

Audiotape labeled:

Loree Florence, December 17, 1978

Transcribed by Renée Sharrock, October 2020

Brief biography:

Loree Florence, MD was the first female to graduate from the Medical College of Georgia in 1926. After graduation she interned at the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia and worked at Smith College in Connecticut and Bellevue Hospital in New York. Later she returned to her native town of Athens, Georgia and opened a pediatric practice. Dr. Florence retired in 1971 and passed away in 1983. When this interview was conducted in 1978, she was 82.

NOTE: This is an interview with Dr. Loree Florence with an unnamed male interviewer. It is not stated where they are conducting the interview, but from the conversation, it can be assumed that they are not in Augusta, Georgia, but perhaps in her home in Athens. There is no introduction.

Male: This is the spring issue of *MCG Today* 1971, and there's an interview with you. Did you say that thirty of you entered and only twenty four graduated? I haven't looked at this article and again it's the spring issue of *MCG Today*. Who did this interview with you?

Dr. Florence: Yes, my mother lives up on King Avenue, uhmm, doesn't it give who wrote the article?

Male: There's no byline.

Dr. Florence: Look in the index, it must be something.

Male: Well, it doesn't say.

Dr. Florence: There's another picture back there, uhmm. I know I was down at Miami Beach, and they came and said, "Oh, Dr. Florence, there's a long distance call for you." And this girl had called down at Miami Beach to ask me about this. Her mother is Mrs. uhmm...

Male: That's okay...So, do you still keep in touch with the people in your graduating class?

Dr. Florence: Well, I tell you, there's not too many of us left. I understand you go to Augusta quite often.

Male: That's right.

Dr. Florence: Well, some of these days I'm going to run down with you. You go and come the same day, don't you?

Male: I haven't been, but what I can do now, if I'm going to go this coming week, I will do it that way.

Dr. Florence: Well, if you go down, you know Marge McConnell, with whom I lived with for two years when I was in medical school, had a stroke, and I would like to go down and check on her.

Male: I see here this John William Thurmond, Jr. here. Is that the Senator's brother?

Dr. Florence: Yes, Strom Thurmond.

Male: He's still active, I believe, isn't he?

Dr. Florence: No, he's retired, and I tell you, George Wright is in Augusta, and so is Victor Roule. Now those are three. I think that H.B. Smith is still living and I think he's someplace in Florida.

Male: Well, I'm sure the alumni society would have good records of who and where. William Hardman, that's certainly a Georgia name, William Wallace Hardman.

Dr. Florence: Oh, yes, he was from around Cummings, I believe.

Male: Is he still around?

Dr. Florence: I don't think he is. Now you'll have to check with the archives secretary. Do you know Mary Hallahan?

Male: I know who she is.

Dr. Florence: Well, anyway, if you call her, she can give you help, too. I believe Austin is the secretary now. He's taken over her duties.

Male: That's right, that's right.

Dr. Florence: So how many of us are left? I would really like to know. Now somewhere in some of this, I had a little piece of paper.

Male: I notice that the address was by George Barrett. Was he the mayor of Augusta?

Dr. Florence: Does it say so?

Male: No, it's not important. It says, "Honorable George B. Barrett." That's a real Augusta name. And you graduated in the First Baptist Church. Did you usually have commencement there, in the First Baptist?

Dr. Florence: Well, we did that year. Of course, our class was so little, and now they have over 200 in the freshman class.

Male: Isn't that incredible? Tell me, how were you actuated to choose medicine as a career?

Dr. Florence: Well, I'll tell you, see that's a long story. I went to Shorter when I was only 15. I started school when I was only 5 because my brother was 7 and I didn't want him to go off and leave me. So, I went along. I just kept going and got a year ahead. That made me finish school when I was only fifteen. We only had ten grades in those years. Then I went to Shorter and my

father wanted me to... (inaudible)...but Luther Hogan came along. He was teaching at Shorter at the time and he insisted that I got to Shorter. Louise Norman, who was a house mother who had gone to Shorter, I talked with her and so anyway, to make a long story short, Mr. Hogan talked my daddy into letting me go. While I was there they had doctors there and they sort of somehow said I would do well in medicine. They sort of planted a seed and at that age I was very immature and didn't know anything. So, then when I graduated, I taught school. And by the way, I must show you something. I think this is very interesting. I taught in a little one room school house down in south Georgia and this little fella that use to deliver for the dairy. Anyway, this is him and this is me in the picture where I taught in a one room school house in Wilkes County in 1920. The next year I taught in Dayton and I took the civil service exam and this woman and I... (inaudible)...

