



# 1896 - 2016

## **Village landmark gets 120th birthday facelift as a gift from Ballston Dental proprietor Dr. Thomas Pray**

The tribute to the life and legacy of dentist Thomas Pray that follows was written in 2014. But as the expanded Second Edition of *The Prayer Lines Behind the Bylines* was nearing its publication deadline in October 2016, author Ann Hauprich learned the historic structure that houses Dr. Pray's dental practice at 128 Milton Avenue in Ballston Spa, NY was celebrating its 120<sup>th</sup> birthday.

To mark the milestone, Dr. Pray arranged with Kirkland Westbrook of Brookside Restorations for the exterior of the 1896 landmark to receive a facelift. With only the sepia horse and carriage era photograph that accompanies this presentation to guide him, Kirk Westbrook devoted extensive time to the meticulous transformation.

At the time the 1896 picture on this page was taken, the multi-tiered brick structure in the heart of the then young village was occupied by William Clements' Paint and Wallpaper store on one side and Jesse Young's Funeral Parlor on the other. Prior to being acquired by Dr. Pray in 1978, the structure housed Ruland's Furniture Store.



The 2016 project's goal was to replace all of the deteriorated first floor trim and signage areas with architectural details that were more in keeping with the 1890s. (All T111 siding from a renovation project that had taken place roughly four decades ago were also removed in the process and replaced with non-deteriorating PVC board.) Painting the detailed new trim with appropriate period color further enhanced the front of the building's quality historical appearance.

Pictures taken by Donna Martin of Village Photo following the project's completion capture Westbrook's masterful craftsmanship — along with signage lettering by Phillip Steffan and updated lighting by Fred Sutch of Sutch Electric.



Joining Dr. Pray outside of Ballston Dental on a recent autumn day were (left to right) dental assistant Taylor Joyce; dental hygienists Melissa Curry and Tracy Gilliland; office manager Denise Nichols; dental assistants Breana McCoy, Joy Soriano and Susan Joyce; and bookkeeper Brandi Phillips. PORTRAIT COURTESY OF DONNA MARTIN/VILLAGE PHOTO.



**More SMILEstone images:** A second commemorative portrait of Dr. Thomas Pray and his staff was taken indoors the day as the group was photographed outside of the 120-year-old landmark where they work. Flanking Dr. Pray in the first row are Tracy Gilliland and Susan Joyce. Standing behind them are Brandi Phillips, Joy Soriano, Taylor Joyce, Melissa Curry, Breana McCoy and Denise Nichols. ALL IMAGES BY DONNA MARTIN/VILLAGE PHOTO.

# Thomas Pray

## How an upscale upstate dentist grew a Green Thumb & a humanitarian heart

I'd arrived at the state-of-the-art dental practice owned by Dr. Thomas Pray on a glorious May afternoon seeking keener insight into the Dentistry from the Heart event he'd be hosting a few weeks hence.

By the time I departed, I was praying I'd be able to do justice to telling how a lad who'd "felt like Huckleberry Finn" romping on his Grandpa's farm half a century earlier had been transformed into a respected family and restorative dentist and member of the distinguished American Academy of Cosmetic Dentists.

Typing the advance story announcing that the first 100 uninsured Saratoga County residents to show up on Pray's Milton Avenue doorstep in Ballston Spa, NY on June 20, 2014 would have something extra special to smile about was a piece of cake.

Founded in 2001 by Dr. Vincent Monticciolo, Dentistry from the Heart annually helps ease the suffering of tens of thousands across the nation. Inspired to join the cause after meeting its founder in Chicago, Pray was for the second time in as many years preparing to offer an entire day of free basic oral health care services.

Supported by a team of other humanitarian-hearted dentists, hygienists and assistants, Pray had in 2013 donated the equivalent of \$30,000 in free consultations and x-rays followed by a free cleaning, filling or an extraction. One patient in need was also given a free root canal. Identical services were to be offered on June 20, 2014.

"The people we're reaching out to are those who too often fall between the cracks because they are neither affluent enough to be covered by high-end insurance nor financially disadvantaged enough to qualify for Medicaid," Pray had explained. "They are often the ones who suffer silently with toothaches because they cannot afford basic dental services."

Because Dentistry from the Heart patients were to be seen on a first come, first served basis, those wishing to take advantage of the event were being encouraged to arrive early. Patients would be welcomed into the reception area in groups of 10 at a time, and thanks to the generosity of local restaurants and firefighters, complimentary beverages and lawn chairs would be available to those who might otherwise have to stand on the sidewalk while awaiting seats inside.

