

North Mountain Hospital



Diagnosis: Bananas

Dr. Kenneth Hall operated a Sunnyslope hospital with a primate zoo until unauthorized medical surgeries used to illegally finance a nearby bowling alley led to his downfall.

MIXING APES AND appendectomies seems like an ill-advised business practice, but not to Dr. Kenneth Hall. In 1955, the maverick physician opened Sunnyslope's North Mountain Hospital, a resort-like medical facility with stunning views of Phoenix. Even more sensational was the bizarre attraction located on the hospital grounds: a monkey zoo.

The weird combination provoked gossip about what occurred at the facility. "The most popular rumor was that my father did medical experiments on monkeys," says Dr. Hall's son Walter Hall, who is retired from the City of Phoenix finance department. "That was an urban legend; he just liked having animals around."

However, some rumors were true, such as an incident involving an escaped baboon in 1967. The resulting monkey chase by the police was emblematic of the odd, untamed nature of Hall's medical empire, which would ultimately collapse under debt and malpractice lawsuits. "My father was a phy-

sician who had become the pariah of the local medical community by the mid-1960s," Walter says. "His ambition wasn't well-anchored. His inner gyroscope showed an increasing wobble as time went on. It would eventually destroy his career."

Compared with his eccentric life in Phoenix, Hall's upbringing seems conventional. He attended the University of Oklahoma in the 1930s and married Nancy Champlin, whose wealthy oil relatives would later establish the former Champlin Fighter Museum at Falcon Field in Mesa. During World War II, Hall enlisted in the army, graduated from the University of Arkansas Medical School, and was honorably discharged after a brief deployment to Italy in 1945. After a medical residency in Brooklyn, Dr. Hall was in the midst of moving the family to Santa Barbara, California when fate intervened. "Our woodie station wagon broke down in Wickenburg," Walter Hall says, remembering the day in 1948. "We didn't have enough money for repairs, so

my father went to a doctor's office asking for work. He later visited St. Monica's Hospital in Phoenix and met [founder] Emmett McLoughlin, the ex-Catholic priest, whom he much admired. My father was a very liberal Oklahoma populist."

Hall went to work at St. Monica's, later renamed Phoenix Memorial, but had a short stint. "He was caught lying about a routine matter and dismissed for a breach of ethics," Walter Hall recalls. "I remember him later saying that he left because 'I didn't want any goddamn nurse telling me what to do!'" Dr. Hall subsequently opened up clinics in south Phoenix and Sunnyslope.

In Sunnyslope, Dr. Hall purchased a 900-square-foot house and expanded it to 4,500 square feet. "It's as if my father wanted to become the 'King of Sunnyslope' by having the biggest house in the neighborhood," Walter Hall says. "He was a compulsive builder, and our house had a crazy layout - bedrooms attached to bedrooms with no hallway between. Out front was an

indoor-outdoor fish pond, by the entryway was a macaw perch, and there was even space for giraffes, but he couldn't get the import license."

In 1953, Dr. Hall began building a 40-bed hospital on five acres of government surplus land where Central Avenue ends in a box canyon at North Mountain in Sunnyslope. To reduce construction costs, Hall charmed people into providing volunteer labor and used scavenged materials. Much of the hospital's equipment was military surplus. Dr. Hall changed the name of the facility - initially called Allergy Valley Hospital - to North Mountain Hospital when it opened in 1955.

Dr. Hall had a loyal following of devoted patients despite his volatile bedside manner. "When my older sister, Beverly, had an allergic reaction in 1958, my family didn't have the money to take her anywhere else," former Sunnyslope resident Connie Garnell says. "Dr. Hall treated her, and she quickly recovered. I'm forever grateful to him."

Hall's reputation as an eccentric but brilliant healer grew. "He became the personal physician of Governor Ernest McFarland and held political fundraisers for him and Congressman John Rhodes. He had the drive and charisma to run for political office," Walter Hall says.

Ultimately, the doctor's outside-the-box tendencies got the better of him, according to his son. He started "rubbing shoulders" with members of the mob. He fancied himself a Rat Pack-style bon vivant, "chasing women, doing crazy things, and making money." He cultivated a bad boy reputation.

"By the mid-1960s, though, he was losing his golden touch, becoming increasing-



Dr. Kenneth Hall at North Mountain Hospital's dining room

ly isolated as only hired help, often alcoholics, could put up with his narcissistic ways," Walter Hall says. "He was a bright guy but so self-absorbed that his judgment suffered."

