

Burt Shurly

A Remarkable Life Story

Written by Richard J. Frendt

We all are familiar with the camp on the Northwest side of North Lake. We see the youth in the summer enjoying the thrills that a few days at camp can bring. The camp bears the name of Burt Shurly. The story of this man is remarkable.

Burt wrote in a short autobiography, "I was born on the Fourth of July, 1871, and never got over it." His father, Edmund, was a Civil War Colonel in the Union Army and ended his service in Chicago where he decided to make his fortune. When Burt was just three months old, the Great Chicago Fire struck and destroyed their home and Edmund's business.

During his early years, Burt lost his only siblings, a sister and brother, to diphtheria. His sister Edna died before Burt was born and eight year old Arthur died when Burt was an infant. This was no doubt an influence in his later interest in children's health.

After some difficult years, the Shurly family moved to Sparta, Wisconsin, in search of a healthier climate for Burt's mother, Augusta. Burt spent his first year in high school in Sparta and had vivid memories of starting each school day with the Lord's Prayer and recital of the twenty-third Psalm. The temperature, which once reached minus 43 degrees, was also memorable.

The family moved back to Chicago where Burt finished high school earning the honor of class Salutatorian. Desiring to follow in his father's military footsteps, Burt applied to West Point. He passed the rigorous exam but for some reason was not accepted. This was a great disappointment, and as a second choice he enrolled in the Northwestern Military Academy in Highland Park, Illinois. He graduated in 1890 and was commissioned second lieutenant in the Illinois National Guard.

Burt then enrolled at the University of Wisconsin and earned excellent grades, graduating in 1893 with a Bachelor of Science degree after only three years of study. While there, he was the school tennis champion, manager of the football team, and editor of the campus newspaper.

Burt's uncle, Dr. Ernest Lorenzo Shurly (Edmund's youngest brother), was a professor at the Detroit College of Medicine. He suggested that Burt study medicine at the school. Burt enrolled and eventually interned at Detroit's Harper Hospital where private rooms cost ten dollars a week and ambulances were pulled by horses. Burt sometimes rode on the back step of the Grace Hospital ambulance as they hurried to the accident scene. The first ambulance to arrive reaped the financial reward of caring for the injured. Graduating from medical school in 1895, Burt did post graduate studies at the University of Vienna. His medical education was undoubtedly made possible through the generous support of his Uncle Ernest.

Burt loved baseball and he recalled some exciting games between Buffalo and the Detroit Wolverines (renamed the Tigers in 1895). Fans would throw seat cushions at the umpire when they disagreed with a call.

When Burt moved to Michigan, he resigned from the Illinois National Guard and enlisted as an apothecary in the Michigan State Naval Brigade. The brigade was known as the “champagne preserve” or the “millionaire’s navy” due to the number of wealthy Detroit families’ sons in the brigade. They trained on Lake Huron on the *USS Michigan*, the same ship Burt’s father, Edmund, helped defend during the Civil War when confederate prisoner Major Charles Cole attempted to capture it during the prisoner uprising at Chicago’s Camp Douglas. In other Civil War action, Edmund defended railcars owned by the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. Edmund was given a lifetime rail pass by the railroad company, and Burt used it often while he was living in Wisconsin.

In 1897 while aboard the training ship, then Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt inspected the ship. The crew pleaded for another training ship since they shared the *USS Michigan* with Ohio and Pennsylvania crews. Roosevelt acquired for them the *USS Yantic*, a sleek, 197-foot, three-masted bark, built for Civil War blockade duty. It was in terrible condition but the brigade repaired and refitted her, covering much of the cost themselves.

