

A Will of Iron: Dr. M. L. Peter and the Oklahoma City-County Health Department



*By Stephen B. Peter**

On September 30, 1969, the day following the death of Dr. M. L. Peter, longtime director of the Oklahoma City-County Health Department, the *Oklahoma City Times* characterized his public service:

A mild mannered, soft spoken man, Dr. Peter directed the health department with a will of iron since he was appointed to the post in 1954. . . . During his 15 year stint as the chief enforcer of the community's health laws, Dr. Peter collided head-on with anyone he thought was trying to undermine good health procedures.¹

Maurice Lyle Peter Sr. was born on February 19, 1908, in Oxford, Kansas, the son of Jesse (Jess) Simon and Grace Maud (Smith) Peter.²

His father, sequentially, was a teacher, public school superintendent, and small town retailer. He wrapped up his work years as executive secretary of the Oklahoma Council of Christian Education, a statewide, nondenominational training program for Sunday school teachers. Maurice's mother clerked in her husband's dry goods store in Pawnee, Oklahoma, and later served as coordinator of children's services for the Council of Christian Education.³

The family moved to Pawnee in 1910, where Maurice completed his elementary school years, and then to Oklahoma City in 1922, when Jess became council secretary. There, Maurice attended Webster Junior High School and Central High School, from which he graduated in 1926.⁴

In 1925 Jess Peter was diagnosed with cancer, from which he later recovered. His high-school-aged son spent a lot of time at his bedside while he was hospitalized, observing the operations of a health care facility. This experience opened his eyes to the world of medicine and he was hooked.⁵

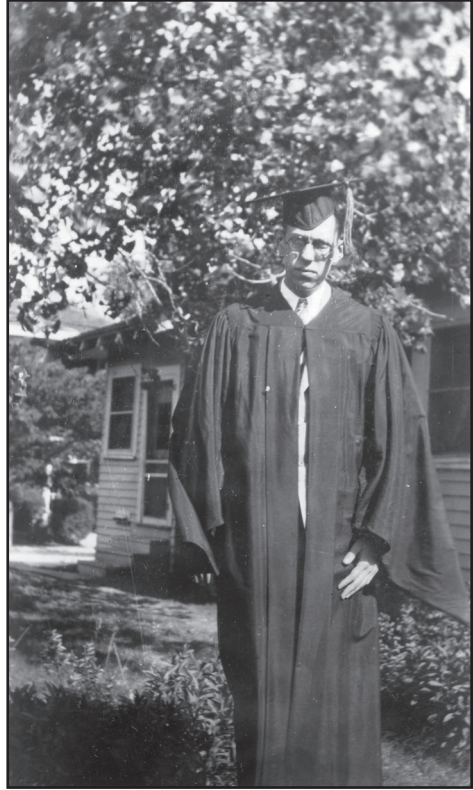
Maurice applied for admission to the University of Oklahoma's (OU) College of Medicine at the end of his second year of undergraduate studies at Oklahoma City University. At that time, it was expected that OU would soon tighten admission requirements and limit consideration of medical school candidates only to people with undergraduate degrees. Therefore, if Maurice was not admitted in 1928, he might have to wait another two years to be considered again. The requirement was, indeed, soon thereafter imposed. Fortunately, Maurice was approved for acceptance to the OU College of Medicine and was admitted for classes in the fall of 1928.⁶

In El Reno, Oklahoma, on July 31, 1930, he married Claribel Elizabeth Oldfield, the daughter of former district judge and Mrs. Edward Dewes Oldfield of Oklahoma City.⁷ Though both had been students at Oklahoma City University, they met one morning during Sunday school at Oklahoma City's First Methodist Church. So enthralled was he with her that he is said to have told his parents, upon returning home from church, that he had just met his future wife. Three sons were born to their union.⁸

He graduated from the OU College of Medicine in 1933. In 1934, after completing a one-year internship at Saint Francis Hospital in Colorado Springs, Colorado, he established a general practice in Blackwell, Oklahoma. His was a typical Depression-era, small town practice with fees often coming in the form of chickens or a basket of fruit. His fee for treating a boy's broken arm in 1935 was a summer's lawn mowing service, courtesy of the patient's brother.

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M. L. Peter as a young graduate of the OU College of Medicine, 1933 (photograph courtesy of the author).



In those days, every Oklahoma county had a superintendent of public health “appointed by the State Commissioner of Health . . . who shall be a regular practicing physician, of good standing and of good moral character, and a resident of the county for which he was appointed.”⁹ Appointed for terms of two years, a superintendent was required whether the county had an organized public health department or not. The statutory duties of the superintendent were limited:

It is the duty of the county superintendent of public health to enforce the rules and regulations of the state board of health in the prevention of the spread of all infections, contagious or epidemic diseases in his county; to investigate and examine into the causes thereof, and to recommend rules and regulations to remedy the same, and to do such other things in carrying out the purpose and object of its creation, as the state board of health may lawfully require of him.¹⁰

In return for this service, a superintendent was to be paid a stipend at the rate of \$5 per day on the days when he or she worked, but no more than a maximum amount annually, depending upon the population size of the county.¹¹ For example, in the early 1930s the maximum allowable salary in a county with a population less than ten thousand was \$200 per year; counties between twenty thousand and forty thousand paid a maximum of \$500 per year; counties boasting more than fifty thousand people could pay superintendents a maximum of \$1,500 per year.

In 1935, when medical care was often bartered for chickens and lawn mowing services, stipends came in handy. Therefore, when Dr. Peter was asked to serve part time as Kay County's superintendent of health, the young physician with a growing family jumped at the chance. And, since Kay County boasted a population of 50,186 people in 1930, there was the outside potential for as much as \$1,500 per year in additional revenue—no small sum in those days.¹² Of course, that assumed three hundred days of work at \$5 per day, which was not likely with a private practice to maintain. In any event, with the decision to accept this responsibility, Dr. Peter unknowingly launched a thirty-four-year career in public health.