Male: Well, when someone suggested that you could make a good career in medicine did they really mean as a doctor, or a technician, or as a nurse?

Dr. Florence: No, they were doctors. When I got out, you see, cotton went down to four cents and I had enough credits from the winter quarter to go home for the spring quarter so I went home and stayed that quarter and graduated and got this job teaching school for three years. Then I decided school teaching wasn't for me. The funny part was that I had three boys in my teaching days and one of them was cute as a button. I use to put him right in front of me. Then I had one who came in one day and gave me a bunch of violets and I knew there was a catch in it. So I took the violets and when I did, out jumped a frog! Which wasn't too bad as you look back at it. And there was another one in there and so I just figured school teaching wasn't for me. Then I went to Washington and worked in the War Department. Then the armistice came along in November so I ... (inaudible)...who was press secretary for Woodrow Wilson and ... (inaudible)...Who was the secretary of state from South Carolina, do you remember? Anyway, I wanted another job in Washington and I got a job in the Internal Revenue. You see, that was only passed in 1916 so then I said I wanted to go see my folks. I decided I didn't want to go back to Washington and so I just didn't go back. I just decided I wanted to go into medicine and so I piddled around here for six months and then I finally went over and took courses in chemistry, physics, and zoology and then I took one course in psychology and one in sociology and got a BS. Then I went down to Augusta to see Lombard Kelly. You see, Ellis Dickson and I were in the same chemistry class under Dr. Hendry. Well, I followed through and Dr. Lombard Kelly at that time was dean and the medical school was co-educational. So many wonderful doors have opened to me and I don't see why. They were just opened and I walked in, see. Anyway, I was making \$33 per month making tissues for the histology department and who taught me to do all that I don't know.

Male: Actually at this time, Dr. Doughty was still dean and then Dr. Goodrich, and then Dr. Moss, and then Dr. Kelly.

Dr. Florence: That's right. Everything was in one building and you had three wings at University Hospital. Well, anyway, Lombard Kelly was very gracious and kind and I did a little research with him on the cycle of the guinea pig and it was published in the Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology. Well, I did some work around the place for the five years I was there. Dr. Will Crane was a surgeon and it got back to me that he said, "Dammit! She came down here and I let

her go in the room with the boys.” As if to say I was trying to walk where angels feared to tread. So, I forgave Dr. Crane because I met him the first time for my exam in surgery when I was getting ready to graduate. I kept talking, I don’t ever know what I said, but anyway, I came out number two. You know, I didn’t work for grades. I worked because I loved it. It was just like doing something you like.

Male: So Dr. Kelly was instrumental in getting you to go to MCG?

Dr. Florence: No, may I say responsive. Because I had gone down and found out what I could have to have and it was too much to take in summer school. See, I had let summer school go too far ahead before I started digging around so I just started. As I say, I was making \$33 a month and gave my aunt over in North Augusta \$24 for room and board. Then, my daddy saw I was hell bent on going so he let me have an old automobile so I could drive back and forth. So, I was over there one year and later I moved over to 15th Street and didn’t have a car.

Male: When you went in to this stronghold of male chauvinism down there, what was your reaction? Did your application stir up any questions on the part of the administration?

Dr. Florence: Well, I’ll tell you. A lot of people have asked if the boys gave me a hard time. I know some of the boys and had had classes with them the year before I went down there and so the boys meant not too much to me. I had been brought up in a male environment, you know. I had had no sisters and so the boys treated me like a sister and I did my work. Of course, I was not one of those pushy kind, not an aggressive woman. I was just trying to stay within my bounds and I’ve never tried to be anything but a woman. I’ve known some women doctors who tried to be very mannish and aggressive, well, that never appealed to me.

