

An Interview With Mr. James I. Lavelle

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James I. Lavelle

Mr. James I. Lavelle, Treasurer of the American Foundation for Homoeopathy, was interviewed in his office at the Foundation's headquarters, 2726 Quebec Street, N.W., Washington, D. C. on June 19, 1968. The interviewers, Dr. John Duffy of Tulane University and Mr. Martin Kaufman, his research assistant and graduate student, had not intended to interview Mr. Lavelle, but he was anxious to put himself on record.

Mr. Lavelle was born in 1909 in New York City. In 1935 he moved to Washington, D. C. to take a position with the Treasury Department. In 1941 he met Miss Margery B. Green who he married two years later. She was a niece of Dr. Julia Green, and through this contact Mr. Lavelle was drawn into the homeopathic movement. At Dr. Julia Green's suggestion Mr. Lavelle became Treasurer of the Foundation in 1942, a position which he still holds. In order to further his career, Mr. Lavelle attended Benjamin Franklin University in Washington and received a Bachelor of Commercial Science degree in 1952.

Mr. Lavelle was delighted to be interviewed and happily chatted away on any topics which were mentioned. He accepted the typescript in much the same form that it was submitted to him.

Mr. Kaufman:

This is an interview with Mr. James I. Lavelle, Washington, D. C., treasurer of the American Foundation for Homeopathy, June 19, 1968, Tape I, Side 1.

Mr. Lavelle:

Do you require the rest of our titles?

Dr. Duffy:

Yes.

Mr. Lavelle:

Working Treasurer of the American Institute of Homeopathy, and also the treasurer of HOMPAC.

Dr. Duffy:

How would you explain the latter?

Mr. Lavelle:

The Homeopathic Medical Political Action Committee.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Duffy:

We wanted you to get that right on the tape.

Mr. Lavelle:

I see. I didn't volunteer for that job. I was drafted. One of those things I didn't try for and didn't want any part of, but I was available.

Dr. Duffy:

Yes, well, willing hearts, you know, always tend to get all the work.

We wonder if you would start out by telling us something of your background, and obviously I can see how you got into this atmosphere, but you may have been inclined towards homeopathy before you married.

Mr. Lavelle:

I would say that my entering into homeopathy had so many coincidences that there are a lot of people who would say

that it was inevitable that I come under homeopathy. As for my earlier years, I was born in New York City, and I knew nothing about homeopathy, except that I vaguely remember seeing advertisements of Humphrey's remedies.<sup>2</sup> My paternal grandmother, who did most of my raising, had a philosophy that leaned toward homeopathy. She knew that suppression of any illness is bad, and that things must work from inside out. That is a natural thing that just stayed with me. I came to Washington in 1935 to a government position, joined a young church group, and had no connection with homeopathy for quite a long time. I went back to New York in '39 and '40, and came back here in '41.

D.- What was your occupation?

L.- In government I was with the Treasury Department. I came in as a calculating machine operator because I just wanted to get started in government work. I didn't advance there, so I went up to New York in order to get an advancement. I went to the Railroad Retirement Board, but after a year-plus of that, I couldn't get out fast enough. I came back to the Army Engineers here in Washington, and I enjoyed the work. I was given recognition for my abilities, and I advanced. I had only one promotion handed to me in the thirty years that I spent in government, but nevertheless I did manage to advance. In '41 at a Young People's meeting I saw this very attractive girl and decided right then and there that nobody else was going to take her home if I could help it.

I managed, and from there on I didn't give her too much chance to look around and go over the field. And that is the girl I married.<sup>3</sup> She happened to be a niece of Dr. Julia M. Green, and how can you get closer to homeopathy than marrying into the family?

D.- True.

L.- Well, anyway, I found out that a number of my friends from the same young people's group were in families that were treated by Dr. Green. I found that the couple that I was rooming with up in the northwest area when I met my wife were patients of Dr. Green's. And I forget how many other coincidences, but enough of them to almost start writing a book on. When we were married, my wife suggested that I be checked up by Dr. Green, that I study homeopathy a bit, take a look at it, and find if I didn't agree with it. As I went along and learned more about it, I became more and more in agreement. I took the Foundation's<sup>4</sup> course for laymen and apparently it was a good fit, too, because I had a grade in the 90's on that. I knew that my medical background was pretty poor, and my inheritance was worse. My mother and just about her whole family died of TB, and I was a sad case as a youngster myself. I think that Dr. Green did an enormous amount for me, and I knew that a lot of that was necessary if I were going to raise a family. I didn't want some of that inheritance passed along if there was any way around it. Incidentally, I think both of my boys have come along pretty well under homeopathy. And I think things would

have been a lot worse if it weren't for that. One was asthmatic as a youngster, and the other had a few less important difficulties, but nevertheless the treatment helped both of them. Incidentally, also I was very allergic to poison ivy. I couldn't look at it without breaking out. If I came near enough to the plant any time on a hike, walk through the woods, or anywhere, I would break out on the ankles and wrists with rash. But I don't any more. Somewhere along the line I became immune to it, or at least for the time being I am immune.