Dentists who volunteered to join Pray at his 2014 event included Francisco Banchs, Lionel Bulford, Allyson Byrne, Katelyn Page, Richard Salvadore and Vera Salvadore. (A portrait taken by Donna Martin of Village Photo on the facing page shows the entire group of 2014 participants.)



**DENTISTRY FROM THE HEART** – Those who gave generously of their time and treasure to help make the June 20, 2014 event a success included (front row, flanking banner): Rebecca Gula, Dr. Thomas Pray, Tracy Gilliland, Dr. Katelyn Page and Joy Soriono. Middle row: Ryan Zager, Sharon Fronk, Anne Wright, Jimmy Valentin, Bre McCoy, Denise Verderese, Dr. Vera Salvatore, Michele Watkins, Dr. Lionel Bulford and Steve Gilliland. Back row: Tina Mott, Maggie Schmidt, Rebecca Scotland, William Wright and Dr. Richard Salvatore. Missing from photo is Melissa Curry. Portrait courtesy of Donna Martin/Village Photo. The picture below shows Pray with a Cambodian woman whose teeth had been blackened by eating betel juice nuts. Offering to give her a free oral examination was something the then vacationing dentist couldn't resist. The huge vine ripened tomato above was grown by Pray on the Saratoga County farm where he and wife Rhonda enjoy harvesting healthy and naturally sweet treats to share with others.



What editorial word count restrictions had prevented me from sharing with newspaper readers a year ago was the story-behind-the-story about how Pray grew the humanitarian heart that is motivating him and his incredible team to offer similar services during the summer of 2015.

Here's what I was chomping at the bit to share then, but couldn't fully sink my typing teeth into until now. It's the story of Pray's crowning achievement – a legacy of caring and sharing that has made a lasting impression far beyond the walls of his Saratoga County dental practice.

The person who observed *you can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy* may have intended it as a barb, but something tells me the source wouldn't be so glib after meeting Dr. Thomas Pray. For pride in his agrarian heritage is very much at the root of this dentist's inspiring story. Flashing an impish grin, Pray muses: "It's tough to get me out of my office, but it's tough to get me out of the fields, too. I feel so at home in both settings."

Not only at home, but at peace. Indeed the word *blissful* comes to mind whether gazing upon images of Pray clad in a crisp white oral surgeon's jacket or in dust-covered jeans atop a tractor – a sight reminiscent of Murray McLachlan's 1972 *Farmer's Song*.

"I gave up long ago on the idea of running my dentistry practice strictly as a business. My staff and I believe in creating relationships with our patients that go beyond the office doors. Our mission is to provide top quality dental care in a state-of-the-art environment with careful attention to patient comfort and safety. The fact that there are still people out there who can't afford regular dental check-ups and follow-up care really bothers me. That's what motivated me to get involved with Dentistry from the Heart," explains Pray.

One can't help but believe Pray's Polish-born Grandpa Constantine "Gus" Rogalski, who wed American-born Grandma Antoinette "Tilly" Gabrych in the early 1900s, would be proud as they had a profound effect on Thomas Pray's early life. The 12-acre homestead they purchased in Webster, near Rochester, NY in 1923, became his second home. Since both of the lad's parents worked, he had free reign of the fields and barn under the watchful eyes of his grandparents every afternoon during the school year and all summer long. At various times the small farm was home to a plow horse named Bosco and to 40 chickens as well as to many rabbits and flocks of ducks and geese. The latter two were not only used for their rich tasting eggs, but for making a Polish duck blood soup called *czarnina*. Their feathers went into the pillows and *pierzynas* — down comforters that kept them warm at night.

Young Pray loved hanging out on the farm with his Grandpa. "I was like a little deer running around in a meadow and often felt like Huckleberry Finn because there was abundant freedom to explore." The family dubbed him Grandpa's Little Shadow.



Future dentist Thomas Pray with dog Buddy on an ancestral farm in Webster, and surrounded by brother Bob and parents Eleanor and John in 1956. Bottom photo was taken several years later outside of the chicken coop-pig pen on the Saratoga County farm known as Agewood. To learn more about that chapter in Pray's fascinating life, kindly turn the page.



