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The Landmarks of Federal Hill: History and Legacy of the Doctors Gorfine

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The Landmarks of Federal Hill

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Ask anyone who has had any contact with Federal Hill during the past 50 years about the Doctors Gorfine, and you’re sure to have some reaction. Either of a childhood dental experience or their parents first exposure to dentistry. Or should you be talking with an elder, they’ll remind you when it only cost 50 cents to have a tooth extracted and that sometimes people couldn’t afford it.

But their tooth was extracted and other dental work done and that later they paid the doctors Gorfine when they were able to.

It was this faith in a community and pioneering thinking that made the Mr. Gorfine Dental office grow from a one person dental office to one of the largest dental facilities in New England.

It all started in 1929, when Dr. Sam in this practice were a very difficult patients, who are still coming to our office. They also employed two dental hygienists, three licensed nurses, and from 14 to 17 dental assistants, or a total of between 42 and 43 people.

This practice grew over the years because of the great service that they gave to the community.

Their office hours were from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Sundays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., and many nights the dental office could be seen illuminated, as apparently someone had called for the emergency extraction of a tooth, and the Gorfines would come to the office to perform the emergency dental work required.

During the war years, due to the drafting of the laboratory technicians, the Doctors Gorfine engaged and trained many young local women and men to become dental laboratory technicians.

Some of these technicians later opened their own dental laboratories.

Another innovation which was pioneered by the Gorfines was the hiring of pre-medical and pre-dental students to work as dental assistants.

"I can honestly say, that we have never lost a penny. We have been seeing third and fourth generations of patients, who had not learned of the passing of Dr. Sam."

Some of the older residents of Federal Hill can remember when the parents of Doctors Gorfine would bring prepared food in baskets to the office on Atwells Avenue, as their children did not have time to leave the office to eat lunch or many times supper.

Area residents will remember what a close family the Gorfine Family was.

They all lived at Lindhurst Avenue in the Smith Hill section of Providence.

"Dr. Syd remembers the great change that had taken place on Federal Hill and is so happy to see the renewal taking place."

When asked what he missed most on Federal Hill he said it was the attraction of the pushcarts and the friendships he had developed over the years with the vendors who he would see mornings and evenings on his way to work and his way home.

He recalls that at the peak of activity on Federal Hill it would
be a difficult selection for him and his brother Sam to make. It or an excuse for the many invitations they received for Sunday dinner.

Dr. Syd claims that the friendships he has developed, he will never forget.

He has sensed a definite culture in the neighborhood and it seemed to have been lost between the '60s and the '70s.

But he now feels that the same culture and the same warmth of the people are returning to Federal Hill.

When asked when was the lowest point on Federal Hill, he said it was during the mid-60s. "Imagine having to be in an office and looking across the street at the Capelli Building, which was at one time completely filled, then later, it became completely vacant and abandoned.

"And today, we again see it being rebuilt. It really is a nice feeling to see things become alive again in the neighborhood," he said.

In 1979, Dr. Sydney sold his practice to Dr. Ralph P. Gebhart, who is presently carrying on the practice which was established by the Gorfines.

Dr. Syd still visits the office daily and is winding down his practice, but as soon as his practice and the details of winding down his life of dental practice are completed, he and his wife plan to travel and leave the state.

He may be taking up residence further South in order to be closer to his sister who has now moved to Florida.

When asked if he could have done anything different in life, what would he have done, his answer was, "Practice dentistry. I have always loved what I have done. Dentistry has been my vocation and my avocation."

There is no question that the brothers Gorfine and their sister rendered a great service to a developing community when the community was experiencing hardships caused by the Depression, and that this dental clinic was convenient and became tailored to the time and the needs of a community.

There is no question that the community will miss Dr. I. Sydney Godine.

It is gratifying to note that the institution which was started by the Doctors Gorfine is being continued by Dr. Ralph P. Gebhart.

Gebhart intends to continue his practice at the same location where the Gorfine dental clinic was founded and remained for more than 50 years.