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The Activator Methods Story: Development of a New Concept in Chiropractic.

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Chiropractic was born and grew up in America's rural heartland, the Midwest. This fertile environment and its people sustained the young profession and many of its great pioneers. Among these have been the technique developers, such as Clarence Gonstead, Clay Thompson, and I.N.Toftness. In more recent decades this group has been joined by two more Midwestern chiropractors, Warren C. Lee and Arlan W. Fuhr, the developers of Activator Methods chiropractic technique.

Based on oral history interviews with Mrs.Dorothy Lee, Dr.Arlan Fuhr, and Mrs.Diane Fuhr, this paper records the development of Lee, Fuhr and the technique.

Warren Clemens Lee was born on 8 December, 1914, in the rural village of Villard, Minnesota. His father Clyde was a farmer and grain elevator manager. His mother, Nellie, gave birth to four children, Irene, Marjorie, Warren and Margaret.

Lee attended Villard Grade School and high school in nearby Glenwood. His wife Dorothy recalls his mother Nellie mentioning that, even as a boy, he had loved to tinker with mechanical things. He often pulled apart and put back together radios and small machines.

At the age of seven an event happened that greatly influenced the course of his life. He became seriously ill, and was taken to hospital and diagnosed as having spinal meningitis. The medical doctors told his parents to take him home, as he was not expected to live through the night. But his parents called for help
from Glenwood chiropractor Dr. Witts, who stayed at their farmhouse for two days and nights, checking and adjusting the boy every twenty minutes. He recovered, and these events planted in his mind the idea of becoming a chiropractor (Dorothy Lee, telephone interview, 17 July 1989; Diane Fuhr, interview, 7 March 1989; Arlan Fuhr, interview, 18 July 1989).

Arlan Fuhr believes that Lee attended the Globe Business College, in Minneapolis, before commencing chiropractic studies. While working as a hotel porter to help cover tuition expenses, Lee studied at the Minnesota Chiropractic College before graduating from Northwestern College of Chiropractic in 1941, the same year as its incorporation*.

It may have been that, while at chiropractic college, Lee's early interest in mechanics developed into an interest in biomechanics. After graduation he enrolled in a one year post-graduate residency at Logan College of Chiropractic in St. Louis, Missouri, to study the work of Hugh B. Logan. On weekends Lee worked in the St. Louis J. C. Penney store. One Saturday afternoon, after work, he was caught in an April rain shower. He shared an umbrella with another J. C. Penney employee, Miss Dorothy Sharp. Three months later, on 2 July, 1942, they were married in St. Charles, Missouri.

The young couple then moved to Minnesota, where Lee worked in the St. Paul practice of Wally Hedburg D. C. But his introduction to practice was short, as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 led to his joining the U. S. Army Medical Corps. During his
service time a daughter, Joyce Ann, was born, and was followed in 1951 by a son, Richard.

After his discharge in 1946, Lee obtained a position as associate in the practice of Joseph Anderson D.C. The office was located above the movie theatre in the southwestern Minnesota farm town of Redwood Falls. Lee studied and practised Toftness and radionics work, and, after Anderson's death, purchased the practice and moved it across the street to 249 East Second Street. One of his new patients in 1953 was a thirteen year old farm boy named Arlan William Fuhr.

The young Fuhr was also the product of a rural background. His parents, Myron Lloyd and Cecilia Mary Fuhr, were of German extraction, and farmed near Seaforth, Minnesota. Following Arlan's birth on 2 September, 1939, two other boys completed the family. Fuhr has warm memories of his childhood, particularly the tightly knit German-American traditional family life. Family members were forced by the harshness of the cold Minnesota winters to work closely together and to rely on each other. Family prosperity depended on constant and careful shepherding of their livestock. Responsibility was learnt early, as the young boys were assigned farm chores, simple at first, and becoming more complex as they grew. In this environment Arlan learned what the writer Doug Bandow has called "the values that came naturally from rural life: self-reliance and independence, honesty and industry, family and community." *

Fuhr was particularly influenced by his paternal
grandfather, Leonard Michael Fuhr, the head of the Fuhr clan. The old patriarch owned the first and only threshing machine in the area. Its annual use, by sixteen neighboring farms, with teams of horses and men in friendly competition to do the most work, was an exciting event on the local calendar. Leonard Fuhr apparently sensed potential in his grandson, for he took the boy with him as he oversaw such events, and began to teach him the management of not only the land and animals, but also of men.