“By the time I came along after World War II, my grandfather had divided the farm between his two daughters: My mother (Eleanor Barbara Pray) and her sister Edwina. My now 92-year-old mother grew up on the farm, but my Dad (the late John Thomas Pray) was a city slicker. Raised in a large family in the shadow of Kodak, he was the first in the Pray family to graduate from high school. I was the second. John was a cracker jack welder as well as a maintenance mechanic for the Genesee Brewery.”

Pray awards credit for his strong work ethic to his grandfather. A tailor by trade, his Grandpa Gus crafted men’s suits by day and worked the farm in his off hours, often totaling 80 or 90 hours a week. His grandfather’s tailoring work had to be precise and the finished product of the finest quality. His motto: *“If you’re going to make a suit, make it out of the best material you can find — not tissue paper.”* These are words Pray has clearly taken to heart in his current practice.

Pray also followed his grandfather’s lead in other ways. Starting at a young age, Pray worked 16 hours a day, six days a week during high school summer vacations. By age 18 he was running his own hotdog stand from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., followed by the night shift at Canada Dry, unloading trucks from 6 p.m. to 1 a.m.

While attending Webster High School, Pray earned a reputation as both an athlete and as an entertainer, competing on the track team and earning the nickname “Woody” after wowing audiences as that character in a high school musical production of *Finnegan’s Rainbow*. “I had no interest in music, but coming from a family filled with tenor voices, I more or less got drafted to perform.”

Following his 1965 graduation from Webster High School, Pray earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Biology as well as Master of Science Degrees in Education and Molecular Genetics from the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. He subsequently earned his Doctoral of Dental Surgery degree from the University of Buffalo, graduating with double honors in Pediatric and Operative Dentistry.

To finance his college education – which ultimately spanned nearly a dozen years — Pray worked a diversity of odd jobs. These included being a hospital security guard, a short order cook, and laboring in a Bird’s Eye plant, where he regularly swung a sledgehammer to break up one-ton blocks of frozen rutabagas.

Unable to afford room and board as an undergrad, Pray lived in his ’62 Chevy parked in the college parking lot —with the exception of a few sub-zero nights when Campus Security took pity on him and brought him to the Infirmary to keep him from freezing. Somehow he also found the time and energy to compete in sports, earning renown as a varsity swimmer and runner. In 1966, Pray finished 94th in the prestigious Boston Marathon.

During the early years of his dental practice, Pray became a charter member of the Saratoga Springs Rowing Club. With nary a slacker aboard, the SSRC swept the nationals, winning the National Masters title in 1988. Pray and his crew went on to compete in three world championships in Miami, France and Scotland.

After reaching the pinnacle of his rowing career, Pray began to look for new ways to challenge himself. Competitive bicycling soon gave way to triathlon training and competition. Even now, his nature is to challenge himself physically.





CROSS COUNTRY CHAMP -- Young Tom Pray (in glasses) always ran barefoot. "I was way ahead of my time since this is now the new thing in long distance running," he quipped in 2015. Bottom photograph was snapped when he was honing his entrepreneurial skills in 1966. "I operated my own hot dog stand each summer during my undergraduate years. Norm Ferris, a high school senior, was my helper. I was selling hot dogs at only 30 cents and still making a profit," said Pray. After laboring from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. behind the hot dog stand, Pray would work the night shift at Canada Dry, unloading trucks from 6 p.m. to 1 a.m.





## Ageo Frizzera '71 & Woody Pray '70 Master Rowers

When Ageo Frizzera and Tom "Woody" Pray met in the title role of a production of *FINNEGAN'S RAINBOW* in 1967, they surely had no idea that 24 years later, they would still be spending several hours a day together.

Frizzera and Pray hit it off right at the beginning. At Plattsburgh, they earned together and joined the same fraternity. Ageo earned a bachelor's degree in economics and Pray completed both a bachelor's and master's degree in biology.

After college, Frizzera found a job with an electrical appliance company and moved to New Jersey. Pray enrolled at SUNY Ballston's dental school, then went into practice in Ballston Spa. They stayed in touch. Two Frizzeras decided New Jersey wasn't for him and he returned to New York where he is now an associate classification and pay analyst with the New York State Department of Civil Service in Albany.

While they're both doing well professionally, it's their personal lives that are making the headlines. The two have become world renowned rowers and have competed in numerous local, regional, national and international races - mostly finishing among the top of their class. They compete in Master's level competition, which is for competitors over the age of 27 and is divided into various age groups, generally opening about six years.

