

## History of Public Health in Florida



### The Historic Mission of the Florida Public Health Association

By E. Russell Jackson, Jr.

In 1979 the Secretary of the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS) appointed the Assistant Director of the Palm Beach County Health Department, James T. Howell, M.D., M.P.H., as Florida's new State Health Officer. Dr. Howell had begun his distinguished career in public health in Florida working with one of the most outstanding and recognized county health officers in the nation, Carl L. Brumback, M.D., M.P.H. This experience with Dr. Brumback prepared Dr. Howell well for his impressive career in public health at the highest levels of Florida state government, including being appointed by Governor Lawton Chiles as the first Secretary of the current Florida Department of Health in 1997. Dr. Howell's legacy and the story of public health during the tenures of those who would succeed him as State Health Officer will be told in upcoming issues of the *Florida Public Health Association Advocate*. In the meantime with the annual educational conference of the Florida Public Health Association (FPHA) being held this July 30 to August 1 in Orlando, there are two events in the FPHA's history that are well worth noting.

In their 1964 landmark history of the first seventy-five years of public health in Florida, *Millstones and Milestones*, Albert V. Hardy, M.D., Dr.P.H., who served as the Director of the Bureau of Laboratories at the State Board of Health for over ten years, and May Pynchon, commented on the importance of the FPHA. "The Florida Public Health Association has had a unique role since the first 'Conference' was called in 1929 by the State Health Officer, Dr. Henry Hanson. Two years later in 1931, the association was formally chartered under its present name with the State Health Officer, Dr. Hanson, as its first president. Through its annual meetings this association has provided education and has been the friendly meeting place for all concerned with public health in Florida."

The FPHA's annual educational conference in 1964 provided Dr. Hanson's successor, Wilson T. Sowder, M.D., M.P.H., with the opportunity to speak to the FPHA's membership about the significance of county health departments in Florida's public health system. Dr. Sowder's words still ring true today. "In 1931 a new era began in Florida. The county health unit law was passed which authorized a joint effort by local and State authorities through the State Board of Health; and more important still, it provided for a consolidation at the local level of all health programs by cities, the counties, the schools, and even by voluntary health and private agencies. There was provision for the joining together of several counties where these were too small to operate alone. Not only this, it made possible also the use of all types of State aid and State funds, as well as Federal aid and Federal funds at the local level. To anyone who may be unfamiliar with this Florida plan, this will sound like a utopian arrangement—but how has it worked? Partisan as I may be, I can hardly see how anyone could answer this question in any way except—very, very well! These health departments furnish community health services in possibly the widest variety and broadest spectrum to be found in the entire country. From the standpoint of community organization and statewide coordination, large areas of the country have nothing approaching it. In the organization of overall community health services, Florida is well ahead and is well prepared to undertake new responsibilities."

Both Dr. Hanson and Dr. Sowder clearly viewed the FPHA as a unique and important educational organization and a unifying force for public health professionals at the state level and in all 67 counties. The FPHA continues to serve its historic mission as the strong partner of the Department of Health and as the leading advocate for Florida's public health professionals and the improved health of all Floridians.