

# Obituary for Arthur Martin Skeffington

March 3, 1976

Dr. A. M. Skeffington, “the father of modern optometry,” “the one who established THE IMPORTANCE OF VISION to children,” died at 11:10 PM on March 3, 1976. One day some person will take on the monumental task of writing something aimed at coming close to a full biography of this great man. There will be an attempt at enumerating and evaluating the many “firsts” in functional, behavioral optometry which he introduced. Such a biography will be a voluminous one, for the writings, contributions and achievements of one of the profession’s most remarkable personages are legion. It will be the fascinating story of the man who, more than any other single person, has been responsible for the quality of today’s vision care and welfare of the American people. It will be the exciting story of how, from the early 1920’s, he never ceased in his crusade for imposing upon optometry the sense of urgency in the constant upgrading of the practice patterns of the profession.

The Skeffington story is to great extent the history of optometry from its infancy. In fact, optometry was little more than a “trade” when he established practice in Kearney, Nebraska, in 1916, the year following his graduation from Needles Institute of Optometry. However, he refused to accept such a label of the profession in which he saw a means for benefitting mankind. And, to say the least, he was disillusioned by the variance between the theory and practice of optometry of those days. He was frustrated and dismayed by the lack of information then available within the profession...information of the sort that he himself was gathering through phenomena seen in his own practice. From those phenomena he formulated his theory and concepts that were to revolutionize the field of vision care and open new opportunities for men, women, and children.

By his overwhelming desire to help his fellow man, by his never-ending quest for knowledge, by his continual delving into research in vision, by his natural intellectual curiosity, by his constant synthesizing of information from other disciplines, by his dogged determination, he evolved the means for providing knowledge for guiding visual development in the infant and child of pre-school age; preventive and protective care of child and youth; ease from the stresses of occupational and cultural visual demands; and an extension of the visual abilities of the again. All of this will be recorded and become optometry’s history for all time.

There is little likelihood that there is any person reading this “In Memoriam” who does not have his or her own special and very personal memory of “Skeff,” as he was affectionately known to co-workers, colleagues and friend throughout optometry and other disciplines as well. In the days to follow, these memories will be very much with each of us. There will be the memory of the first meeting with him – the firm handclasp in greeting and his vibrant, “Welcome to the fellowship.” It could be the memory of an optometrist hearing him lecture for the first time and the realization that Skeff’s approach took the field of service from the hum-drum to one with a dynamic potential. For some there will be the memory of his encouragement when encouragement was needed. For others it will be the very personal handwritten letter on an occasion important to the individual and/or a member of his or her family. For all there will be the memory of the golden voice, eloquent and at times taking on an almost evangelistic quality as the excitement of a theme mounted.

So many, many memories. What words could possibly be found that would convey the gratitude and tributes all have for a beloved teacher, counselor and friend? Honors bestowed upon him have been legion. Each has conveyed its own very special way of saying “thank you” to the man who gave so much of himself. To list them here would be redundant. What “In Memoriam” then?

The answer came with receipt of a copy of Skeff’s last Congress presentation. While the progressing illness had made speech at first difficult and then impossible, his mind remained alert as ever up until the very end. His strong will and determination to keep going never faltered, and even though almost superhuman effort was required, he continued to fill his role as coordinator of Congresses by typing out his presentation and having it read by a colleague at the Congress. He continued his contributions to each meeting by means of written notes. What could be more appropriate, more treasured by his students throughout the Program than excerpts from what was to become his farewell?

He was obviously aware as he wrote the message that not much time was left to him. Just as obvious was his wish to make it clear that his passing should not mark the end of all that he had worked for in optometry but must be the beginning of even greater progress in the fields in which he pioneered and to which he contributed so much. He wanted his contributions to be thought of as simply the foundation upon which the future of optometry will continue to expand. He reminded how much there remains to be learned, how much is yet to be done before optometry reaches full scope

The following passages are excerpts taken from the presentation, the complete text of which will, at a future time, be released.

It was my great good fortune to be reared in the King James' version of the New Testament. Because of this, I am tempted to repeat the words of an ancient in the Temple at Jerusalem when he said, "Lord, now lettest this, thy servant, depart in peace according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people..."

I revert to our own subject, which might be stated as "The role of optometry". Optometry is unique. No one know from where it operates, nor what its operation actually is. There is no actual discernable physiological physical part, like a lung, or an ear, or tongue. Yet we know the total organism is involved.

At every level of human knowledge postulates have been formulated and premises laid down which, at that time, were incapable of scientific testing. The realm into which science is proving at present, with all the tools at its disposal, gives us courage to hunt even further. At the beginning of this century, our concepts seemed to provide a comforting solidity. Today, the scientific world has advanced so rapidly that men, in all professions, are forced to reconsider their facts and regroup their philosophies. MOST IMPORTANTLY, this is true of the performance of Man himself.

There is no time now to bring to light the wondrous developments that have made the last half-century notable. We have been fortunate to participate in the ongoing accumulation of various points of view that have made possible this wonderful Congress.

What is optometry? How do we state the corpus of its discipline? Expressing my own point of view, optometry is the discipline of the investigation, the development, and the enhancement of all the processes of the organism having to do with the utilization of a band of radiant energy to obtain and apply it in experience.

Optometry is the official discipline of VISION. It is the fresh, exciting development of science. Optometry now has the courage to strike out. Let none of us fear to venture into this admirable profession. The excitement of it

is contagious; the opportunities of it are challenging; and the rewards of it are unlimited.

If we will follow in the paths of intellectual empire, those are the metes and bounds that delineate the corpus of the discipline of optometry, which is the official discipline of vision. On that prerequisite postulate, that venturesome empire of professional adventure, comes the shocking and startling realization that all the other biological disciplines are but the handmaidens of VISION and hence, in the remedial phases, are but the handmaidens of optometry. To reiterate, again and yet again, optometry is the official discipline of VISION, the chief and the greatest of all the sciences dealing with Man, to which all other sciences contribute. For as they grow, inevitably the dominant process grows faster. Each day, each patient makes it possible to contribute to our profession. Throw wide open the doors to the development of new eras in vision, in opTOMetry.

I look at all of you, the work you are doing, your methods, the wealth of materials you are making for our wonderful profession. Perhaps some time in the future I will be sitting on a “pink cloud” and shall proudly tell my friends there – “That is one of my boys, or girls, as the case may be.”

Skeff and his beloved Mary Jane had happiness and the blessed privilege of observing their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary just two weeks before his death. To her goes heartfelt sympathy.