Dr. Peter soon found himself involved in an effort to organize a permanent health department for the county. And, as his involvement in this effort grew, so grew his interest in public health. In 1937 he left private practice behind and became the first full-time medical director of the new Kay County Health Department, which opened for business on August 16 with a staff of four.¹³

A month later, on September 19, 1937, the *Blackwell Sunday Tribune* ran a feature story on the new department and, through this story, Dr. Peter announced the agency's five primary purposes: "(1). Public Health Education; (2). Control of Communicable Diseases; (3). Sanitation of milk and water supplies and proper disposal of sewage and exercise [*sic*], both urban and rural; (4). Maternity and Infancy service; (5). School hygiene programs."¹⁴ Often during his career, Dr. Peter would repeat this practice of publicly defining specific program goals for the departments he managed.

The *Tribune* article also noted that "one of the first objectives of the new unit is to emphasize on the minds of the public that the health unit is not a substitute for the family physician. The unit works in the interest of the entire community."¹⁵

After getting the Kay County Health Department established and stabilized, Dr. Peter and his family moved to Stillwater, where he became director of the Payne County Health Department from 1939 to

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The Vanderbilt University postgraduate public health class of 1939. M. L. Peter is pictured on the top row, far right (photograph courtesy of the author).

1941. Before taking on this new position, he resided briefly in Nashville, Tennessee, while completing a three-month postgraduate course in public health at Vanderbilt University's College of Medicine.

During his tour of duty in Stillwater, Dr. Peter delivered to Payne County residents the Child Health Conference Program to help young mothers keep their babies healthy. Six conferences were scheduled each month in Perkins, Yale, Glencoe, Stillwater, and Cushing. The conferences, handled by Dr. Peter and a public health nurse, appear similar to what later became known as the Well Baby Clinic. "The point is, that some of those babies wouldn't now be in good health if they hadn't been watched during the past year, if the mother hadn't found out what to do," Dr. Peter observed about the program.¹⁶

Around 1940, State Commissioner of Health Grady Matthews began urging physicians working in Oklahoma's public health program to pursue graduate studies. He realistically saw this as a way to improve the overall quality of public health in Oklahoma. Dr. Peter was one of those motivated by Dr. Matthews. In September 1941 he moved



Dr. Peter on the porch of his family's apartment in Baltimore, Maryland, while pursuing his master's degree in public health (MPH) at Johns Hopkins University (photograph courtesy of the author).

with his family to Baltimore, Maryland, and the following spring he received a master's degree in public health (MPH) from Johns Hopkins University. After his graduation in 1942, he returned to Oklahoma and was soon named director of the Okmulgee County Health Department. In 1950 he accepted the additional challenge of running a second department part time in neighboring Okfuskee County.

In 1947 the Okmulgee County Health Department faced a funding crisis when the County Excise Board threatened to shut the program down, according to reports in a local newspaper. The Cities of Okmulgee, Henryetta, and Morris, in a feud with the county commissioners, all agreed to relinquish a quarter-mill of their ad valorem tax levies to support the department's ongoing operations. The school districts in each of these communities agreed to do so as well, according to the news accounts. The Okmulgee and Henryetta City Councils voted their support despite the aggressive opposition of those two communities' mayors. The Okmulgee County Department of Health survived a near death and has been in continuous operation ever since.¹⁷

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The years in Okmulgee were busy ones, professionally, for the young physician. In 1949 he served as president of the Oklahoma Public Health Association.¹⁸ On November 3, 1950, the American Board of Preventive Medicine and Public Health certified Dr. Peter as a specialist.¹⁹ And, on September 18, 1954, just days after he was tapped for his new position in Oklahoma City, he was issued Certificate #25, designating him as a fellow of the newly organized American College of Preventive Medicine.²⁰

Also, while he was in Okmulgee Dr. Peter developed an interest in the concept of a merit system for public employees, at least for those in the Oklahoma public health system. He developed a relationship with Roy A. Dillon, supervisor of the Oklahoma Personnel Board in Oklahoma City, and they teamed with others to promote the idea. In a September 14, 1954, letter to Dr. Peter, Dillon noted, "Personally, I have always been very happy about how you have boosted for a good merit system for State health employees. I am sure what little success we have had in establishing the merit system for health workers has been due to your influence."²¹ It would be several years before legislation was passed creating a mature merit system for Oklahoma employees.

Near the end of his period of service in Okmulgee, Dr. Peter assisted the outpatient clinics of the University of Oklahoma's School of Medicine and University Hospitals with the establishment of a satellite Comprehensive Care Program in Okmulgee, and offered suggestions that apparently helped the university establish similar programs elsewhere in the state.²²

In a letter noting his imminent departure from Okmulgee to assume his new position in Oklahoma City, Dr. John P. Colmore, director of outpatient clinics, congratulated Dr. Peter on his selection for the Oklahoma City slot and added that "we are very sorry to see you leave Okmulgee because of the tremendous help you have been to us in establishing the Comprehensive Care Program not only there but in ironing out many of the rough spots in its entirety."²³ Dr. Peter would continue to maintain a relationship with the OU College of Medicine in the years ahead. Soon after moving to Oklahoma City, he was named a clinical instructor for both the Schools of Medicine and Health. He was later elevated to assistant clinical professor then to associate clinical professor in preventive medicine just before his 1969 death.²⁴

In 1961 Dr. Peter served on a faculty search committee for the College of Medicine, seeking a chairman for the Department of Urology. Among others, Dr. Peter interviewed candidate Dr. William Parry, who was later selected for the position. Years later, following his retirement, Dr. Parry expressed the feeling that his interview with Dr. Peter