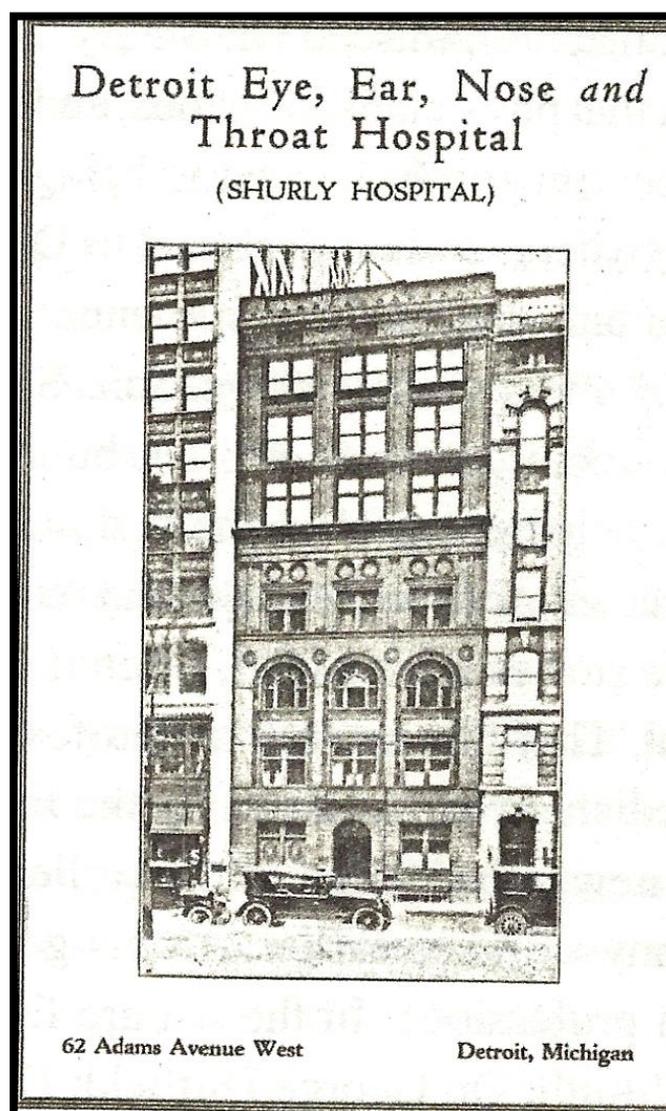
When the Spanish American War broke out, the brigade volunteered their service and in April, 1898, was assigned to a 398-foot auxiliary cruiser, the *USS Yosemite*. The *Yosemite* was the first ship to land marines in Cuba and was the only ship blockading San Juan Harbor, Puerto Rico, when superior enemy forces were defeated by the Michigan Brigade. A Detroit News article stated, “A world impatient of class distinctions has forgiven them their wealth, their unimpeachable pedigrees, and their glittering social positions.” For their actions, each man on the *Yosemite* received service medals and three months extra pay, the only sailors in the war to receive it and the last extra pay ever awarded in the U.S. military.

After the war, Burt returned to Detroit and practiced medicine with his Uncle Ernest. In 1905, in addition to his medical practice, he became a professor at his alma mater, the Detroit College of Medicine. He was a pioneer in the use of intubation, the technique of inserting a tube in a patient’s throat to improve breathing. He was an ear, nose and throat specialist and became involved in the fight against tuberculosis. He was instrumental in establishing the Detroit Tuberculosis Society, and started funding drives that were very successful. At his urging, the society began testing school children for TB and gave free chest x-rays to all who tested positive. By 1937, there were 270,000 Detroit kids being tested every year.

In 1913, the Detroit College of Medicine lacked funds to make necessary upgrades to its labs and equipment and in a desperation move, the stockholders decided to auction off its assets. The University of Detroit bid \$75,000 and Burt, who was against a merger, bid \$76,000 of his own funds and became the only person in America to own his own

medical school outright. It was renamed the Detroit College of Medicine and Surgery. Funding continued to be a problem and attempts to raise money were inhibited when WWI broke out. In 1918, the Detroit Board of Education assumed responsibility and the school became the first medical school in the country owned by a municipality. Eventually it became what is now the Wayne State University Medical School.

Burt's uncle Ernest died in 1913. Ernest had built a four-story medical office building on West Adams Avenue across from Grand Circus Park. Burt had worked in this facility since graduating medical school in addition to his professorship at Detroit College of Medicine and Surgery. Burt assumed control of the medical office building and in 1915 he added three floors and converted it to a hospital, officially The Detroit Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Hospital, but widely known as the Shurly Hospital.



The hospital closed while Burt was away during WWI but reopened in 1919 and operated until 1950. It had 100 beds and served the people of Detroit with seventy-five percent of its patients too poor to pay. The costs were borne by the city, a charity, or the hospital. Burt often charged as little as five dollars for tonsillectomies and adenoidectomies.

In 1917 Burt began organizing a Harper Hospital medical unit, named Base Hospital Unit 36, to serve in France. The U.S. entered WWI in April 1917, and Harper Hospital immediately formed two hospital units to serve in France. One was Base Hospital 36 with Burt Shurly, now with the rank of Major, as its Director. This was Burt's proudest achievement in his life. This calls to mind his comment about being born on the fourth of July and never getting over it.

