

# Lake Tahoe orthopedic surgeon recalls the days before medicine became mired in bureaucracy

By Kathryn Reed

Working 10-, 12-hour days, sometimes seven days a week. Unable to leave until every patient was treated because there was no on-call doctor to call. But all the while forming a bond with patients that doesn't happen today.

Oh, and then there were the cattle drives along Highway 50.

Things have changed tremendously in South Lake Tahoe and in the field of medicine since Paul Fry first began practicing here in the 1960s.

Fry will be the recipient of the Spirit of Philanthropy award Dec. 1 at the Barton Foundation's 21st annual Gala, which is part of the four-day Festival of Trees and Lights.



Paul Fry will be honored Dec. 1 at the Barton Foundation Gala. Photo/Provided

When Fry opened Tahoe Fracture Clinic in 1964 the office was

in the complex where Tahoe Pharmacy is. Looking out his window he could see the twice-yearly cattle drives. Ranchers took their herds either over Echo Summit to Placerville or over Kingsbury Grade to the Carson Valley for the winter, then brought them back to graze in the basin in the summer.

Fry remembers one year a rancher with a knee issue refused to get out of the saddle for surgery because straggler cows needed to be rounded up so they wouldn't be lost to the cold and snow. Work came first, no matter the pain.

In those days, private medical insurance was a rarity. Ranchers walked around with wads of cash.

"It was all done in cash and a handshake," Fry recalls.

Fry took out the rancher's knee cartilage and the rancher took out a stack of bills to pay the doctor.

"I think the most satisfying part of the profession is dealing with people – trying to help them regardless if you get paid or not," Fry told *Lake Tahoe News*.

When the town was cut off from the rest of the world for days at a time because of snow, people would gather at the few places that were open year-round. Everyone knew each other. Most of the town shut down between October and May. Heavenly and the casinos were the big draws in the winter.

"I compare what Tahoe was say 25 years ago to what it is now. We were one of the first and foremost vacation areas, at least on the West Coast. We've lost our charm," Fry said. "I look at it now like we are not the head of the dog, we are the tail of the dog. Aesthetically, we need to clean up Highway 50."

He recalls after the 1960 Olympics at Squaw Valley, the South Shore was hopping well into the 1970s.

### **Treating ski injuries**

Fry with Bob Oden of Aspen were the two doctors who created formal medical care for the U.S. Ski Team. It's a tradition Barton doctors have had a role in to this day with Richard Steadman taking over for Fry, and current Barton docs Steve Bannar and Terry Orr being part of the Olympic medical team more recently.

When Fry and Oden were involved, it was a volunteer position – flying all over the world, providing medical care to racers. Fry said he got burned out and turned it over to Steadman, who had joined his practice five years after it opened.

Locally, it was Heavenly Valley Ski Resort and Sierra Ski Ranch where skiers made turns. It wasn't until 1972 that Kirkwood opened, and early on snowboarding wasn't a sport.

Fry remembers one Washington birthday weekend when in a 48-hour period he treated 30 broken legs. He attributes the number of injuries to bindings not releasing. Plus, helicopter service did not exist so Fry handled all the orthopedic injuries.

“Every doctor, all 11 of us, were expected to take emergency room calls. There were no paramedics, no anesthesiologists, no emergency room physicians,” the 81-year-old said.

He was one of the few specialists around. Even so, he still had to do a bit of everything – including delivering a few babies over the course of his career.

When Fry first started treating patients at Barton Memorial Hospital if someone broke their femur, there was no device to put in a rod or plate. Instead, the patients came back in the spring for six to eight weeks of traction. He said there could be between 10 and 15 people in traction any given March.

On sunny days the patients would be wheeled out to the patio to get some sun. And that is when the contraband marijuana would come out.

“Nurses would report it to administration. Administration called the police. The police would give them a lecture. They couldn’t arrest them because they were in the hospital,” Fry recalls with a chuckle. “After a while we gave up.”

Today, a broken femur would be operated on immediately or the next day, with the patient able to go home in less than a week.

### **Changes in medicine**

While Fry praises technology, especially diagnostics, he emphatically liked practicing medicine earlier in his career than he does today.

“The biggest problem I see is the bureaucracy that has crept into the medical profession,” Fry said.

He also longs for the days when doctors had a better connection and better communication with their patients – something like the old country doctor. He attributes all the specialization to creating a disconnect between patient and doctor.

Today, the orthopedic surgeon assists his son, Mike Fry, with surgeries once a week; provides pro bono services to the Barton Community Clinic; and sits on the board of directors for Barton Health and Carson Valley Medical Center.

As for the award that will be bestowed upon him next month, Fry said, “The honor doesn’t really belong to me as much as it does to the people who have supported me along the way to be in the position to get the honorarium.”

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### **4th annual Barton Foundation Festival of Trees & Lights – Nov. 29-Dec. 2**

- **Nov. 29:** Senior Stroll and entertainment: 10-11am (Free for

seniors 55-plus)

Designer tree public viewing and entertainment: 10am-2pm

- **Nov. 30:** Designer tree public viewing entertainment: 10am-2pm

Family Night: 5-9pm

- **Dec. 1:** Teddy Bear Breakfast: 8:30-9:30am

Designer tree public viewing entertainment: 10am-2pm

The Gala: 5:30pm-midnight

- **Dec. 2:** Designer tree public viewing and entertainment: 10am-2pm

Family movie showing, "The Polar Express": 3pm

Public viewing (\$5 for adults; \$3 for senior citizens (55-plus); \$3 for children (ages 3-12); children 2 and under are free) and Family Night tickets (\$35 for a family of six). Available at South Lake Tahoe Raley's.

Event is at MontBleu casino in Stateline.

All proceeds benefit Barton Memorial Hospital's emergency department Level III trauma center designation.