

# States of the Union

## DEEP IN THE HEART OF TEXAS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



**O**n the road—Our station wagon, parting the morning mist at 70 mph, is headed south out of Corpus Christi into the Rio Grande Valley, toward three of the most threadbare counties in all America—Willacy, Hidalgo and Starr. It may be the same route, I am thinking, taken by Zachary Taylor (“Old Rough-and-Ready”) with his ragtag army in pursuit of Santa Anna. That, say historians, is how we won Texas; and *that*, say I, is why I am here today, pursuing the Chicano heart.

Did Zachary Taylor get up this early? It is 6:45 A.M. and we have been driving nearly an hour. Our cardiac caravan of three cars bears a covey of doctors, nurses and technicians, all of them heart-wise. I’ve been allowed to go along for the ride, to take notes for a book on the American health system, but I’m probably the only one in the group who can’t tell a ventricle from an atrium.

We are bound for Raymondville and thence to the border town of Brownsville. In the back tier of our station wagon sits the mild-mannered mastermind of these excursions, Dr. James W. Simpson, 39, head of the cardiology department at the Driscoll Foundation Children’s Hospital in Corpus Christi. The middle seat is occupied by Sally Woods, a student nurse; Agapito Sanchez, a young social worker; and Dr. William Cox, a heart specialist who once numbered Lyndon Johnson among his patients. Arturo Cortez, a “PCA” (pediatrics-cardiac associate), is driving.

At least twice a week Simpson, his staff and anyone useful he can enlist ride the rural circuit. They

visit a dozen clinics each month, assay a million heartbeats. Last year the team traveled 40,000 miles and examined 8,000 children, nearly all Chicano. About one out of every 100 children born down here suffers from some type of congenital heart defect, and one in three of these dies within the first year of life. Early diagnosis and treatment could prevent most of the deaths—which is why Simpson keeps his caravan rolling.

Right now we are rolling through the flat grazing country of the Kings, Bishops, Kenedys, and Armstrongs—the big landowners whose barbed wire fences parallel the highway and stretch tiresomely toward the horizon. I ask my fellow passengers if they have found a positive correlation between congenital heart disease and feudalism. Simpson smiles. “Maybe we can get a grant to study that,” he says.

**Raymondville**—The other two cars have beaten us to the clinic and the occupants are already hard at work. The waiting room is only half full, but the tiny examining

rooms are overflowing with nurses, PCAs, children, parents, and grandparents. Many of the fathers and mothers have given up a day's wages to be here. Whoever proclaimed the death of the American nuclear family could not have had these folks in mind. They are too poor to be in vogue.

Dr. Simpson, looking "Texas Casual" in an open-neck gray shirt and slightly baggy gray trousers, glides down the corridor exchanging greetings with patients. Incredibly, he remembers their names and even some of their problems. To an elderly man: "Did you get that Social Security matter straightened out, Mr. Martinez?" To a teen-age boy: "Are you still taking those little yellow pills every day?"

I am free to wander where I please. I pass a room in which Arturo, wearing a white coat, is examining a little boy. Arturo beckons me in. The boy's parents are hunched in a corner gravely watching as Arturo thumps first the child's chest, then his back. When he has finished his thumping, he removes a pen from his pocket and with excruciating care writes a few words in his folder. The parents lean forward to see what he has written. I lean forward, too. We can't see.

Now Arturo looks up and says something in Spanish. The effect is magical: dazzling smiles, musical laughter. The parents are the happiest two people in all of Willacy County.

"What did you say to them?" I ask.

"Nothing much. Only that the boy has a healthy heart."

I drift into another room. Agapito is talking earnestly to a small, pale girl with large dark eyes. She is holding a baby on her lap. "This baby," Agapito explains to me, "has something wrong with her heart—we don't know how serious it is. We need to get her up to Corpus for a complete examination, but the parents are afraid. They

say they don't want anyone to tamper with their child's heart."

I tell Agapito that the parents' position seems reasonable. "Yes," he says, "only if we don't change their minds the baby could die."

The little girl with the large eyes is staring at me. "Is she a sister?" I ask.

"No, the mother."

**Matamoros**—We are sitting at a long table in a small restaurant, having arrived here by riding straight through Brownsville and on across the toll bridge into Mexico. This is the town "Old Rough-and-Ready" took with ease in 1846—and retook with ease in 1848. We Simpsonites come in peace, merely hoping to fortify ourselves with beer and enchiladas against the long, clinical afternoon.

Simpson calls to me from the other end of the table. "Has anyone told you yet about Dr. Toledo and Enuresis Sunday? No? Well, this Dr. Toledo is a pediatrician in Eagle Pass, which is a town quite a ways north of here along the border. It's mostly Mexican-American except for some Kickapoo Indians who sleep by the river under the bridge. Anyway, Dr. Toledo is a terrific doctor and he's always thinking up ways to dramatize health and hygiene to the people there. He started his own television program, for instance; and he organized a Health Festival, a *fiesta*, that had the whole area thinking about things like nutrition and sanitation. He's an amazing man.

"Except there was one problem he never seemed able to solve: He couldn't stop the parents from punishing their kids for bed-wetting. Of course, the more they beat the children, the more the children wet their beds. It was getting to be quite a dilemma.

"He decided to ask the local priest for help. At first the priest didn't want to get involved in 'a secular matter,' but because Dr.

Toledo plays the organ in church every Sunday—and for free!—there wasn't any graceful way the priest could refuse. So the next time the people came to mass they were astonished to hear a stern sermon on the sinfulness of beating children for wetting their beds. That was Enuresis Sunday."

"Did it work?" I ask.

"According to Dr. Toledo, nobody wets his bed in Eagle Pass any more."

**Brownsville**—The time is 7 P.M. For nearly five hours the staff has been probing the hearts of Brownsville children. Now the huge waiting room is empty.

In the examining room Sybil Beck, the electrocardiogram expert, is running her last EKG of the day, on a little girl who doesn't want to lie still. "Keep your head down," says Mrs. Beck as she watches the needle make Dow Jones-like peaks and valleys. "There's nothing in this room worth looking at."

Gilbert Muniz, a PCA, is holding a tape measure in one hand, a baby in the other. He says he must measure the baby's length.

Dr. Simpson, with a stethoscope to a boy's chest, is showing Sally Woods how to detect a certain type of heart murmur. "You start here," he says, placing the instrument beneath the boy's right collarbone, "and carefully work your way across."

Dr. Cox is staring hard at an x-ray lit up on a screen. I stare with him. "Uh, what exactly are we looking at?" I ask.

The question seems to amuse him. "It's a man's heart," he replies.

"Oh. And is there anything wrong with it?"

"It's in failure. You're looking at a failing heart."

I squint at the x-ray but I see nothing, neither the heart nor the man. Suddenly I am very tired. On the long ride back to Corpus I shall surely sleep.