Dr. Peter when he was director of the Okmulgee County Health Department, c. 1950 (photograph courtesy of the author).

had been very positive. While serving on the faculty of the University of New York at Syracuse as its only full-time urologist, Dr. Parry had acted as a consultant to the local county nursing home. He was asked to evaluate and advise the home on the problem of patient incontinence and developed some useful recommendations for them.²⁵

Nursing home patient incontinence and the infections often connected with it were also of concern to Dr. Peter as a public health administrator. Therefore, during the interview he and Dr. Parry discussed the issue. Later, after joining the OU faculty as chairman of the Department of Urology, Dr. Parry assisted Dr. Peter and others in developing solutions for the problem in Oklahoma County.²⁶

On September 28, 1954, Dr. Peter took office as director of the Oklahoma City-County Health Department. The combined health department arrangement had recently been organized under the leadership of longtime City Health Director Walter H. Miles, who had recently passed away. Dr. Miles briefly served as the first director of the new agency in 1954. Shortly after the merger, however, he became ill and announced plans to retire. He passed away just as Dr. Peter was being selected as his successor. Dr. Miles had been with the Oklahoma City Health Department since 1919 and, during this period, had also

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occasionally served as interim Oklahoma County superintendent of health when that position became vacant from time to time.²⁷

In mid-December, soon after settling into his new position, Dr. Peter announced his departmental goals: additional funding (he contended that the per capita public health funding for the department was well below national averages); additional staffing; greater emphasis on health education and immunization levels; a new departmental records system; and centralization of services in a new building.²⁸ All his goals were attained except the last. A new building for the department was approved and funded, but not built before his death in 1969.

When he assumed his new job in Oklahoma City, Dr. Peter was ready to lead the state's largest and most innovative local health department. He had long-since established a reputation among his peers as a professional of high integrity and intelligence with a comprehensive understanding of his field. He was well organized, self-disciplined, clear, and focused on his objectives and committed to his professional beliefs.

In May 1955, not long after his arrival, the new department was challenged. Veteran Oklahoma City Manager Bill Gill expressed concern about the combined "health board idea on grounds it sets up a separate branch of government."²⁹ As reported by the local press, the League of Women Voters, which originally supported the merger, responded with a letter to Gill, city council members, and the Oklahoma County commissioners.


The league was quoted as observing:

Lay boards of health have long been proved [*sic*] as the best method for getting community interest and support for adequate public health service. In fact, Paul Revere served on such a board in Boston. We recognize that flies, mosquitoes and dogs and other disease carriers have no respect for municipal boundaries and that for health purposes, the metropolitan area (and not just the City) should be under one agency."³⁰

The combined operation prevailed.

Though perhaps preoccupied with concerns about departmental survival, Dr. Peter was not deterred from his enforcement duties, for he managed to find time to take on snow cone street vendors who sold "a concoction of crushed ice and fruit flavoring." The decision to seek a city ordinance that would disallow sale of the product by street vendors was proposed by the department after a child became ill from consuming a snow cone that had been contaminated with a fly spray.³¹

M. L. PETER



OKLAHOMA PERSONNEL BOARD
606 Right Building
Second and Broadway
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

September 14, 1954

PARTICIPATING AGENCIES
Department of Public Welfare
State Department of Health
Employment Security Commission
Commission for Crippled Children

PERSONNEL BOARD
Lloyd E. Lippincott, Chairman
Ira R. Sagner, Member
Roy H. Doh, Member
Roy A. Dillon, Supervisor
Don L. Hansen, Personnel Technician

Dr. M. L. Peter, Director
County Health Department
Okmulgee, Oklahoma

Dear Dr. Peter:

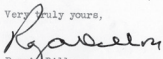
Congratulations to Oklahoma City for their being able to hire you as the new Director of the City-County Health Unit.

Personally, I have always been very happy about how you have boosted for a good merit system for State health employees. I am sure what little success we have had in establishing the merit system for health workers has been due to your influence. I remember some of the talks that you made at our district meetings when we were first getting organized.

We want to offer you our fullest cooperation in your new work in Oklahoma City and although it may be wishful thinking, perhaps you and I will live long enough to see a new city-county health building constructed in Oklahoma City and all employees qualified under a good merit system.


We get to see your mother and sister at the First Methodist Church every Sunday and would feel quite honored if you and your family would select our church when you move here. At least, we want you to visit us and be our guest at the Wednesday night Fellowship Dinner where you will meet 250 or 300 of our members. Dr. Earl Dorff, Pastor of First Methodist Church, is the best pulpit man in Oklahoma City and we hope that we can persuade him to stay with us a great many more years. One way to do this is, of course, to have the leading citizens in Oklahoma City as members of the congregation.

We are looking forward to this opportunity of getting better acquainted with you and your family.

Very truly yours,

 Roy A. Dillon,
 Supervisor

RAD/jh

Two letters to Dr. Peter congratulating him on his appointment in Oklahoma City (images courtesy of the author).



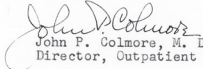
THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS
800 NORTHEAST THIRTEENTH STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY 4 - OKLAHOMA

September 13, 1954

M. L. Peter, M. D.
Director, Okmulgee County
Health Department
Okmulgee, Oklahoma

Dear Doctor Peter:

I have read in the paper about your appointment to the post of City-County Health Director here in Oklahoma City and while I am very much pleased that you will be near us and happy for you in your new appointment, we are very sorry to see you leave Okmulgee because of the tremendous help you have been to us in establishing the Comprehensive Care Program not only there but in ironing out many of the rough spots in its entirety. We have certainly appreciated all your efforts in behalf of the program and I want to extend to you our heartiest congratulations in your new appointment.

Sincerely yours,

 John F. Colmore, M. D.,
 Director, Outpatient Clinics.