The people and businesses of Detroit completely outfitted the unit at no cost to the government. As an excerpt from *'The Town Gossip'* attests, Dr. Shurly was a dynamo.

“He has one of the largest practices in Detroit and manages to attend to an almost unbelievable number of suffering people every day. Despite that and other calls upon his time, he has assumed the task of organizing one of the base hospital units, which will represent Detroit in France when the American Army under “Black Jack” Pershing gets to grips with the Germans... Between consultation with patients, he talks to the adjutant general in Washington, interviews candidates of both sexes anxious to journey to France with him, and answers a never-ending series of more or less pertinent questions over the telephone regarding the progress of his plans... As one of his assistants put it to me: “Dr. Shurly is never in one place more than a minute at a time.”

Hospital Base 36 was housed in five hotels and contained 3,000 beds. At times it was overflowing, on one day alone over 1,000 were taken in. The work was complicated by the deadly influenza that incapacitated 20% of the American forces. The hospital was the closest one to the front lines, about 40 miles away. Dr. Shurly was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and then full Colonel while in France.

Upon arriving home, Burt gave this report: “The wonders of modern surgery, which reduced mortality and amputations to an almost unbelievable minimum during the war, completely revolutionized surgical methods. . . Of 18,344 cases handled by our unit, we lost only 143, the percentage of mortality being 0.78%, less than one percent. And of all the cases, we found it necessary to perform only 20 amputations.”

Base Hospital 36 served all the allies as well as the occasional German prisoner. For his service in WWI, Colonel Shurly was awarded the Purple Heart medal for meritorious service, and in 1932 the French presented him with the French Legion of Honor medal.

In spite of the carnage he witnessed during the war, he was adamantly against disarmament believing a strong military deterred war, and voiced his beliefs openly.

Another of his beliefs was that prohibition caused more ills than it cured and spoke out on his views. In 1931 he ran for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives on the Republican ticket but was badly beaten in the Democratic wave that swept into office.

In 1927 he ran for the Detroit Board of Education and was elected. He served on the board until his death in 1950, including two terms as president. In 1927 many educators thought Detroit Schools were a model for the nation. He championed improvements in education and in children's health, including hearing tests for elementary school children, orthopedic exams, free eyeglasses for children who couldn't afford them, and free clinical care for underprivileged children.

Wayne State University, in a publication titled "Notable Alums", lists Burt Shurly and includes the following statement: "After his death, the public school leadership named a summer camp in Gregory, Mich. after him." This must have occurred a few years after his death since a Detroit Free Press article on July 1, 1954, states: "More than 200 underprivileged children left Wednesday for a month's vacation at Single Bar Christmas Seal Camp at the Detroit Tuberculosis Sanatorium at North Lake near Chelsea." Calling the camp "Single Bar Christmas Seal Camp" distinguished it from the Double Bar Christmas Seal sold by the National Tuberculosis Association. The Detroit Tuberculosis society sold their own stamps and kept most of the money for local TB endeavors. The interesting thing to note is that in 1954 the camp was not yet called the Burt Shurly Camp.



TB Christmas Seals: A National Seal (double bar) on left and a Detroit Seal (single bar) on right.

On February 10, 2015, PBS aired a program titled "The Forgotten Plague" that stated: "By the twentieth century, TB had killed one in seven of all the people who ever lived." For many years the disease was commonly called "consumption", perhaps explaining the lack of awareness about TB. Fresh air was considered to be very helpful in recovery and camps were established across the country.

The book titled "Burt Russell Shurly", written by Burt's grandson Robert Vanderzee (iUniverse, Inc., 2011) states: "In 1926, The Detroit Tuberculosis Society established the Leland Sanatorium in Ypsilanti, Michigan, and Shurly served it as a consulting physician. By 1937, it had a capacity of 150 beds. It also had a facility known as Leland Farm, *and a summer camp for 120 boys or girls.*" (italics added)

Note the caption of the photo below.



1940 Detroit TB Sanatorium
North Lake Camp

In 1950 Burt suffered a massive heart attack and passed away two days later, on October 20, at Harper Hospital, the same hospital where he completed his medical internship over half a century earlier. The Burt Shurly Camp on North Lake, Chelsea, MI, was named for this amazing man and his generous contributions to our society.

Burt's grandson Robert Vanderzee graciously gave permission to use his book "Burt Russell Shurly" (iUniverse, Inc., 2011) for excerpts, paraphrasing, and information used in this article.