Although Arlan enjoyed the healthy outdoor life of his childhood summers, winter was a time of misery for him. The bitter cold brought him chronic sore throats. His thirteenth winter was the worst, and he endured seventy two low dose penicillin injections in a matter of months. One day, too sick to attend school, he accompanied his mother as she visited her chiropractor, Dr.Warren Lee. Lee noticed the boy, inquired as to his problem, and had his associate, Dr. Larry Wilson, who took care of all the children in the practice for free, take a full spine X-ray. Fuhr clearly remembers being shown his "leaning tower spine" on the X-ray. Following a program of twelve Toftness adjustments his throat problems disappeared.

Enthused by this experience, he wrote a homework assignment entitled "Why I Want to Become a Chiropractor." He was shocked when his favorite teacher at Wabasso High School dismissed chiropractic as "quackery". But in spite of this introductory taste of prejudice, his personal healing experience made him sure of his future calling (Arlan Fuhr, interview, 18 July
In 1957, after graduation from high school, Fuhr spent the summer at a Naval Air Reserve training camp in Minneapolis. This first time away from home was a lonely and difficult period for the teenager, but also a time of mental and physical maturing. That fall he enrolled at the University of Minnesota to complete the one year of pre-chiropractic liberal arts study which was a state requirement for later licensure.

Advised by Lee and Wilson, a Logan College graduate, Fuhr prepared to enter that institution. His parents had been able to afford the $270 tuition for the year at the University, but wondered how they could meet the $400 per annum fees for Logan. But Fuhr was determined, and an answer to the problem presented. Wilson learnt of an influential Minnesotan, M.T. Thatcher, who was the founder and president of the Grain Terminal Association. Thatcher had instigated a program of Grain Terminal Association scholarships, which supplied $1,000 to cover second and third years of study after the student had paid for and passed the first. After receiving a similar scholarship, the eighteen year old Fuhr enrolled at Logan in the fall of 1958. He admired and learnt much from college president Vinton Logan, whom he describes as "a salesman, like B.J. Palmer. Smoother than B.J., but not as smart." Logan was a good dresser and speaker, whose students continually tried to catch him breaking his trademark habit of never wearing the same tie twice. From him Fuhr learned "how to be a diplomat, and how to get along in the professional world."*
While at Logan, Fuhr showed early signs of the business and interpersonal skills that were to serve him so well later in life. On weekends he would travel to surrounding rural areas, buying eggs for twenty cents a dozen. These were then sold door to door in St. Louis for a dollar a dozen. Gradually he built up a route of regular customers, and expanded to supplying turkeys and hams as well. When he entered clinic, his egg route clients were invited to become patients. Eventually the business was sold to another student for a tidy profit.

After graduation, in September, 1961, Fuhr returned to Minneapolis and sat for the Basic Science Board examinations. When finished, he completed his commitment to the Naval Reserve by spending two years on active duty. After being posted to the Navy base at Charleston, South Carolina, he served as Yeoman Second Class on the U.S.S. Alacrity, a 198 foot long wooden minesweeper. The experience of sharing the cramped quarters of a small ship, in all weathers, with hard bitten older veteran sailors helped to mature the twenty one year old further.

However, it was not all hard sailing. Ship board friends introduced him to Diane, the daughter of Charleston army officer John Holt and his wife Dixie. Diane was a student at the Medical College of South Carolina School of Nursing, and the shy Southern girl and the extroverted Minnesota sailor were married on 23 December, 1963, at Folly Beach, South Carolina. The next month, after his discharge from the Navy, they travelled back to his parents' farm to decide where they would settle to begin
their married and professional lives.