Male: What about other doctors? Dr. Crane apparently had some misgivings, initially.

Dr. Florence: Well, when I first went down there, you can see and as I look back, I can see how they saw the doors were opening. Despite the fact that I finished medicine I am not an ERA’er. I am not a “women’s libber” and I think woman was made to be a helpmate for a man. I go back to the original creation of men and women and I think the power to be has a plan for everybody if you can fit into the right plan that he has for you. I have always and still advocate that a man should be the head of his household. That doesn’t mean you browbeat your wife but you work together, you see. I was talking to this little man today, he’s twenty-five, and I said, “I hope you will meet the right person because of all people who need an understanding wife, it is a doctor.” A lot of women will come in and make statements and they have gotten so aggressive today, and sometimes they will overpower a man, and men don’t have strong will enough not to give in. You know what I mean. Anyway, he said no, and all I could say was that I wanted him to hit the jackpot because it is a contract that you get into that requires a wife who is understanding and a woman needs someone that she means something to.

Male: How were your classroom experiences? Did you have any lecturers you remember? Any good ones? Any bad ones?

Dr. Florence: I went through medical school and I practiced in the golden era, if I may say so. We had wonderful professors. We had Dr. Sydenstricker in medicine. We had Dr. Mulherin in

pediatrics, and we had Dr. Kline in pathology. And who was the professor in medicine who smoked one cigarette after another? He lived down on lower Greene Street...Dr. Murphey. ... (inaudible)... They used to play strip poker, you know, get the women down to the lower level and then they'd run out.

Male: Oh, my lord!

Dr. Florence: Well, anyway, then there was Dr. Chaney in surgery and by the way, he used to take 125 mgs of aspirin for headaches and we finally found out he was allergic to the very thin film around an egg. I never will forget Dr. Chaney when I got to the point where I had to go to the clinics. I was going down to the male clinic. I never tried to get out of anything. I thought, well, if the others can do it, I can do it, too. Ralph Chaney met me in the hallway and he said, "Now, you come back up here and you take double duty with the women." He didn't want me going down there and messing with all of those, you know, venereal diseases and so forth and so on. So, that's just by the way, but I appreciated him respecting me and having feelings to that extent.

Male: Well, what about Dr. Sydenstricker? He must have been doing a lot of research and must have been an interesting man.

Dr. Florence: Yes, he was. When I was down there he taught medicine. So, one day I went down and I knew Dr. Wausham in the physiology department. We use to go down early and play a game of tennis. So, this one morning we went and played tennis and I couldn't eat breakfast. I didn't feel good. So, I went out for lunch and all I could drink was a glass of tea. I went to the class in medicine at 2 o'clock and so, when I got through Dr. Sydenstricker was teaching, and I said, "Doctor, I've got a pain in my tummy." So he had me right over to his office and did a blood count and it was just sort of on the borderline. It was just before final exams and he wanted me to come in and have it out. And I told him that if he'd let me take my final exams I'd come right in and have it out. Well, he played along with me and had several blood counts taken and it was never too far out. I appreciated his concern because he had had a ruptured appendix himself. I think they thought of me as their own little child of something. As I look back I appreciated their kindness and respect and thoughts of me. I had my last exam on Monday morning. I went in Monday afternoon and I had it out on Tuesday morning. I had my tonsils and appendix out at the same time. Dr. Cranston, who was a neurologist, gave me the anesthetic, and brother, it couldn't have been better. The nurse was holding my hand and I could feel myself slipping away. I had seen people fuss and fight the anesthetic. Anyway, it was fine and I wasn't under very long and the doctor who was the nose and throat man, took my tonsils out and the surgeon took my appendix out. So, they kidded m and wanted to know how I felt and I said I felt fine. And they said, "The hell you do!" I said, "Well as far as you're concerned, I am fine." And so the afternoon after the surgery my parents came to visit and I had a brother, the one at home, who went over to Atlanta and had his tonsils out. He woke up and had a nurse with him and swallowed his tongue and like that, see. So, my mother and father were very distraught. My daddy said if Dr. Crane said it was all right, he'd acquiesce. They came in to see me and just after they left, my stomach was full of blood and I vomited. Anyway, for some reason, I vomited

and I was so glad my mother and father were spared that. I drove to Athens the following Monday.

