

# OUR HERITAGE

## A.M. SKEFFINGTON, O.D. —THE MAN

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### Abstract

*Dr. A.M. Skeffington dedicated his life to the betterment of optometry. He is considered the father of behavioral optometry. His quest for knowledge brought him in contact with leaders in psychology, neurology and education. His mission brought about changes and developed the concepts that vision is a learned skill, and through proper training, people could see more efficiently. The growth and success of OEP is directly associated with his genius.*

### Key Words

*vision reconditioning, post graduate education, stress-relieving lenses, Optometric Extension Program, A.M. Skeffington*

**D**r. A. M. Skeffington, was born in Kansas City, Missouri on August 28, 1890 and died in St. Louis on March 3, 1976. The remarkable story between those two dates is of a man who extended an influence on the rationale and delivery of eye and vision care that continues through today. His extraordinary dominance in optometry, at times controversial, was always directed towards improving the profession, with the public being the ultimate benefactor. The Skeffington story is to a great extent the history of optometry from its infancy.

Skeffington's mother was born in Denmark and educated in the Court Schools. She could speak all the modern languages, including Russian, and was noted in the then stuffy community of Kansas City, Missouri, as having a "foreign accent." His father was born in England. Skeffington Parish in Leicestershire still houses the Skeffington Library (one of the largest sermon libraries), Skeffington Hall (dating from King John), and Skeffington Cemetery (burial vaults in the walls of the church) (see Figures 1 and 2). His father, instead of following the family traditions of service in the army, the church or the diplomatic corps, went to sea and ultimately commanded a lake vessel. He met his wife in America and settled in Kansas City, Missouri.

According to Skeffington's wife, Mary Jane, whom he knew from childhood, "...throughout his formative

years, Skeff was always planning on ways to make everything better. He was a brash, annoying young pup to my staid relatives, just a 'dreamer' to them..."<sup>1</sup> Language and discussion was always respected in the Skeffington household. Even as a pre-schooler, his family played word games with him, standing him upon a chair, making him express himself and enlarging his vocabulary. Skeffington dropped out of high school because he felt that his teachers knew all the answers and none of the questions. Their unhappiness and discomfort with his questions led him to leave formal schooling and go West to wrangle cattle, herd sheep, pick hay and work on section gangs. When he returned to Kansas City, ready to settle down, a Rev. J. Stewart Smith influenced him to become a postulate and candidate for Holy Orders. With six months until graduation and having earned all the credits for the B.D. degree, he was told "you must abandon reason in religion."<sup>2</sup> This did not fit with his dreams of a future based on the betterment of mankind, so he abandoned a career in the clergy.

Optometry was little more than a "trade" when he decided to pursue it. The year 1917 marked the first time that he completed a program of formal education, when he graduated from the Needles Institute of Optometry in Kansas City. He rented a small one story building in Kearney, Nebraska. This was the first purely optometric practice in the state. The next decade in private practice



Figure 1. The graveyard in Skeffington Parish, Leicestershire, where there were "no stones engraved without the Skeffington name." Photos courtesy of London optometrist, Paul Adler.



Figure 2. The village bulletin board.

was a prelude to his "mission" that would ultimately lead to his leadership in optometric postgraduate education and the restless seeking of answers to clinically oriented problems.

Mary Jane and Skeffington made a tour of the eastern United States in 1922, visiting the offices of optometrists and supply houses. They were shocked at the general practice procedures and lack of organization in optometry. They were also troubled by the lack of information available to the practicing optometrist. However, they were encouraged by the fact that, in 1923, the first Western States

Congress had convened in Denver, Colorado, for the purpose of bringing optometrists together to exchange ideas. One of the slated speakers for that Congress, R.C. Augustine, a past- and the only three-term President of the American Optometric Association (AOA), asked Skeffington to fill in for him due to an illness. Skeffington said "...I was not fit to untie the laces of his shoes, but when you get called on by that kind of a man to do something, you attempt to do your best."<sup>3</sup> He put together a series of talks on his work with the ophthalmometer and adverse hyperopia. Other

speakers were Howard D. Minchin, Ph.D., Professor of Applied Physics and Director of the Applied Optics Program at Ohio State University, and Charles Sheard Ph.D., Head of the Dept. of Physics-Biology of the Mayo Clinic and, several years later, Head of the Dept. of Physics-Biology at the Los Angeles School of Optometry. Skeffington was a bit disillusioned because he felt some of the speakers were discussing methods of diagnosis and treatment which, from his clinical experience, just didn't work. Later, when asked by the Kansas Optometric Association to repeat his Denver lectures, he replied that he would not lecture, but rather conduct a "clinic," using patients, and discuss the findings with the audience.