JFC:lc

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Borden Milk Company public relations "Photo Flash" describing the company's role in the county-wide polio immunization program (image courtesy of the author).



Beginning in 1955 Dr. Peter organized and supervised Oklahoma County's multiyear mass immunization clinic program following development of a polio vaccine by Dr. Jonas Salk (and later Dr. Sabine's oral vaccine). Part of a nationwide campaign, dozens of clinics were offered during the next few years. They were routinely scheduled in highly visible, accessible locations, such as schools and community centers. Supported by department staff, the Oklahoma County Visiting Nurses Association, and numerous volunteer health care providers and support people, thousands of citizens received protection against what was then the most dreaded communicable disease in the country.³²

Under his leadership, key organizations in the community were rallied to ensure a successful, long-term immunization campaign. The Junior Chamber of Commerce, for instance, urged local businesses to give employees a "vaccine break," according to a news story announcing a typical downtown clinic scheduled for February 17, 1958. The story noted that Red Cross volunteers would be helping, along with the Borden Milk Company, which transported vaccine from the storage facilities of the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation to clinic sites. The Yellow Cab Company helped transport volunteers to clinics free of charge and PTA groups provided numerous volunteers.³³



City-County Health Director Dr. M. L. Peter and American Red Cross volunteers with a supply of polio vaccine for Oklahoma City residents in 1957 (2012.201.B1050.0186, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

This particular clinic, seen here as representative of many, was scheduled to take place in the Municipal Auditorium's famed Zebra Room in downtown Oklahoma City. "The clinic will . . . run non-stop from 11:30 am to 9 pm, with some 250 doctors, nurses and volunteers on the job," the story noted. The article also reported that 5,905 people were inoculated the previous evening during a similar clinic at Capitol Hill High School. "Everyone who received his first two shots last summer is now due for his third shot," Dr. Peter was quoted as saying.³⁴

Basil O'Connor, president of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, recognized the success of the local clinic program in 1957 during a visit to Oklahoma City. A news account noted that O'Connor "will honor Dr. M. L. Peter, city-county health officer, and others for this year's community vaccination program that led the southwest in the number of adults protected against polio." The story added, "The county topped others in a five-state area in the number of vaccinations in the over-20 age group."³⁵

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Shot in the arm for Mayor Norick was given by Dr. M. L. Peter, 1968 (2012.201. B1050.0184, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).



By 1958 the nationwide inoculation campaign against infantile paralysis was winding down. The last mass immunization clinic in Oklahoma City was offered early in 1958, though health departments continued to offer the vaccine through their regular clinic programs. Shots were also available from physicians in private practice.³⁶

Incidence of polio would cycle over a period of years, culminating with a peak year at the end of each multiyear cycle. The next anticipated peak year was 1959 and, as it approached, public health officials and others engaged in the battle against the disease nationwide held their breath. These apprehensions were warranted. Oklahomans got the bad news on July 8, 1959, with blaring headlines like this: "Sharp Polio Rise Here May Bring Salk Drive."³⁷

By July 9, 1959, Oklahoma County had twenty reported cases of polio, which exceeded by four the total number of cases identified during the entire year in 1958.³⁸ By September 2, 1959, the number of reported Oklahoma County cases had risen to sixty-eight.³⁹

In July Dr. Peter reacted by scheduling meetings with the Oklahoma County Medical Society and the local chapter of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis to discuss a battle plan. It was quickly agreed that additional clinics were needed. Appropriate target groups for the

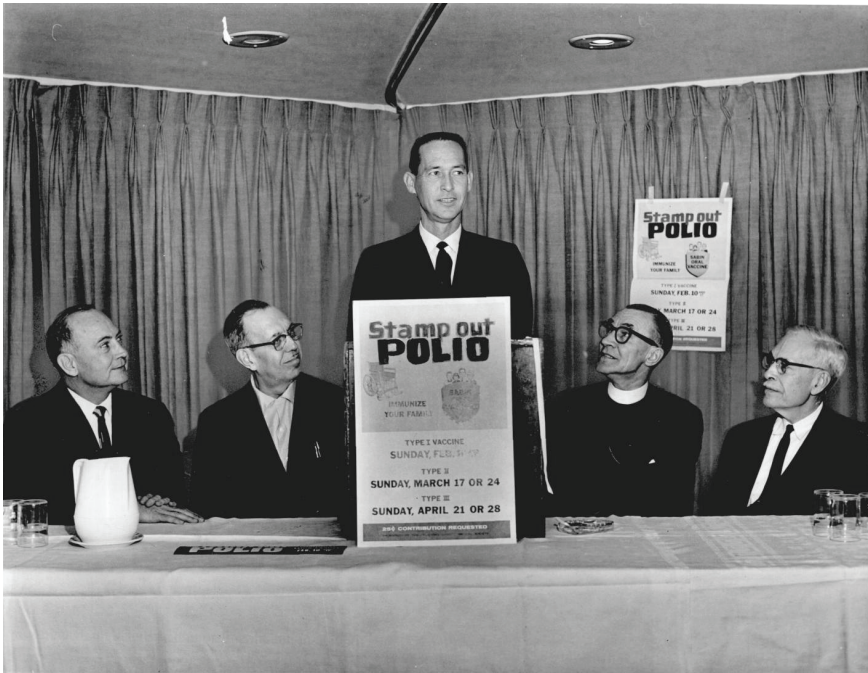


Steve Wilson and his mother, Mrs. Dick Wilson, receive shots from Dr. M. L. Peter, city-county health director, in July 1957 (2012.201.B1024.0608, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

clinics also were considered. It was noted, for example, that there were “soft spots” in the previous efforts to inoculate the populace according to survey findings in Oklahoma County undertaken by the US Public Health Service in collaboration with the Oklahoma City-County Health Department. These soft spots were in “the lower socio-economic groups and also in the higher income levels among persons over 39.” Another concern was with citizens who had participated in the previous inoculation programs, but skipped one or more of the required shots. At least three shots were recommended over a period of several weeks. Often a fourth booster shot was recommended.⁴⁰