Male: That was a fast recovery. How long did it take in those days?

Dr. Florence: I was operated on Tuesday morning and the following Monday I left for Athens. But there weren't any paved roads to Athens then.

Male: That's what I meant. How long did it take from Augusta to Athens?

Dr. Florence: I do not know. My brother drove. I did not drive. You know, Henry Holiday was down there. Once I went back and Lombard Kelly said I had six months. Well, when I graduated in '26, I think they thought it would be good for me to get out of Augusta. And I applied and was accepted at the Women's Medical College Hospital in Pennsylvania. That was an all-women's hospital but they had men on the staff. They had an awful lot of men patients, too. So, you had men, women, and children. Of course, the men always said they got better attention from the women than they did from the men doctors. Be that as it may, I had one year there and let me tell you, when I interned, we didn't get one dime, just room, board, and uniforms. Now, as you know, they get a thousand or fifteen hundred or more a month. So, there was quite a difference.

Male: Where did you live when you were interning?

Dr. Florence: Well, see, they furnished quarters. I never shall forget. I went to Philadelphia and it had been raining there for about a week. And the next Monday I was supposed to report to the OB ward. When I got to the OB ward and there was a woman who had made it to the back door and they finally got her up on the table. She had her baby and she was bleeding like a stuck pig! I thought, dear God! I had not been oriented or nothing there they called me out! I never heard tell of such a thing. So, I couldn't scrub and the women hadn't been scrubbed, and I knew I couldn't touch anything. So, I just got on a little stool and I got up there and took one finger, and two fingers, and three fingers, and out came the placenta all over the nurse, all over the walls and everywhere. Now that was miracle number one! I've seen so many miracles I can't count them. Somebody, somewhere tells you what to do when you get in a crisis. We have had good teachers and as I look back on that I could have turned the whole placenta wrong side out and then I would have been in a hell of a mess. But the good Lord took care of me. I was there for one year and Dr. McFarland said I could do more with my hands than anybody she had ever worked with. She wanted me to go to New York and get into OB-GYN but I knew that if you got into that, you'd have to have surgery and would have to have somebody assist you. I know I wanted to come back home and if I got into that field, I'd have to have an assistant. Anyway, her letter got lost and in the meantime, I applied to John Smith College in the medical department. I went up there and was making \$200 a month and was terribly rich. Of course, I had to pay my room and board.

Male: This was at Smith College in New Hampton?

Dr. Florence: Yes, Smith College. I was there for one year and they re-appointed me for two years but spring vacation...(inaudible)...Now, somebody I had interned with in Philadelphia was at Bellevue at the time so through her...(inaudible)...You see, if somebody wants a vacation for