At the age of twenty four, Fuhr felt that he was too young to begin practice on his own. He accepted Lee's offer of an associateship, and also performed chiropractic assistant duties in the office. He bought himself a pair of dime store glasses, and wore a hat to make himself appear older. His first patient was Henrietta Tweeten, wife of Carmen Tweeten, the local mortician. Success with Mrs.Tweeten's hypertension and headaches led the gregarious undertaker to send many patients to the young chiropractor. Tweeten would tell prospective patients "It's either him or me!"*

Those who today see the successful Arlan Fuhr may find his recollections of his early days in practice interesting, and his rise from a simple beginning to fame and fortune inspiring. In his first month he grossed $300, and in his first year, $6,000. The Fuhrs initially lived in a seventy five dollar per month third floor one bedroom furnished apartment. On 18 September, 1964 a daughter, Krista Diane, was born at 11.45 pm. During the delivery Fuhr pleaded with the attending obstetrician to hurry things along. The harried doctor asked why the rush. The father-to-be immediately answered that it was Chiropractic Founder's Day, and the baby just had to be born on that day. Fuhr swears that the baby then presented, and was nearly dropped by the stunned obstetrician.

During those early years Lee and Fuhr practised Logan Basic Technique and radionics. Hoping to improve his services, Fuhr had purchased a used radionics
machine. Shortly after he was warned that officials of the U.S. Federal Food and Drug Administration were confiscating the machines, and he got rid of his. He then found that he was without pre- and post-adjustment procedures to guide him as to when and where to adjust. He heard of seminars put on by Richard Van Rumpt D.C., and travelled to Chicago to learn Van Rumpt's procedures of pre- and post-adjustment analysis, utilising leg length checking, and his double thumb-lock toggle adjusting procedures. Fuhr attended many of these seminars and used this work until Van Rumpt introduced "Dropping the Bomb". This procedure involved the chiropractor standing at and observing the patient's feet and mentally asking Innate Intelligence to communicate the locations and listings of subluxations via changes in the relative lengths of the patient's legs. This was too much for Fuhr, who ceased attending the seminars in 196.

Later that year Fuhr was manning a Minnesota Chiropractic Association blood pressure testing booth at the State Fair in Minneapolis. A woman approached, and, after having her blood pressure checked, offered to teach him some chiropractic. Initially bemused, he watched with growing interest as she outlined on a napkin a system of pelvic analysis utilising relative leg length checking. He later realised that it was the chiropractor Mabel Derefield who had explained to him the Derefield leg check procedures, which she had developed with her husband. Fuhr incorporated these into his patient examinations. From a book belonging to Lee he also learnt and used the Truscott procedures of pressure testing of the atlas and leg length checking.
So, although many first think of the Activator adjusting instrument (AAI) when the name of Activator Methods is mentioned, the Activator Methods technique really had its basis in Logan’s concepts of body distortion, and the leg length checking procedures of Van Rumpt, the Derefields and Truscott. However, as their practices grew, Lee and Fuhr found the repetitious use of the Van Rumpt thumb toggle tiring. Fuhr recalls frequently arising with stiff and sore elbows, which he would place in hot water to loosen up. He would end the work day by placing them in ice water to ease their pain. Thus the development of the AAI was in response to the inability of these two chiropractors to stand up to the physical demands of busy practice.

In 1967 they mentioned this problem to Dr. Steve Inglis, a local dentist. He gave them a dental impactor, a small instrument designed to force amalgam into cavities in teeth. They ground off the end of a door stop, placed it on the end which contacted the patient, and used the instrument as a substitute for the thumb toggle. Unfortunately this unsophisticated piece of clinical research ended in failure, as thrusts delivered in this way appeared to have no effect on patients. Several other devices were also experimented with unsuccessfully.

Eventually, in 1970, another dentist named Dr. Stava gave them a surgical impact mallet, designed for splitting impacted wisdom teeth. They removed its scalpel, replaced it with a brake shoe rivet, and attached another piece of door stop to the end. When this device tested successfully on patients they finally had
the first functional ancestor of the modern AAI. They modified and used this mallet, manufactured by Union Broach of New Jersey, for several years. However, it did not stand up to the demands of busy chiropractic practice, and broke down quickly. Help came from Freddy Hunziker, a student at Cleveland College of Chiropractic in Los Angeles. Hunziker worked in his spare time in the machine shop of Western Airlines, and used its facilities to design and build a more reliable interior mechanism for the instrument. In 1976 he sold the patent of this design to Activator Methods, Inc., which had been incorporated that same year, and introduced Fuhr to a Swiss-American firm which began manufacturing the AAI to a high standard of quality.