The annual meeting of the American Optometric Association (AOA) in 1924 was held in Kansas City and brought together, by chance, Skeffington and E.B. Alexander. Both were featured in the first official clinical demonstration at an AOA convention. In booths, five optometrists demonstrated current clinical practice on preselected patients. This led to the development, around 1926, of AOA's Certified Clinicians status. Dr. Skeffington provided educational sessions to the candidates.

Skeffington decided that the isolation and limitations of an office practice hampered the attainment of his mission. Consequently, in 1926, the Kearney office was closed and Skeffington established a formal association with E.B. Alexander's highly organized Southwest Oklahoma Study Group and the Oklahoma Extension Program, which was an expansion of the Oklahoma Optometric Association's education program. This was a very symbiotic relationship, because as Skeffington said "...I am not a planner...Dr. Alexander one time observed that I never planned anything, but that very fact allowed a degree of flexibility that the planner never had."<sup>3</sup> This new direction involved the burden of leadership, sacrifice, both for himself and his loyal and gracious Mary Jane, and a degree of dedication possible only for a man nurtured in piety and in dignity, disciplined in the world of hard knocks, yet possess-

ing one of those unique qualities of rebellion, and of the questing mind.

The name Optometric Extension Program (OEP) was first coined in 1928. The word "Extension" was used to convey the idea of reaching out to others, without boundaries. Skeffington became Director of Education and traveled around the country each year to meet with optometrists at congresses, seminars and study group meetings. The following is the original OEP organizational structure and activity list at the County, State and National levels:<sup>3</sup>

1) For the Clinical Associates the OEP educational activity list placed emphasis on the technical, clinical, as well as practical, aspects of optometry. It was *Technical* in much of its published material, *Clinical* in the form of supervised monthly study group meetings covering *Extension* subject matter and *Practical* in its coverage of optometric economics: practice building ideas, office management, office routine, methods of "selling," office analysis.

2) For consumer information, OEP's efforts included (as it does today): *publicity* (newspaper releases service, personal publicity for Clinical Associates), *public education* (school surveys, a consumer-oriented educational system and public lectures at civic clubs).

In the middle of the 1920s and early 1930s optometric education was disorganized. Each college (and there were dozens of them) taught its own particular "brand" of optometry, which in general, incorporated the same two elements—determination of the lenses to obtain the best distance visual acuity, and, for presbyopes, the use of a plus add for reading. Skeffington and his associates sought to assess the vision system more fully. The "18 Point" optometric examination was developed by the middle of the 1920s. Later, the "blur points" were added by Associates Louis Jaques and George Crow, and the OEP routine became known as the "21 Point Examination."<sup>4</sup>

As an increasing number of optometrists were utilizing the "21 Point Examination," it was being incorporated into the curricula of some of the optometry schools. Skeffington was holding innumerable conferences with his optometric associates, and with leaders in other disciplines, especially experimental psychologists and neurologists, developing the then radical theory that vision is a learned skill, and that, through proper training, people could see more efficiently.

This concept was first introduced as "vision reconditioning." Then, after the publication by OEP of the series of papers by Crow and Fuog during the middle 1930s,<sup>5</sup> Skeffington coined the new term, "The Training of Visual Skills," or "Visual Training,"<sup>6</sup> to differentiate it from orthoptics, which emphasized the exercising of weak extra-ocular muscles. Consequently, with significant effort by Skeffington and OEP's leadership between 1920 and 1935, optometry was transformed from a business of fitting glasses for better distance seeing to a profession dedicated to the patient. The goal was to obtain maximal acuities and **COMFORT** along with more **EFFICIENT** vision for each patient. During this period, Skeffington was inspired to impart the ideas that vision could be made more efficient and that it is developed.