Since the immunization campaign nationwide had been winding down for a year or so, Oklahoma state and county officials had to contend with shortages both of funds and vaccine, though Dr. Peter had no difficulty reactivating the volunteer group that had been so supportive of the clinics in previous years. With adequate supplies in question, no mass immunization clinics could be scheduled until late July.⁴¹

“Mass polio immunization clinics beginning Monday in four city locations were announced Thursday, after arrival of enough Salk Vaccine for 9,000 shots. . . . The Salk Vaccine, shipped by air from a Detroit pharmaceutical firm, was delivered to city-county health



Left to right: Dr. Vernon Cushing, Oklahoma County Medical Society president; Dr. Maurice Peter, City-County health director; Dr. W. J. Dowling, project director; Dean John C. Van Dyke, chairman of a committee of clergymen; and Dr. George H. Garrison, pediatrician (2012.201.B0311.0246, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).

department headquarters in the city hall at 8:30 a.m.”⁴² The arrival of a second shipment of nine thousand shots on August 5 enabled county officials to schedule more clinics and the crisis then began to abate.

The 1959 upswing in the incidence of polio in Oklahoma inspired popular editorial cartoonist Jim Lange of the *Daily Oklahoman* to recognize it through his art. Depicted is polio’s open gravesite, as though it had never been filled after the casket had been lowered in place, with foot and crutch prints moving away from the grave. Next to the grave is a shovel, identified as “Salk Vaccine,” standing in a pile of dirt and covered with cobwebs identified as “Public Apathy.” The caption reads, “We Didn’t Finish the Job.”⁴³

In 1958 the department proposed an unpopular ordinance prohibiting skiing and swimming in the city’s water supply to minimize the potential for bacterial and viral contamination.⁴⁴ Both the Oklahoma State Health Department and numerous national authorities advocated

such prohibitions as sound public health policy and it was an issue in many communities across the country. The controversy continued for several months with attention focused on a citizens committee, chaired by District Judge Phil E. Daugherty, charged to study the issue and advise the city council.⁴⁵ In this situation Dr. Peter enjoyed the support of the local medical community, which endorsed the proposed ban.

Many business and citizen groups were strongly opposed, however. The citizens committee initially recommended a one-month trial during which the water would be frequently tested for bacterial and viral growth. Ultimately, skiing on Lakes Hefner and Overholser was banned for many years, though the issue was revisited many times in the years to come.⁴⁶

Indeed, in 1965 the *Oklahoma City Times* described the recurring ski ban feuds as the “annual suggestion for water skiing on Lakes Hefner and Overholser.”⁴⁷ When the “annual suggestion” was made the year before, in September 1964, Dr. Peter not only stood firmly in support of the existing ban on the two lakes but also proposed that it be extended to include Oklahoma City’s newest water supply, Lake Stanley Draper, which had been approved for skiing and swimming the previous June.⁴⁸

State Commissioner of Health Dr. Kirk T. Mosley and other officials teamed with Dr. Peter and the City-County Health Department in calling for a ban at Lake Stanley Draper. Extension of the discussions to include Lake Draper led to favorable editorial support of the position taken by public health officials in a local daily newspaper:

Water Skiing

We are certainly in accord with the health authorities who deplore water skiing at Draper Reservoir.

It is a revolting thought that we should have to drink water in which hundreds of human bodies have been dunked over and over.

Some individuals have developed an idea our water is “sterilized” and it doesn’t make any difference what goes into it at the reservoir.

Health authorities say this just isn’t so.

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Dr. M. L. Peter, city-county health director, says water skiing in Draper Reservoir is eliminating the value of the holding time in the lake and continuing to add contamination to the water.

He advises that holding time is considered a vital part of water treatment because bacteria tend to die out as time elapses.

The human body is the main source of viruses, the health authority points out, and it is certainly deplorable that we have to have our drinking water further endangered by water skiing in the lake.⁴⁹

During the 1950s Dr. Peter and the health department did battle with rats in the downtown area. It monitored food handling practices, helped establish and enforce local quality standards for the emerging nursing home industry, and supervised studies of health status measures in the county. Dr. Peter took on local producers of nonpasteurized goat's milk, one or two with great influence in the community, and won. Seeing a public health role in the abatement of summer allergy problems, he secured an annual appropriation from the Oklahoma City Council enabling the department to eradicate noxious weeds growing on unattended properties.⁵⁰

The department's challenges in the 1960s matched those in the 1950s. For example, Dr. Peter and his creative director of sanitation, Dave Cleveland, played a key role in the demise of open garbage dumps and the evolution to the more efficient sanitary landfills. Along the way, the Health and Fire Departments had to deal with the occasional practice of burning waste both in dumps and landfills that, of course, created unhealthy air pollutants. However, the department's concern with air pollution extended well beyond landfill fires. In 1962 the US Public Health Service recognized the department for its role in a four-year air pollution study for the National Air Sampling Network.⁵¹

In May of that same year, Dr. Peter underwent open heart surgery at the Mayo Clinic to repair an aortic aneurysm. Despite this significant personal distraction, the Oklahoma City-County Health Department took the lead in coordinating the Oklahoma City-County Disease Control Demonstration Project, under the sponsorship of the Oklahoma City Community Council. Essentially, the project involved a series of studies of selected diseases, over a period of years, with annual status reports to the public. The Oklahoma State Department of Health, under Dr. Kirk T. Mosley's leadership, partnered in the project. Some



M. L. Peter at his desk in the basement of the Oklahoma City Municipal Building, where he worked during his tenure as city-county health director (photograph courtesy of the author).

of the studies focused on venereal disease, fly and mosquito control, tuberculosis, infant deaths, and immunization programs.⁵²

Around the start of the decade, Oklahoma City enacted a canine leash law for the community at the urging of Dr. Peter and the department, in hopes of controlling more effectively diseases dangerous to the local human population, such as rabies and injuries resulting from dog bites.