But yet another reliability problem arose. With heavy use the small springs inside the AAI gave out after about three months. Fuhr was delighted when in 1978 Clark Bumgarner D.C., of Coffeeville, Kansas, informed him that this problem could be eliminated by replacing the springs with stronger ones removed from a twenty nine cent Parker ball point pen. Pen sales in Redwood Falls skyrocketed briefly as Fuhr's staff was called upon to perform the delicate task of replacing all the springs in AAIs held in stock. The insertion of stronger springs at the factory ended the problem and the AAI has changed little since.

Like many chiropractors, Lee and Fuhr found continually bending over adjusting tables tiring. In 1972 they designed what they believe was a first, a motorised adjusting table which not only took the patient from the standing to the prone position (and vice versa), but also
raised the prone patient higher from the floor. This eliminated the need for the doctor to bend over while adjusting. They arranged for a local company, Active-Aid, which manufactured physiotherapy equipment, to begin producing their table.

Having been taught at Logan that an adjustment "activated" the bone, they chose the name "Activator" for the instrument. hoping to avoid having the technique named after themselves, and having it die when they died, they named it "Activator Methods" (AM) in 1967. They became dissatisfied with the Active-Aid tables, and, while visiting the Active-Aid factory, picked up a pamphlet advertising TRI W-G, Inc., a Valley City, North Dakota manufacturer of physiotherapy equipment. In 1971 they contacted TRI-WG President John Weber, whose wife had just had back surgery. After Fuhr gave her one AAI thrust on her fourth lumbar vertebra she was able to get out of bed and walk for the first time in six weeks. Thus began a long relationship with TRI W-G manufacturing tables specially designed for use with AM.

By today's standards, the procedures of AM technique in 1970 were very simplistic. Yet they aroused enough interest within the profession that Lee and Fuhr were asked to teach them to others. In 1967 they began teaching informal weekend seminars in their own office. In 1970, at the invitation of Ervin Chessin D.C. and Eric Perlman D.C., Fuhr presented a seminar at the Garden Grove, California office of Carl Remlin D.C. Ten chiropractors attended.

Excited by his first seminar success, Fuhr planned
another shortly after at the Baker Hotel in Dallas, Texas. Depressed when only six enrolled, he considered cancelling. But Diane urged him to persevere, and he did so. One attendee had brought with him a woman patient whose chronic headaches had made her suicidal. Immediately after Fuhr adjusted her atlas she passed into a deep sleep. His worry about her passing out turned to elation when, twenty minutes later, she awoke and announced that she was finally free of head pain. Among the impressed observers was Karl Parker D.C., the son of Dr. Jim Parker, founder of the Parker practice management seminars. Karl visited Redwood Falls in 1973 and observed Fuhr's work for a week, before inviting him to teach AM at the Parker seminars. Fuhr declined.

But 1970 was a busy year for Fuhr anyway. He had become frustrated by the actions of his local state senator, who was not supportive of chiropractic. After consulting with Diane, who was the county Republican Party chairman, he decided on the unusual course of running as a Republican against the incumbent Republican, Carl Jensen, for the position of Senator representing the Seventeenth District. Following a hectic campaign, Fuhr narrowly lost the November election, and was deeply depressed before he realised the positive side of the experience. Not only had he and Diane learnt political skills which they were to refine and put to good use within and without chiropractic in later years, but the public exposure he gained during the campaign greatly helped the growth of his practice. Jensen also appeared to learn from the experience, and became responsive to the approaches of chiropractors.
In 1971 Lee and Fuhr began presenting two seminars a year in Minneapolis. Word of these reached the State Board of Chiropractic Examiners, which requested them to appear before it to explain what they were teaching. They were nervous and worried as they began their presentation. But the tension in the room broke when Lee recognised one of the Board members and asked if he was "the White boy from Olivia", whom Lee had taken care of when, as a two year old, he had almost died of measles. They knew they had won over the officials when the meeting ended with most Board members requesting AM adjustments then and there.