2-3 weeks, they get somebody to fill in for them and they take off. You know how that is. So, anyway, I filled in my spring vacation on the fourth division, which was a little of everything. And somebody said, "Why don't you come on down and get you a four year internship?" Well, when I went back, Elizabeth Tory, who was a resident in pediatrics, asked me if I would stop on my way home from Smith and work for her in June, and I said I would. So, I relieved her for three weeks. So, that's when I ran into Dr. C. Smith. He reminded me of my daddy. Pretty white hair and a ruddy complexion. So, when I got home, I wrote to the pediatrician in Philadelphia and I said, "Dr. Bacon, I think I know I want pediatrics, because I figured I could handle myself. And so she said, "If you can get on at Bellevue, by all means do it." So, I wrote Dr. Henry Smith a letter and he said to come the first of January. Well, I had six months to work around, so I went over to ... (inaudible)...and Hines Roberts wanted somebody for good, not for six months. And I could understand that, so then I went down to the medical school and Lombard Kelly was there, and he said "I'd love to have you down here in the anatomy department." Well anyway, I was walking down the hall with him one day and he said he wished I could stay the rest of the year. And I said, "Well, Dr. Kelly, if you want me to, I'll write Dr. Smith." Of course, I was making \$75 a month then. So, I wrote Dr. Smith and he said "Stay where you are." Well, somebody got sick and they wanted me to come in June, so Dr. Kelly was good enough to release me and they even paid me for twelve months. I was walking down the hall one day and I was just an intern and Dr. Smith said, "Dr. Florence, what about staying on for six more months as a resident?" And I said, "Thank you, Dr. Smith, but I have a three month commitment, but after that, I can come back." So just like that, I came back. They fuss and fight over those internships like nobody's business. So, as I say, things just fell in my lap, so to speak. So, I was there for another six months. I felt like I had "hospitalitis" and I went down to the steamship line and I thought I would love to get on a s a doctor on the ship just to go someplace for a little recreation. Cause, anytime I had a little time off, I felt like I should visit my parents. One year I did not come home at Christmas time but that was the only Christmas I was away from my parents. So, that didn't turn out so I went back and did some clinics. You see, I went to New York in 1930, right after the depression. A lot of people who left the hospitals and started practices had to give that up and come back and get a job in the hospital to make body and soul keep together. It didn't bother me because I never had had anything and I didn't know what money was. So, I heard about the clinics out at Westchester Hospital, the richest county in the world. They needed somebody out there. The Sunshine Cottage had just been built and it was just beautiful. So, they wanted somebody as a resident of that, so I went and was interviewed by Dr. Nicholas. And he insisted I not take anything else, but the head of the hospital, who he had to consult with was in Europe at the moment, Dr. Manga. So, Dr. Manga came back and he wanted to know if I could leave the big city and come to the country. And I told him I grew up in the country, and I said it was so beautiful out there. I was out there for five years until I married in 1936 and came home. I did some work on the adult as well as the children and at that time, they were doing pneumothoraxes for tuberculosis, but they don't do that anymore. Times change.

Male: Tell me some more about Augusta. What did you do with your leisure time when you were living in North Augusta or Fifteenth Street, when you could get off?

Dr. Florence: You know, AKK and Phi Ki and Phi Kappa Psi were down on the corner of Fifteenth and Broad. To tell you the truth, I didn't have much time. I was also working part-time and I did have dates on the weekend, maybe Saturday or Sunday nights. I looked at boys all day. I played tennis a lot.

Male: What was downtown Augusta and Broad Street like? It was a nice shopping street in those days.

Dr. Florence: Oh, I used to say that street was as hot as hell. It was so hot, you could hardly keep your eyes open. It was truly hot!

Male: Were there any student hang outs, like soda shops?

Dr. Florence: There was a place right across where we use to get our lunch because I know I had breakfast and supper or dinner where I was living, but at noon, we got something there. But really and truly, there was not much free time. I guess I use to go downtown to a movie or something, but that was a rare thing in those times. I guess I was an old workhorse that took most of my time.

Male: What was it like to go to class in the old building that's been torn down? Could you use the library effectively?

Dr. Florence: Oh, yes, I remember the chemistry teacher, and then of course we had anatomy up on the second floor. And there was the library. I did my little stuff in a big lab where they had histology and where you had the brain with the nerves and so forth and so on. You had to study the skull. We use to take the brain home with us and this that and the other, you know. I don't know, we were just too busy for monkey business.

Male: What about the hospital? I have this photograph of it right after it was built. This must have been the Women's and Children's Hospital. Everything's been torn down except the old hospital. Was the old hospital an efficient and good place to work?

Dr. Florence: Yes, of course, Dr. Metz, he put the slide on the microscope. He asked me what it was. I saw it was a big cell like this, a blood cell or something. I thought he was trying to pull my leg. They had an alligator out there in the back in a pool and I said that's alligator blood, and it was.

Male: Where was the alligator?

