup lunch.

After lunch, to my friend's dismay, he found the tooth to be prepared for a gold inlay was much more decayed than the X-rays revealed. He would drill a little, wipe the sweat from his forehead, wash his hands and go in for another try.

By now I had endured three shots of novocain. Not only were my gums dead, but so was my nose and part of my ear. My mouth ached with a throbbing dullness.

My neighbor informed me the decay was deep, almost to the pulp of the tooth where the tiny blood vessels and nerves are. If he drilled into that, he said, it might kill the tooth and things would get a lot tougher.

"Look, Rick," he said, "I'll buy you a steak dinner when this thing is over." Then it was open wide again.

I was doozy and half-asleep and certainly wasn't looking forward to chewing anything for a while.

The second cavity finally drilled, it was time to take a rubber impression.

The work was over around 5 p.m., but only for the day. Instead of a gold inlay, I was

sporting a sore mouth, a headache and a tooth stuffed with cotton and cement.

When I came back two days later, my neighbor's eyes were red (he'd been through two days of extensive written tests) and he hadn't eaten. I hoped that the patron saint of dentistry would steady his hand.

The rubber impression of my tooth had been turned into a plaster impression, then filled with wax and finally gold. On what looked like a tooth pick he held a little replica of my tooth with a rough gold inlay nestled in the crevice.

Out came the temporary filling. In went the gold, and out that came too after a trial fitting. Then both of us (my neighbor and I) went into the lab. With a drill, he buffed the inlay until it sparkled. It felt strange to hear the drill and not feel it in my mouth.

"Waiting . . . waiting," is the rest of the story.

After cementing the gold inlay into my tooth, my neighbor checked with the men in white. We were something like 30th on the list, since many of the other dentists had finished at about the same time.

Numb-jawed, I went downstairs for a pimento cheese sandwich prepared by the "Dental Dames," wives of dental students, who seemed to be taking this whole thing in stride.

My neighbor, after lunch, began to pep up a little. After taking several X-rays, he sort of plodded around the room exchanging "rah team" looks with his cohorts. I was beginning to detest dentists even more than is jokingly expected, although I had to admit that my friend had done a very professional job. Besides, now my seat, in addition to my gums, jaw, nose and ear, was getting achy.

One by one the dentists packed their instrument chests and trudged toward the door, hail-and-farewelling their buddies.

Three newspapers and a Life magazine later, the examiner visited my chair. He stared at the X-rays of my repaired tooth . . . picked . . . slipped a string between the tooth and gum . . . adjusted the light . . . "Okie doke," he said.

And that was the State Boards.

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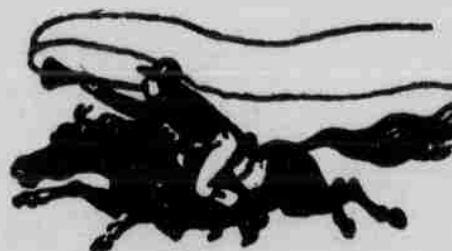
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