The department dealt with outbreaks of infectious meningitis during the 1960s, and found itself busy doing battle with the Hong Kong flu, Asian flu, and other annual viral influenzas as interest in mass flu vaccination programs began to pick up steam. Oversight of nursing home operations continued in the 1960s, leading to the closure of some facilities, orders to others to make significant changes, and a lawsuit or two against Dr. Peter intended to block one enforcement action or another.⁵³

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On May 7, 1963, Dr. Peter alerted the city council to a problem involving the development of new sanitary sewer systems under a recently approved bond issue. Residential developers were moving more quickly to build and sell new homes in twelve subdivisions (later adjusted to thirteen) than the construction of sewer lines to serve them could be accomplished. As a result, sanitary systems were starting to back up. The new sewer systems, Dr. Peter reported, were scheduled for completion in the next six months to two years. A news report indicated that Dr. Peter also advised the council that “there is nothing in the bond program now to construct adequate treatment facilities. He suggested withholding approval of sections requiring pumping until a treatment facility has been constructed.”⁵⁴ Even if the sewer system was adequate, available facilities to treat the sewage also were needed.

During a meeting on May 24, 1963, Dr. Peter advised the city planning commission that “he had asked the Oklahoma City building department to cease issuing building permits to 13 subdivisions where sanitary sewer facilities are inadequate.”⁵⁵ The building department soon implemented his suggestion and the State Health Department discontinued the issuance of occupancy permits in the developments until the problem was solved. At the same meeting, Sidney Davidoff, executive director of the Oklahoma City Homebuilders Association, reportedly appealed to the planning commission “not to do anything that would slow down home construction in Oklahoma City.” He noted that the developers had a large investment in the projects.⁵⁶

At about the same time, the city council began developing a plan of action with the developers to institute short-term solutions for the problems. The plan basically called for the use of four tank trunks, affectionately called “honey wagons,” leased and operated by the city to pump sewage from temporary holding tanks in the affected developments and haul it to treatment facilities. The developers, it was reported, bore most of the cost for this.⁵⁷

Dr. Peter’s position on this matter earned him some favorable editorial comment in the *Oklahoma City Times*:

Order on Sewers

Dr. M. L. Peter, city-county health director, is on solid ground in asking a stop order on the issuance of building permits in 13 subdivisions where sanitary sewer facilities are inadequate.

With Oklahoma City’s present high vacancy rate, there is no overwhelming need to push homebuilding in areas where sani-

tary sewer facilities aren't yet adequate. Dr. Peter is looking out for the interests of the entire community in warding off any epidemic-producing conditions. Certainly his move would safeguard home buyers from moving unbeknownst into unready situations.

There is something completely incongruous about fine new homes having to be serviced by "honey" wagons. Let's do things in the proper order, even if it takes a bit longer.⁵⁸

Dr. Peter occasionally found himself in the middle when city and county officials were at odds with each other or with the department over public health issues—especially funding issues. After a county-wide vote on December 15, 1964, resulted in approval of a 1.9 mill levy to support health department operations, county commission interest in the funding of department operations heightened, often leading to clashes with Dr. Peter.⁵⁹

With new monies earmarked for the department, the commissioners wanted to move the county indigent care clinic to the department so that it would be funded out of the new levy. Dr. Peter said the mission of public health does not extend to "curative medicine."⁶⁰ The county also wanted fees collected by the department for services in Oklahoma City to be placed in the department's budget rather than city coffers. Funding for a proposed new Child Guidance Center in Del City also became controversial. And, in July 1965 the commission threatened to withhold the wages of department employees to force the city to take over the indigent care clinic. Feuding like this went on for more than a year and became personal at times.

"The City had better get Dr. Peter lined out or else I will call for a vote of the people to repeal the 1.9 mill levy," Commission Chairman Ralph Adair declared in August 1965. The *Oklahoma Journal* reported on August 20, 1965, that County Commissioner Adair "threatened Thursday to seek an election to repeal the 1.9 mill levy." Adair noted that when the city-county arrangement was first set up, Oklahoma City was "sustaining a major portion of the burden" for its operations. Under the arrangement, Adair noted, other cities in the county could participate in the program by paying a proportionate share of the costs. Now, since the election, it's strictly a countywide operation. "The people are contributing whether they want to or not," Adair opined. "It's my thinking that Dr. (M.L.) Peter is still treating it as an Oklahoma City deal. Let's not limit the benefits only to Oklahoma City," Adair pled. "I personally can't see where the other littler towns and the county are going to benefit proportionally," he added.⁶¹

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Nearly a year later, the commission was still threatening to call for a repeal vote, not only on the health department levy but also on a similar levy for the Metropolitan Library System. In July 1966 Adair blamed Dr. Peter for these disputes when he said he was “a worse PR man than I am. He’s made everyone mad, including me.”⁶²

No call for repeal of the mill levy vote was ever issued. The Del City Guidance Center opened for operation in September 1965, and the department’s employees got paid. Despite all this controversy, the county also authorized the health department to establish the new position of assistant director, though not without a poke at management.⁶³

As reported in the press, in a letter to F. Redding Hood, chairman of the county board of health, advising him of their approval, the commission suggested that the new assistant should be “qualified both in public health and public relations.”⁶⁴ The newspaper account suggested that the reference to “public relations” was, perhaps, a sarcastic swipe at Dr. Peter, “who has been under heavy personal fire” from the commission of late.⁶⁵ Ultimately, Dr. John W. Gales would be named the department’s first assistant director and would eventually succeed Dr. Peter as director.⁶⁶