Skeffington, at this stage, was increasingly interested in emerging scientific concepts. He was not content to settle for a compromise answer to the clinical questions his colleagues raised, nor to those that plagued his own restless mind. His quest for a philosophy that reached out and beyond the empiricism of the past once again inspired him to meet with leaders in psychology, neurology, education and other disciplines. He not only read the works of research scholars such as Samuel Renshaw, D.O. Hebb, Hans Selye, Emmett Betts, Walter Lancaster, Ward Halstead, S. Howard Bartley, Arnold Gesell, Wilder Penfield, Darrell Boyd Harmon and Leo Sherrington, but he came to know them personally through protracted sessions. Such Universities as Temple, Miami, Penn State, Yale and Ohio State were all



A. M. Skeffington, O.D.

frequented by Skeffington and his associates in the quest for information to provide a conceptual basis for his developing philosophy. From Renshaw<sup>7</sup> he found the importance of feedback and motor output; hence the behavioral maxims, "vision is motor" and "vision is learned." Harmon,<sup>8</sup> an educator and kinesiologist, taught Skeffington to consider the environmental factors involved in the development of visual problems and to understand the relationships between movement, posture and vision. From Gesell, Getman and others at the Gesell Institute of Child Development<sup>9</sup> came the observations of the infant's development of ocular fixation, accommodation and binocularity. Emmett Betts called Skeffington, "The one who established THE IMPORTANCE OF VISION to children."<sup>10</sup> From the others he learned that vision is a dynamic process in which the whole body participates and that it is the only human system where the somatic and the autonomic nervous systems must work together. In 1956, he was elected into the Sigma Xi Honorary Research Fraternity in recognition of his many contributions.

Skeffington always found the time to encourage, assist, and guide others who were trying to formulate their ideas. All

the stops he made, all the study groups with which he kept in touch, and all the educational venues, particularly the Congresses that he started, were for one purpose—a better optometry. His overwhelming desire to help his fellow man, his never-ending quest for knowledge, his continual delving into research in vision, his natural intellectual curiosity, his constant synthesizing of information from other disciplines, and his dogged determination, provided for the spectacular success that the OEP enjoyed from the 1930s through the '60s.

From his last OEP presentation at the 1975 Northwestern Congress, when Parkinsonism made speech impossible but left his mind alert, he typed his mission statement for the profession. (I have corrected some of the original text to be more understandable). "What is optometry? Expressing my own point of view, optometry is the discipline of the investigation, the development, and the enhancement of all the processes of the organism having to do with the utilization of a band of radiant energy to obtain and apply it in experience... Optometry is the official discipline of VISION... It is the realm into which science... with all the tools at its disposal, gives us courage to hunt even further... Vision is unique. No one knows from where it operates, nor what the operation is. There is no actual discernable physiological, or physical part, like a lung, an ear, or tongue. Yet we know the total organism is involved... Optometry is the fresh, exciting development of science. It now has the courage to strike out. Let none of us fear to venture into this admirable profession. The excitement of it is contagious; the opportunities of it are challenging; and the rewards of it are unlimited..."<sup>11</sup>

Skeffington's core concept of vision is illustrated by his four circles.<sup>12</sup> Vision is held to be the dominant mode for information-processing and is viewed as an emergent of four sub-processes: Anti-Gravity, Centering, Identification and Speech-Auditory. Vision is considered not solely in terms of optics or accommodation-convergence relationships, but rather as an organismic process in-

volved with movement, orientation and localization in space, language and information-processing. Skeffington also suggested that mankind is not biologically suited for our culturally imposed near work demands, and that such tasks provoke a biological stress response. The excessive close work response leads to discomfort, avoidance or adaptation within the visual system. Skeffington emphasized the use of appropriate stress-relieving low plus lenses to eliminate the mismatch between the visual systems of vergence and accommodation, prevent the development of vision disorders, relieve discomfort and permit optimal visual efficiency.

Skeffington always did the kindly little things, the gentle things that make this a better world for having been part of it. Thoughtful and considerate of others, he never allowed anything or anyone to interfere with the dedicated purpose of his life - the betterment of optometry. He is recognized as the Father of Behavioral Optometry. He was honored by his colleagues with the very first Apollo Award, optometry's highest recognition at the 64th AOA Congress, June 1961, in Denver, Colorado. It is interesting that Denver was the place his mission began. He was the rare individual who was able to integrate knowledge of his profession with that of other disciplines, to examine the extant body of knowledge from a totally different point of view, and ultimately to revolutionize concepts of clinical care. His continual delving into research in vision, curiosity and determination has shown the way for a better, more adequate and more efficient care of vision.

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