Dr. Florence: In a pool out in back of the medical school. Between the medical school and the hospital. I knew there was a catch to the question and I knew it was something to do with the blood. And we had Dr. Lamar, who was a professor of pathology, and I tell you he was a West Point man and he was very precise about the time. You didn't dare come into his class a second late. If you got in and couldn't get in and sit down before class began, you didn't get in. He was very good.

Male: There were a lot of complaints that some of the people associated with the college didn't hold clinics or frequently did not show up for clinical assignments. Did you run into any of that?

Dr. Florence: No.

Male: What about the nurses? I'm sure there was a black and white wing in the hospital. Did you get full cooperation from them anywhere you were?

Dr. Florence: I never had any problems with the nurses. They were always helpful. And at that time, it was not as integrated as it is now you see. Integration did not come in until '54. And there were white nurses and we didn't have that to contend with.

Male: Tell me, I am sure you knew Ms. Janet Newton. She was a secretary down there.

Dr. Florence: Ms. Janie Turner was the secretary when I was there. And she was a big help. ... (inaudible)...I don't remember having any particular problems because I just got my books. I didn't go down expecting any favors and I didn't ask any favors and I was just like one of the boys. I didn't want any special concessions or anything. I know, Dr. Salant was professor of physiology and Dr. Ford was up there and he and another boy threatened him with a pistol if he didn't pass them and he did. But then he left the institution. They lined us up alphabetically and you got quizzed every day. So, when I'd be studying and find out I would have to read something 2-3 times to know what it said, I'd close the book and go to bed. When I'd wake up in the morning I'd look at it again. So often when I'd be studying that stuff I'd say I'm going to get called on for this and nine times out of ten, I did. At that time I had a photographic memory and I could just see the page.

Male: What about Dr. Doughty? Did you have any direct contact with him?

Dr. Florence: No, I never did. I remember who was the superintendent of the hospital, Dr. Lentz. And I tell you there is a woman here who is a member of the senior citizens and goes down to the First Presbyterian Church. She was down there as a nurse and I forget who the head of the nurses was at that time.

Male: I'm sure you knew Louise Grant at one time or another.

Dr. Florence: I don't remember that name. I've known so many nurses in so many hospitals that I just can't remember any more.

Male: What about Dr. Goodrich?

Dr. Florence: He was a surgeon wasn't he? The story was he operated on this woman who was seven months and he didn't know it.

Male: He, of course, wrote the history of the Medical College on its one hundredth anniversary.

Dr. Florence: Tell about this history that Kelly Coleman wrote.

Male: I don't know about that.

Dr. Florence: Well, he had written something. When I went down to get an award and Dr. Sydenstricker and Dr. Kelly were the only other ones to get this award, and by the way, I made AOA {Alpha Omega Alpha, a national medical honor society. Dr. Florence was the first female

member.} I didn't know what it was until Dr. Sydenstricker called us in. So, I am one of the charter members of the AOA. As I said, I never knew there was such a thing as the AOA.

Male: Tell me something about Dr. Moss.

Dr. Florence: I heard that he practically ran the medical school, but I don't know.

Male: Yes, he was dean from 1932 to 1934. He was such an interesting man that I am intrigued by what he was trying to do. I can't quite figure it out. Of course, he was a researcher primarily.

Dr. Florence: Well, I remember they said he was so into his research he actually forgot to eat and he died very young because of malnutrition. I have forgotten who they said that about though.

Male: You didn't know the Mettlers did you?

Dr. Florence: No, I was gone when they were here.

Male: Do you have a feeling for the Medical College of Georgia today?

Dr. Florence: Yes, I do and I keep in touch. I have sort of lost some contact. Dr. Moretz use to keep us informed of what was going on at the Medical College and there is a lot I would like to know about. That's why I was so interested in this third year medical student, but we may run down to Macon, and if we do, we'll have a chance to chit chat on the way back.

Male: I'm going to let you have peace now and tell you how much I appreciate you letting me come over to talk with you.

Dr. Florence: If there's anything specific about the medical... (inaudible)...I have no qualms. I was there and I was just like a sponge. Everyone was so nice and gracious and very kind. I'm still very fond of Mrs. Chaney and some of those people down there.