Throughout his career, Dr. Peter repeatedly lent his support and talents to the professional organizations with which he was affiliated. In 1968 he agreed to take on the chairmanship of the Committee on Local Arrangements for the 1969 annual convention of the southern branch of the American Public Health Association, which took place in Oklahoma City on May 21 through 23.⁶⁷

As a former president of the Oklahoma Public Health Association (OPHA), Dr. Peter also had served as the OPHA’s official representative to the southern branch of the national organization and had been active in both groups for many years. His service as local arrangements chairman for this annual conference is worthy of note because it was the last major service he performed for any of his professional groups before his death later the same year.⁶⁸

Dr. Peter enjoyed the support of the Oklahoma City-County Board of Health throughout his tenure with the department, despite its change in composition and chairpersons from time to time. He understood the value of its support and initially worked hard to earn it and then to sustain it over the years. Aided by the ongoing support of the board of health and other individuals and groups in the community, Dr. Peter survived all of the political challenges he faced over the years, though, of course, he did not always come out on top. On the greatest initiative of his career, however, he succeeded after nearly fifteen years of effort and due, in no small measure, to his enduring persistence.

Virtually from the day he arrived on the scene in 1954, his grand dream had been to consolidate health department services into one central operation. Less than three months after he became director, he told the *Oklahoma City Advertiser* that a new building for the growing department was “badly needed” and was under active discussion.⁶⁹ By 1966 space problems for the health department had become critical, as noted by Robert C. Hardy, executive director of the Oklahoma Health Sciences Foundation in his 1985 oral history of the Oklahoma Health Center:

The administrative offices and the environmental services were in the old Center Building on Main Street at Hudson Avenue. The laboratory was on the fifth floor of the Municipal Building, the nursing division was in the Civic Center Music Hall and the public health clinic was at 1229 North Kelley Avenue. . . . M. L. Peter, M.D. . . . had been trying for a dozen years to get a new building. It was obvious new facilities were needed in which the entire operation could be centralized and the board of health believed the proposed Oklahoma Health Center would be an appropriate location.⁷⁰

Eventually, Dr. Peter won the necessary approvals for a new Oklahoma City-County Health Department facility and initially agreed to the idea of locating it in the emerging Oklahoma Health Center. However, shortly before his death, Dr. Peter had second thoughts:

At a meeting of the Oklahoma Health Sciences Foundation on June 24, 1969, Dr. Peter had voiced two problems. The health department building was to be constructed above the two-level parking blanket, a design which brought up the legal question of erecting a building using the “air rights” above a structure owned by some other agency of government. . . . Also, he objected to clients and staff being required to pay for parking inasmuch as that was not the current policy.⁷¹

Dr. Peter also was concerned about whether or not heating and air conditioning services in the Oklahoma Health Center would be available when construction of a new health department building was finished. Therefore, at Dr. Peter’s urging it was decided to withdraw from the Oklahoma Health Center. Construction of a new Oklahoma City-County Health Department building at Northeast Twenty-Third and Kelly did not begin until after his death on September 29, 1969.⁷²

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The Oklahoma City-County Health Department Building at Northeast Twenty-Third Street and Kelly Avenue in Oklahoma City. Construction on this building began after Dr. Peter's death.

Dr. Peter never saw the completed building about which he dreamed for so long. During his long career, however, he did see the actualization of many of his professional goals, which must have given him great personal satisfaction. And, as a public administrator fully grounded in his beliefs and self-governed by rigid ethical standards, he set an example for others in public life.

Sometime during his tenure as Oklahoma City manager in the late 1950s, Sheldon Sterling said of Dr. Peter, “When he comes into your office to tell you something, you might as well lean back and listen because he is going to tell you just what he thinks.”⁷³

The *Oklahoma City Times* news report on Dr. Peter’s death described him as a “man of firm convictions concerning proper health protective procedures, Dr. Peter never backed away from a controversy or allowed political stature to deter him from his convictions.”⁷⁴

Under Dr. Peter’s leadership, the infant Oklahoma City-County Health Department quickly grew into a strong and viable force in the community and remained so in 2014, its sixtieth anniversary year. Dr. Peter was driven by an enduring passion for his work, strong personal ethical standards, an uncompromising sense of duty, his perception of public service as an honorable calling and, as it was suggested, by a “will of iron.”

Endnotes

* Stephen B. Peter is a native Oklahoman with a bachelor's degree in history from Central State College (now University of Central Oklahoma) in Edmond. He was an employee of the Oklahoma Health Planning Commission for seventeen years, including more than two years as the agency's executive director. He then joined the marketing staff of Rees Associates, Inc., an Oklahoma City-based architectural firm, where he worked for twenty-three years and rose to the level of senior associate. Since retiring, he has written *The Saga of Marshal Todd Warden*, a biography of a Texas and Oklahoma City law enforcement officer. It was published by the Collin County Historical Society in 2011.

¹ *Oklahoma City (OK) Times*, September 30, 1969.

² Affidavit of Birth, February 19, 1908, Division of Vital Statistics, State Board of Health, State of Kansas, Topeka, KS.

³ Obituary of Jess Peter, *Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, OK), February 26, 1950.

⁴ *Ye Towne Cryer* (Oklahoma City, OK), May 21, 1956.

⁵ Maurine Peter Sayre, interview by the author, 1985.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Certificate of Marriage, July 31, 1930, Office of the Canadian County Court Clerk, El Reno, OK.

⁸ The couple's sons are Maurice Lyle Peter Jr., born in 1931 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; John Edward Peter, born in 1934 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Stephen Baird Peter, born in 1943 in Okmulgee, Oklahoma.