In 1972 Fuhr put on a seminar in Columbia, South Carolina and was amazed when fifty six chiropractors attended. In 1974 and 1975 they held weekend seminars on campus at Palmer College of Chiropractic, but were unable to continue doing so when W. Heath Quigley's administration there ended. Lee began presenting seminars in St.Louis, which were popular with Logan students.

Lee presented the first international AM seminar in Bournemouth, England, in 1972. Fuhr had always wanted to visit Australia, and promised himself that, when he reached a certain number of office visits in a month, he would take his family there for a vacation. He finally reached that number, and was in his dark room entering it on a graph when his assistant informed him that there were two Australian chiropractors in his waiting room. He was speechless when they invited him to visit Australia to teach his work, and he did so in 1974 in Sydney.
In the fall of 1974 events that were to change the very foundations of Fuhr's life began to unfold. His friend Carmen Tweeten began holding bible study classes in his mortuary. To become certified as a bible teacher, Tweeten needed eight persons in his class. To help, Diane volunteered to attend, and dragged her husband along. Fuhr went under protest, as the classes were held on the same night as Men's Night at the local country club, of which he was president. He took along a six pack of beer and, to his surprise, found his interest wandering from the beer to the Bible.

In December 1974 his embryonic faith was put to the test. He developed soreness and a lump in his throat. A specialist diagnosed a thyroid tumor, and he was operated on four days later. During this time he found he needed support, and turned to God. His felt that his prayers were answered when the surgery was successful and the tumor was found to be benign. On 13 January, 1975, he made the commitment to becoming a born again Christian, and his life underwent great change. He poured his immense energy and enthusiasm not only into chiropractic, but also into his religion. His attitudes irritated some, and he was asked to leave his Presbyterian Church. He joined the Assembly of God, but finding it "didn't move fast enough", he left and started his own church. After deciding that he had made a mistake, he returned to the Assembly of God, and placed himself under the guidance of church elder Ted Huisinga. Under the gentle but firm direction of this successful businessman, Fuhr became less brash and abrupt, and more interested in the spiritual aspects of life, and in acquiring wisdom. He began to run his personal, professional and business
lives on "scriptural principles". He also acknowledges
the important part that the behind the scenes support,
wise counsel and steadying hand of his wife Diane have
played in his career (Arlan Fuhr, interview, 18 July
1989).

Fuhr eventually attended a Parker seminar in
September 1976. He was deeply impressed by well known
chiropractic figures he met there, such as Russell
Erhardt, and awed by what he perceived as the power and
influence of Jim Parker, who received the young country
chiropractor while sitting on a leopard skin davenport in
the Petroleum Suite at the Dallas Hilton Hotel. Fuhr felt
that the seminar was "the greatest show on earth", and
told his wife that he was "glad I met Jesus before I met
Jim!" (Arlan Fuhr, interview, 18 July 1989). He began
teaching AM at Parker in November 1976, and is proud that
the technique has been taught at every one of these
seminars since. His enthusiasm for his teaching caused
his classes at Parker to grow rapidly, and he was invited
to speak before 6,000 people at a Parker Share Session in
New York's Madison Square Garden. This "incredible high"
boosted his confidence and reputation as a speaker, and
led to his becoming a popular motivational lecturer at
Parker. His Parker involvement had great influence on
his career. The knowledge and enthusiasm he gained there
enabled him to build a large practice, requiring a 1976
change of office location to 821 East Bridge St. in
Redwood Falls. On the road, his frequent appearances at
Parker led to wider recognition within the profession,
and contributed to steadily growing attendances at AM
seminars.
Thus the story of AM is one of two men growing from humble rural backgrounds and entering chiropractic as a result of remarkable personal healing experiences. They developed this innovative technique partly through synthesis and refinement of the work of others, and partly as a response to the heavy physical demands of chiropractic practice. They shared it with the profession via the grind of countless AM and college sponsored seminars.

But the change of decade from the 1970's to the 1980's was the end of the youthful years of AM. In 1980 Warren Lee retired, and the technique began to enter the mainstream of chiropractic when Logan College began offering its students an elective course in AM. Arlan Fuhr, matured by experience and wise counsel, sensed the first signs of a sea change in chiropractic, in which validation via research would become a powerful influence in the profession. His efforts then began to focus on placing AM in the vanguard of this movement.

References
