



San Gabriel Valley Tribune **July 2007**

Doctor reaches 100 with eye on future

By Janette Williams Staff Writer

DUARTE - His obituary is all ready to go. When you've just turned 100 on Saturday, Dr. Marshall Welles says, it's as well to be prepared.

But he isn't planning to go anywhere anytime soon. He's only at page 400 of his autobiography.

"I'm at Thailand," Welles said Monday, as he reflected on a century of life, 35 years as a medical missionary in Asia and years of doctoring in Duarte, Arcadia and Pasadena after his mandatory retirement from missionary work at 65.

"I am a little surprised to be 100," Welles said, smiling. "It seemed natural to be a nongenarian. That's old, OK, and I've had my sickness and that's part of being in your 90s. But how did I get to be 100? What can I expect after this?"

For starters, 400 family and friends gathered for his birthday party Saturday at Westminster Gardens, a Duarte retirement community where he and his late wife, Helen, moved from Pasadena in 1998.

One granddaughter showed the DVD she made of his life, "My First Hundred Years," including memories of the tumultuous times when the missionary couple first worked in Asia.

Their mission took them from Pasadena to Inchofu, China, in 1938. As Japan invaded Manchuria and "rumors of war" started, they "escaped" to the Philippines after Pearl Harbor in 1941. That landed them and their two little boys, then 1 and 5, in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Baguio for three years.

After liberation by U.S. forces in 1945 they returned to America; the pull of their work was too strong, Welles said. The couple went back to China in 1948 only to flee the next year in a hair-raising train ride to Thailand just ahead of communist forces.

Knowing nothing of the language or customs, or even where Thailand actually was, Welles said, they stayed for the next 23 years. He founded the Bangkok Christian

Hospital, working there as surgeon, internist, obstetrician - his career total is 1,340 babies - director and chief of staff until 1972.

They came "home to Pasadena" with \$5,000, Welles said - recalling that they couldn't get a mortgage anywhere - and he joined a group medical practice, becoming medical director at Westminster Gardens.

In 2002, Helen Welles died after 67 years of marriage that followed a seven-year courtship in Depression-era Chicago; he was in Rush Medical School and she trained as a nurse, Welles said, but they could only afford the time and trolley fare to see each other once a week.

Both knew from an early age they would become medical missionaries, Welles said, and that's what brought them together and led to their marriage in Lake Avenue Congregational Church in 1935.

"I knew I wanted to be a missionary when I was 7 years old," said Welles, whose mother died of tuberculosis when he was 4. His father's remarriage brought them to Pasadena from Los Angeles in 1913.

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