⁹ Oklahoma Statutes 1931, Sec. 4448.

¹⁰ Oklahoma Statutes 1931, Sec. 4458.

¹¹ Oklahoma Statutes 1931, Sec. 7770.

¹² US Bureau of the Census, 1930 Census (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1930). As with many Oklahoma counties during this decade, by 1940 Kay County's population had dropped to 47,084.

¹³ *Blackwell (OK) Sunday Tribune*, September 19, 1937.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Stillwater (OK) Daily News*, 1941.

¹⁷ *Okmulgee (OK) Daily Times*, September 3, 1947; *Okmulgee Daily Times*, September 4, 1947.

¹⁸ *OHPA Viewpoint* 2, no. 4 (April 1971); *Oklahoma City Times*, December 15, 1949. The *Viewpoint* was the newsletter of the Oklahoma Public Health Association.

¹⁹ American Board of Preventive Medicine and Public Health Certificate #1202, issued to Maurice Lyle Peter, MD, November 3, 1950, author's collection.

²⁰ American College of Preventive Medicine Certificate #25, issued to Maurice Lyle Peter, MD, September 18, 1954, author's collection.

²¹ Roy A. Dillon to M. L. Peter, September 14, 1954, author's collection.

²² John P. Colmore to M. L. Peter, September 13, 1954, author's collection.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Commentary* 15, no. 3 (October 1969). *Commentary* was published by the University of Oklahoma Medical Center.

²⁵ Dr. William Parry, interview by the author, August 28–29, 2004.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ W. Howard Miles, interview by the author.

²⁸ *Oklahoma City (OK) Advertiser*, December 17, 1954.

²⁹ *Daily Oklahoman*, May 6, 1955.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

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- ³¹ *Daily Oklahoman*, July 20, 1955.
- ³² *Daily Oklahoman*, January 15, 1958; *Oklahoma City Times*, March 26, 1958.
- ³³ *Daily Oklahoman*, February 14, 1958.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, November 13, 1957.
- ³⁶ *Daily Oklahoman*, January 15, 1958.
- ³⁷ *Oklahoma City Times*, July 8, 1959.
- ³⁸ *Daily Oklahoman*, July 9, 1959.
- ³⁹ *Oklahoma City Times*, September 2, 1959.
- ⁴⁰ *Oklahoma City Times*, July 8, 1959.
- ⁴¹ *Oklahoma City Times*, July 9, 1959; *Oklahoma City Times*, July 15, 1959.
- ⁴² *Oklahoma City Times*, July 23, 1959.
- ⁴³ *Daily Oklahoman*, July 10, 1959.
- ⁴⁴ *Daily Oklahoman*, March 19, 1958.
- ⁴⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, May 19, 1958.
- ⁴⁶ *Oklahoma City Times*, June 9, 1958.
- ⁴⁷ *Oklahoma City Times*, May 18, 1965.
- ⁴⁸ *Daily Oklahoman*, September 29, 1964.
- ⁴⁹ *Oklahoma Journal* (Oklahoma City), October 1, 1964.
- ⁵⁰ *Oklahoma City Times*, November 8, 1957; *Oklahoma City Times*, December 15, 1959; *Oklahoma City Times*, January 7, 1960; *Daily Oklahoman*, October 15, 1958; *Daily Oklahoman*, October 16, 1958.
- ⁵¹ *Oklahoma City Times*, July 10, 1962; *Daily Oklahoman*, July 11, 1962; *Oklahoma City Times*, July 11, 1962; *Daily Oklahoman*, October 21, 1962.
- ⁵² *Oklahoma City Times*, May 11, 1962; *Daily Oklahoman*, March 19, 1963.
- ⁵³ *Oklahoma City Times*, April 3, 1964; *Oklahoma Journal*, October 6, 1965; *Daily Oklahoman*, October 23, 1965; *Oklahoma City Times*, November 8, 1963; *Oklahoma City Times*, October 5, 1966; *Oklahoma City Times*, October 31, 1966; *Oklahoma City Times*, March 16, 1967; *Daily Oklahoman*, March 22, 1967.
- ⁵⁴ *Daily Oklahoman*, May 8, 1963.
- ⁵⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, May 24, 1963.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ *Daily Oklahoman*, June 22, 1963.
- ⁵⁸ *Oklahoma City Times*, May 27, 1963.
- ⁵⁹ *Oklahoma City Times*, December 16, 1964; *Daily Oklahoman*, May 6, 1965; *Oklahoma Journal*, June 11, 1965.
- ⁶⁰ *Oklahoma City Times*, July 16, 1965.
- ⁶¹ *Del City (OK) News*, August 20, 1965; *Oklahoma Journal*, August 20, 1965.
- ⁶² *Daily Oklahoman*, July 15, 1966.
- ⁶³ *Daily Oklahoman*, September 18, 1965.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁶ *Daily Oklahoman*, November 5, 1969.
- ⁶⁷ *The Southern Health Bulletin* 5, no. 3 (March, 1969).
- ⁶⁸ *OPHA Viewpoint* 1, no. 2 (April 1969); *OPHA Viewpoint* 1, no. 4 (November 1969).
- ⁶⁹ *Oklahoma City Advertiser*, December 17, 1954.
- ⁷⁰ Robert C. Hardy, *Hero: An Oral History of the Oklahoma Health Center* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Health Sciences Foundation, 1985), 60. Dr. Peter's office and those of his immediate staff were still in the basement of the Municipal Building at the time of his death in 1969. The Center Building was formerly the Halliburton Department Store Building.

⁷¹ Ibid., 139.

⁷² His death occurred fifteen years and one day after the day he became director on September 28, 1954.

⁷³ *Oklahoma City Times*, September 30, 1969.

⁷⁴ Ibid.