

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Gerald Berenson

COLLECTION: 4700.2855

IDENTIFICATION: Cardiologist and researcher

INTERVIEWER: Trenton James

SERIES: Louisiana State Medical Society

INTERVIEW DATE: May 7, 2018

FOCUS DATES: 1940s-2018

ABSTRACT:

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Introduction; born in Bogalusa in 1922; father emigrated from Poland when he was seventeen; he and his brothers moved from New Orleans to Bogalusa for work because it had one of the world's biggest sawmills; father opened a clothing store in Bogalusa; mother's name was Eva Singerman; parents moved to Bogalusa; Berenson started working in his uncle's theater when he was about nine years old; had two older sisters; one sister married Saul Stone, a prominent New Orleans lawyer; other sister married a Haspel from the New Orleans clothing business; three of his nephews were Harvard-educated lawyers; after graduating from Bogalusa High School in 1939, he entered Tulane University without any idea what he would do as a career; "I was sixteen and joined a fraternity. Most of the guys were going into medical school so I just went with them. I had no intention of being a doctor."; at the time, Berenson didn't care about being Jewish but his brother-in-law insisted he join the Jewish fraternity Zeta Beta Tau; briefly participated in sculling team; mentions some high school friends; coursework at Tulane; "got into the second year of medical school, I began to like it, so I just stayed with it."; never made plans, just took opportunities; volunteered to serve in navy during World War Two; one week after finishing medical school, went to work at naval hospital in Chicago as an intern; then sent to Camp Lejeune; there he met Seymour Eisenberg, who became his lifelong friend; his rank was lieutenant JG (junior grade); working at Great Lakes US Naval Hospital in Chicago, where it was too cold for him; his internship lacked variety, since most of the patients were 18 and 19-year-old males; at Camp Lejeune, he was in charge of children's health; worked as a ship doctor on the US Geodetic Survey Ship; while in the military, he took Dr. George Burch's electrocardiograph course at Tulane; under Burch, Berenson studied sweat; got a fellowship to work at University of Chicago Department of Pediatrics on rheumatic fever from 1952-1954; University of Chicago was much more bigtime than Tulane or LSU; left the navy in 1948; the money he saved in the service helped him pay for medical training; in New Orleans, shared an apartment with other medical workers; mentions his bosses at University of Chicago, including

