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Southern/ Decorative

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“Set of Dental Tools and the 1898 Dental Pocket Register Williamson County, Texas”

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The Root of the Matter: Oral Care in Texas at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

## The Root of the Matter: Oral Care in Texas at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

When one thinks of a dental visit, the image of a brick and mortar dental office typically comes to mind. The patient—let us call him John Matthews—enters the office and stays in the waiting room until he is called in. The dental assistant would take Mr. Matthews's x-rays, send him back to the waiting room for about thirty minutes, and then call him back in to finally see the dentist. The dentist might floss Mr. Matthews's teeth, do prophylaxis, and finally instruct Mr. Matthews on how to better care for his teeth. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, none of these events would have occurred during a dental visit in Texas.

In the Museum of Southern History, Dr. John W. Baxter's dental tools and pocket dental register provides a glimpse into what dental service was like from 1880 to 1912. According to the description provided for this artifact, Dr. Baxter was a traveling dentist in Williamson County, outside Austin, Texas. Mr. Matthews, who was an actual patient listed in Dr. Baxter's pocket register, would not have even gone to a dental office for dental services. Instead, Dr. Baxter would have ridden his horse to Mr. Matthews's house to provide his services.

When Dr. Baxter got to Mr. Matthews's house, he would have performed only a superficial check. Since x-rays were not used in dental diagnosis until 1898,<sup>1</sup> Dr. Baxter could not identify any problems under the gums or inside the tooth. The best he could do to assess Mr. Matthews's oral health was look for swelling or decay and ask Mr. Matthews if he was in pain. If Mr. Matthews had calculus build up, then t

were helpful only if the tooth could be saved. When the calculus had irrevocably destroyed the surrounding bone, the only other option was to extract the tooth. Dr. Baxter had more forceps than scrapers because the main service dentists provided at the turn of the century was an extraction.<sup>3</sup>

There were not many ways to save the tooth if it was decayed or infected, so the tooth often had to be removed. Dr. Baxter had ten dental forceps that were each a different design because of two reasons. One, each design was tailored to the specific tooth that it was intended to remove.<sup>4</sup> For instance, forceps that were designed to remove incisors were shaped differently than forceps used to remove molars. Two, each design was tailored to the location of the tooth in the mouth.<sup>5</sup> For instance, forceps were angled a certain way to better reach the back teeth as opposed to the front teeth. If the incorrect forceps were used, the tooth could be only partially removed or the gums could be seriously damaged.<sup>6</sup> That Mr. Baxter had a variety of forceps proves he at least had the right tools for a professional 19<sup>th</sup> century dentist.

People especially needed trained dentists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because they had poor oral care regimens. Toothpaste was massed produced in America by the 1870s, and toothbrushes were massed produced by the 1880s, but most American did not brush their teeth. It was only after World War II that teeth brushing became part of most Americans' routine. Soldiers were required to brush their teeth, and when they came home, they brought their teeth brushing habit with them.<sup>7</sup> Because people often did not brush their teeth before the 1940s, it was common for

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3. Walter C. Stout, *The First Hundred Years: A History of Dentistry in Texas*, The Egan Company, 1969, ix.
  4. "The Tooth Extraction Procedure," *Animated-Teeth.com*, accessed March 23, 2018, <https://www.animated-teeth.com/tooth-extractions/t5-extracting-teeth.htm>.
  5. *Ibid.*
  6. Richard Buckley, "How Our Ancestors Conducted Dental Surgery," *History in an Hour*, last modified September 7, 2013, <http://www.historyinanehour.com/2013/09/07/how-our-ancestors-conducted-dental-surgery/>.
  7. Mary Bellis, "A Comprehensive History of Dentistry and Dental Care," *ThoughtCo*.