"This year," Pray said, "we took

second place in the two-man and, with two other guys, the four-man Canadian National Master's Championships. We were fourth in the two-man 1000 meter event in the World Rowing Championships in Mainz, and took first in the Head of the Madawaska, the Head of the Mohawk (for the 60th year is a row) and the Head of the Fish (for the 60th year is a row)." The two have also competed in France and in Scotland and, in 1990, were members of the U.S. National Master's team representing championship teams.

Always interested in keeping fit, the two had participated in triathlons for several years. And they continue to do. Last summer, they returned to Plattsburgh to compete in the YMCA's annual triathlon and placed second (Pray) and third (Frizzera) in the 40-49 age group.

But in 1985 "we reached a new apex," Pray said. "So we got together with about a dozen other people and started the Saratoga Springs Rowing Club."

Frizzera and Pray practice year-round. During the rowing season, they'll train for several hours a day, starting at about 5:30 a.m. at Frizzera's home on Saratoga Lake to row for an hour and training again later in the day. In the winter, they run, swim or work out on a rowing machine at least once a day six days a week. Pray has an indoor pool in his house, which makes that part of the training easier.



Ageo Frizzera and Tom "Woody" Pray with their shell.

"What's the best part about all of this?" It's a great meeting people from all over the world," Frizzera said. "I got a letter this week from a Russian rowing coach who invited us to visit. It's exciting to compete against former Olympians. Sometimes we even beat them."

Pray agreed and added, "The 'niz better shape now that we were in college and we can keep doing this

for years because of the guys who compete are in their 70's. If we keep practicing, imagine how good we'll be when we're that age!"

Pray is married, has two children, Jessica, 7, and John Thomas, 5, and lives on a "working farm," with 75 sheep and assorted chickens, ducks, geese and hogs.

Frizzera is single and lives in Saratoga Springs.

### It's Coming Down to the Wire!

Yes, the 1991 Alumni Fund and Parents' Fund will end on December 31.

If you made a pledge, won't you please mail your check today? Your gift WILL make a difference.

Thomas Pray -- who earned the nickname "Woody" after portraying that character in a high school production of *Finnegan's Rainbow* -- was often identified as such in subsequent sports headlines. Pray is second from the left in top photo which was taken after he completed a triathlon with friends in the mid-1990s. At far right is rowing partner Ageo Frizzera. The story above appeared in *Plattsburgh Today* in 1991.

Two years ago, at age 65, Pray and his son John took on the Whiteface Mountain Challenge, an eight mile, eight degree uphill run. “I was proud of attaining my goal of under two hours. But I was more proud that my son John finished a full 15 minutes earlier,” beams Pray, who is also the proud father of daughter Jessica.

Thomas and wife Rhonda Buchanan Pray — former Associate Director of the Adirondack Institute, an outdoor program based upon the principles of Outward Bound — have been wed since 1980. Both have remained physically active and interested in advances in healthy aging. Indeed Pray brings a devotion to fitness and healing to his practice and strives to inspire patients toward optimal health.

A key component is the pleasure he derives from planting seeds and tending crops at Agewood Farms – a former dairy operation in southwestern Saratoga County. It is there that acres of natural treats such as sweet corn and vine-ripened tomatoes grow in abundance. During harvest season, patients have been spotted departing from Pray’s dental practice with gifts of freshly picked veggies from his fields.

When I asked Pray what had been the turning point in his life in terms of wishing to assist the less fortunate with programs like Dentistry From the Heart, he responded: “I was raised to work hard, to be independent and to be responsible for myself. Although I struggled at times, it would never have occurred to me to ask for assistance. Given my upbringing which centered on self-reliance, I couldn’t conceptualize anyone else receiving assistance either. The first hint that there were benefits to societal aid came in the fall of 1969 during a chance encounter with then NYS Governor Nelson Rockefeller.”

Pray recounted how Rockefeller had come to the State University at Plattsburgh to dedicate the new Communications lecture building while he and his best friend, Jeffrey Selchick were Student Association leaders. As President and Vice-President respectively, they stood alongside the Governor as he addressed the crowd that autumn day. They listened as he explained why he’d created the State University system: to ensure lower and middle income New Yorkers an affordable higher education. Both Pray and his friend Jeffrey were recipients of that generosity.