Dr. Hall started performing unsanctioned medical operations. "My father was the first in Arizona to do gastric bypass surgery; it was a big money maker," Walter Hall says. "Another lucrative operation removed the glomus gland from the neck to allegedly cure asthma. For these surgeries, my father was put on notice by the medical community, but the era wasn't as regulated, so he could call his own shots."

Then Dr. Hall's baboon got loose.

"We had a dozen apes, orangutans, and baboons at the hospital and a few at our home," Walter Hall says. "It was the most woebegone zoo you could imagine. My father never took good care of the animals. He had a gibbon ape on a chain, and it acciden-

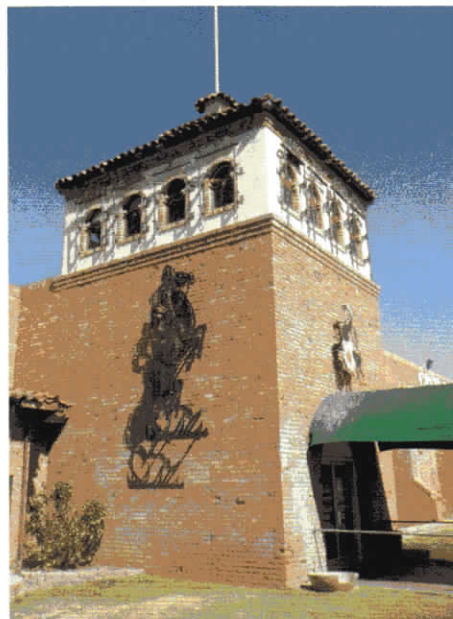
tally strangled itself."

The fugitive baboon had escaped previously but had been lured back into its cage with food. When the baboon escaped its cage again in 1967 and scrambled into the nearby steep terrain of North Mountain, the police were summoned. "The baboon weighed 50 pounds, had an arm strength reportedly seven times that of a human, teeth 2 1/2 inches long, and could easily kill a person," remembers former Phoenix policeman Derald Dougherty, who pursued the primate. "The creature was very nimble and suddenly emerged on an outcrop above a cop. [We] unloaded about a dozen .38 rounds into the animal before it dropped dead."

Medical improprieties finally caught up with Dr. Hall and ended his career. The state revoked the hospital's license in 1971, and he turned the facility into a nursing home and later leased it to a drug rehabilitation clinic. Dr. Hall eventually lost the \$150,000 building to settle a malpractice suit, and the former hospital was razed in the late 1970s. Hall's physician's license was revoked in 1971 after four patients died during gastric bypass surgery. In 1974, he pleaded guilty to diverting \$16,564 in Medicare funds to help construct another grand venture, the Spanish Trails Bowling Alley at 19th Avenue and Cholla Street in Sunnyslope (see sidebar).

At age 80, ever the dreamer, Dr. Hall attempted to get on the heart transplant list at Mayo Clinic but died four years later in 2001.

"Growing up, kids taunted me that my father was a quack," his son says. "I always wished he would just be a normal doctor who would play golf on the weekends."



Gutter Ball

SPANISH TRAILS WAS TO BE DR. KENNETH HALL'S PIÈCE DE RÉSISTANCE, the first in a nationwide chain of massive bowling alleys featuring a French restaurant and multiple nightclubs. Set in a Moorish/Disney-esque fortress built from recycled materials without any bank financing, the project fell shy of its lofty goal. "It was our family's Vietnam," his son Walter Hall says. "Its craziness only seemed to alchemize more craziness. He took umbrage when my brother told him, 'Dad, bowlers aren't really into French food.'"

Located in Sunnyslope, Spanish Trails broke ground in 1963 but floundered as Hall's hospital and medical licenses were revoked.

The cavernous, 65,000-square-foot bowling alley finally opened in 1980, after Dr. Hall received a \$300,000 loan to settle a bank fraud charge involving convicted land swindler Howard Woodall. Dr. Hall and his wife, Nancy, ran the 32-lane alley for a year before the property was foreclosed. There were no disco balls or escargot, only shoe rentals and hamburgers. Spanish Trails later became Pruitt's Furniture, Apollo College, and a church until its current tenant, Castle Sports Club, moved in. "It's a very oppressive, dark building," Walter Hall says. "The place reminds me of a torture chamber."