biochemist Saul Roseman; “Saul was a wonderful person. He taught me more biochemistry and worked Saturday nights all night. It didn’t matter. We just worked hard. I was enjoying the heck out of it.”; learned glassblowing at University of Chicago; learning to be a cardiologist; studying auscultation, or heart sounds; after Chicago, Berenson got a research job at LSU where he set up his own laboratory; working at Charity during segregation; made rounds three times a week of general medicine patients in Charity; helped start the coronary care unit at Charity in early 1960s; it took about two years to get the coronary care unit up and running, evolving out of intensive care unit; primitive equipment in his early research, including a tackle box hooked up to a heating element as a hot water bath; Doctors Seabury and Dascomb were researching infectious disease; Berenson went into cardiology and was head of cardiology for sixteen years; recruited only a couple of people to work in cardiology; mentions some doctors he worked with, Harry Seese and George Martinez; feeling that some other doctors resented his time doing research; met his wife Joan Seidenbach and married her in 1951; kept their dating secret from unscrupulous friends who would try to steal her away; they had four children, including one who became an internal medicine doctor; whereabouts of other children; grandchildren and great-grandchildren; researched how a hot and humid climate affected the heart; researched rheumatic fever and La Rabida Children’s Hospital in Chicago; at Charity Hospital in New Orleans, it wasn’t uncommon to see 30 patients in one morning; much lighter patient load at University of Chicago; early days of dialysis; knew Dr. Albert Hyman; Berenson researched mucopolysaccharides, which later became known as proteoglycans; in the 1960s, used to get umbilical cords from delivery ward to isolate hyaluronic acid for his research; Berenson was also interested in kidney disease and atherosclerosis; mentions his friend Dr. Ike Muslow in Shreveport, with whom he loved to argue; worked closely with biochemist Bandaru Krishnamurthy for more than forty years; attracted other Indian biochemists who worked with him; did inflammatory studies on rats and serum sickness studies on rabbits; switched from hospital-based to community-based research and moved to Bogalusa forty-something years ago; Bogalusa’s biracial population was good for studying heart disease; “Blacks have a lot of diabetes and hypertension, whites have coronary artery disease, particularly white men.”; always had students working with him on heart study; mentions a student who almost gave up because he fainted on rounds—later became a surgeon; started Bogalusa Heart Study because he wanted to do a clinical relationship to other doctors’ study of atherosclerosis in youth; explains the methods of his longitudinal and cross-sectional survey, starting with studying youth in Bogalusa; examined pulse curves related to blood pressure; analyzing what was happening in blood vessels; currently is suing somebody who plagiarized his work; Berenson started his own institutional review board to let people know what he was doing in the community; conducting study on cord blood and cholesterol in Bogalusa; screening kids for cholesterol levels at 14 schools around Bogalusa; another researcher who used his NIH money after he was blocked from implementing a grant; worked at Bogalusa for 37 years, at Tulane for 24 years; somebody brought a HIPAA [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act] complaint against Berenson; “It’s killing my developing a team to do research here at LSU.”; autopsy study on more than 100 patients already analyzed for risk factors; “You do risk factors, you know the vascular changes are occurring, so you’d like to put them together.”; during a large children’s study in Bogalusa, he sometimes detected other critical conditions; taking multiple blood pressure readings on subjects; recalls the Ku Klux Klan’s last lynching near Bogalusa in the 1950s; prepared for the Bogalusa studies in nearby Franklinton; describes his farm near Poplarville, MS, where he raised shorthorn cows and then Beefmasters; genetic marker testing and embryo transplants in cows; marbling in

beef; through his farm's partnership with the LSU Ag Center, spent a week studying beef cattle in Indonesia; wrote articles on beef cattle for an agricultural journal; has added 2,000 acres to the original 1,000-acre farm his father bought; used to play golf, and exercise and swim at the New Orleans Athletic Club; many of his vacations centered on medical meetings; none of his children are interested in farming; mentions his son-in-law, a urologist and avid birdwatcher who lives in Houston; Berenson did a little timber business; compares racial differences in the medical studies in Framingham, Massachusetts and Bogalusa; racial differences related to disease are both environmental and genetic; more about the woman who has stolen the Bogalusa Heart Study away from him; exorbitant legal fees that Tulane will have to pay from the lawsuit Berenson brought against this woman; Tulane has blocked him from using data: "They blocked me on getting the data, blocked me from doing the research, plagiarizing our data, publishing data I collected."; importance of getting multiple blood pressure readings to ensure accuracy; developing a more accurate method of measuring cholesterol; work with researchers in Finland; importance of racial contrast in Bogalusa study; Jihua Xu says he heard of Berenson's work on preventive cardiology when he was still in China; Berenson is interested in "primordial prevention," or starting prevention in childhood before people develop risk factors for cardiovascular disease; Health Smart, a prevention program for schoolchildren grades K-6 in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward; teaching sixth graders about ethics and morals; cardiologist Dr. Jihua Xu introduces himself; Xu has run Berenson's laboratory since 1990; Xu and James discuss possibly adding more audio files to this interview; Berenson mentions an article in the *Advocate* about Tulane withholding his data; Berenson was one of James' medical school professors: "I was a damn hard professor. I meant to be hard, because I wanted to train good doctors."; importance of humility and compassion; hated grading students; taught two to three thousand doctors; finding heart disease while screening marines at Camp Lejeune; Dr. Bazzano keeps publishing articles using Berenson's data without including his name; breeding Irish setters; explains a photo of his staff in front of a house trailer that they used to examine students.

TAPE: 1 (T4858)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 2 hours, 13 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 85

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: 25 digital photos

OTHER MATERIALS: Interviewee Notes; Correspondence; 1 Article; Journal Clippings; Obituary

RESTRICTIONS: None