“My friend Jeffrey Selchick went on to law school. In his illustrious career, Jeffrey has worked closely with three subsequent governors and today is the foremost Arbitrator in New York State. He and I could never have attended college without the State University system. Our families had no money to contribute. Jeffrey grew up in the Gun Hill projects of the Bronx. His dad was a truck driver. Mine worked swing shift in the Brewery. That day, hearing the sincerity in Rockefeller’s voice, I realized there was a place for helping people to go forward. The SUNY motto was *Let Each Become All They are Capable of Becoming*. From that day on, this has been my mantra.”

That wasn’t all the State University system provided the two young men. As student leaders, Pray and Selchick met with SUNY Plattsburgh President George Angell on a regular basis. Under his tutelage and that of the Dean of Students, Dr. W.C. Flynt, the direction of their lives changed.



**HOT WHEELS** -- Dentist Thomas Pray behind the wheel of his very first tractor in 1979 -- one of many he would own over the coming decades. That's also Pray trying to get an unruly heifer to pose for her identification papers. Such pictures were needed because all of the cows raised by him and wife Rhonda at their Agewood dairy operation were pedigreed. Each calf born there had to be photographed and registered. The couple, who raised registered Holstein cows for eight years, received an award from Stewart's Shops in 1981 for the cleanest milk shipped in Saratoga County. Acres of corn and tomatoes now grow at Agewood.



Rhonda Pray, milking top producing cow Copper, also handled other barn chores during most of the years she and Tom ran the dairy farm.

*“I identify with those who work hard, yet still cannot afford the care they deserve. Educating people to keep them healthy is one gift I can offer them.” -- Thomas Pray*

“There were weekly lunch meetings held in the President’s office. Not only did George Angell open our eyes to greater possibilities than we’d been given to expect from our modest beginnings, but he provided us with a very different role model than either of us had known. He also kept us from going hungry. At the end of every meeting, George made sure we took all the leftovers home with us. Believe me, that food was much appreciated!” laughs Pray.

It was Dean Flynt who guided Pray to dentistry and made certain he stayed in school long enough to achieve that goal.

“I’d decided to leave college for a semester. I was falling behind on bills and needed to work before I could pay tuition. I’d already filled out the necessary paperwork to leave. All that was left was to get the Dean’s signature. He wouldn’t do it. In fact, he ripped up the papers and told me to get back to class. He knew that if I left I might never come back. I had no choice but to stay and figure out how to make it work. Later, he was the one who came up to tell me he’d been thinking about my career choice and that teaching was not for me. He told me I should be in medicine. You know, I never would have considered becoming a dentist if it weren’t for him. Neither Jeffrey nor I could have fulfilled our potential had it not been for the care and kindness of these two SUNY men, President George Angell and Dean Willard C. Flynt.”

Now that the flurry of running a dairy farm, raising a family and building a practice is behind him, Pray says he can begin to give back to the community that has supported him all these years. “I identify with those who work hard, yet still cannot afford the care they deserve. Educating people to keep them healthy is one gift I can offer them. When I’m with a patient, I’m interested in the whole person. We talk about their nutrition as well as their dental issues. I want to know how I can help them to become all they are capable of becoming.”

This pay-it-forward generosity takes many forms. Each September the Prays open their farm to host a fundraiser for the West Charlton Fire Department. The event features an Argentine style barbecue as well as raffles and a live band. A recent event raised \$2,000 thanks to 100 pounds of chicken thighs and 60 bottles of wine donations garnered by the couple.

Asked why this annual benefit is so important, Pray responded: “Like most volunteer fire departments, ours is comprised of a few very dedicated individuals who give up hundreds of hours of family and personal time to ensure their neighbors’ safety. I can’t imagine a better reason to support the guys and women who do so much for others.... of course, it’s also an awesome party!”

What more to say but: eat, drink and be merry.

*Just don’t forget to floss – and count your blessings!*



A WONDERFUL LIFE -- It was in the early 1990s when Tom Pray wrapped his arms around children Jessica and John as they were seated inside the shell of a pumpkin that weighed close to 200 pounds. Now old enough to sip vintage wine bottled at Agewood, both offspring enjoy spending free time with their parents. The 2012 National Museum of Racing Ball was the backdrop for photo of Rhonda and Tom dressed to the nines. As the unofficial "track dentist" for Saratoga's Thoroughbred Racing industry, Pray cares for jockeys, trainers, owners, backstretch workers and track officials.