Let us stop for a moment to collect a point that I had in the back of my mind but got sidetracked. Before I married, the Foundation came up without a treasurer. I have forgotten whether the treasurer died, or retired, or what happened, but they had to have a treasurer in a hurry. My future wife found out that I was by trade a statistician, accountant, bookkeeper, etc., so she suggested to her aunt that maybe I could fill in the gap. So I talked to Dr. Green and agreed that it was something I could do. Thus I became treasurer of the Foundation back in 1942, and I have been treasurer ever since. Apparently, we have seemed to belong together.

D.- Twenty-six years.

L.- Yes. It is a good long term I would say for the treasurer of any organization.

We married the year after that. In my activities with the Foundation, I managed to hold to the treasurer's end of it--

that is, I took very good care to listen and learn as much as I could, but I did not volunteer one thing beyond the keeping of the fiscal records. And I followed that pattern for many years, up until the time that my wife became sick and unable to continue as secretary. Prior to her illness, I managed to leave all work outside of the treasury, and a good part of that, in her hands. But then I had to become more active from there on, and there again, activity began to breed activity. I guess that is why I got drafted into this position of working treasurer of the Institute and treasurer of HOMPAC. I am just now on sort of an uneasy edge, ready to run if anyone else comes up with any ideas.

But we do fit in this organization. We have a very close relationship with Mrs. Vargo<sup>5</sup> and Miss Di Mattina<sup>6</sup> and Dr. Wyrth Post Baker<sup>7</sup> and Dr. Maesimund Panos<sup>8</sup> and the rest of us are as closely knit an organization as I could hope to be associated with. And I think all of us appreciate my father-in-law, Mr. Arthur B. Green,<sup>9</sup> as much as anyone could be appreciated. But there are differences of opinion, and they are sometimes--I won't say loud, but they do come up. Still, there is, nevertheless, a family relationship and family group all the way through.

D.- I was going to ask a question in relation to the Foundation, but why don't you continue with your general recollections.

L.- I think I have brought you right up to date except that I might have missed something along the way, and if there is



anything that comes to your mind that I might have missed I would be very glad to cover it.

- D.- I was curious--we asked Mrs. Vargo about the Foundation. The word foundation ordinarily implies an endowment or some fund, I would presume. I was wondering what has been the position financially of the Foundation in the ~~past~~? The founding fathers originally put up <sup>a</sup> trust fund or endowment, or...
- L.- It was a group of doctors who got together--I think Dr. Green was the mainstay of them in organizing--and they decided they wanted a national organization which would cover both doctors and laymen, and they wanted a governing body of this organization which would be half doctors and half laymen. Then the doctors and the organizers--the laymen who were original members--got together and donated an amount of money, as I see it, to start the organization, in the hopes that it would spread and become really national, with a good, large membership that could support it, and as a consequence, it's activities would build up from there on.

Well, the hope has been steady right along. The fiscal standing of the organization has been very weak at times, but something has always come in to keep us going--something to put us back on the road again. This same hope has been preserved, that as long as we get out and do something, and work for something, the right funds will turn up and keep us going.

- D.- Prior to moving in here did you have your own quarters, or

did you...

- L.- Originally the Foundation's office was in with Dr. Green's office. She had her practice downtown in what was the new medical building at 1726 "I" Street, so that...
- D.- So she in fact supplied headquarters for you?
- L.- My wife worked as her secretary, and served, you might say, as working secretary of the Foundation. Dr. Green was secretary of the Foundation when I became treasurer. And then when she had to retire and take less activity, my wife was elected a trustee and secretary of the Foundation, and she was secretary until the time that she died. I was mentioned as a possible trustee at that time, and I told them that I appreciated the offer, etc., but was not looking for anything more than I already had.
- D.- Well now, I suppose Dr. Green left this house to the Foundation, is that correct?
- L.- Yes, she left the house and property to the Foundation. And before she died the land down the hill and to the left a ways was available, and we had a little money to invest. The trustees, at Dr. Green's suggestion, thought it would be a very good idea to buy that property, so that at the time they would inherit this property the Foundation's lot overall would be very close to five acres, and that was worked out. That is the score at this moment.
- D.- That much land?
- L.- The Foundation owns the lots up here on Quebec Street which

were Dr. Green's, and owns the bare land that it bought down the hill, and the whole thing is very close to five acres.

D.- I assume that this estate, in effect, was lent subsequently for the use of Mrs. Lavelle, her niece, I suppose she had the use of it...I believe Dr. Green died several years ago...

L.- Yes, and of course it took a little while in the first place to settle the estate. The trustees of the estate suggested-- Mr. Green was one trustee, but the business end of the trustees was the Union Trust Company Trust Department--that we take a dollar a year, or something like that, lease with the estate so that we would be valid residents of the property. That was carried out until the estate was settled, and the property was actually transferred to the Foundation. At the present time we have, you might say, an unwritten contract with the Foundation--just merely a verbal understanding. I have continued in residence here at the house. My two sons stay with me when they are around. One is in the army, and one is in college. One is home this couple of weeks. We are not paying rent to the Foundation, and in turn since the Foundation is using roughly half of the house and I am using the other half, we are splitting the expenses; the telephone, the electricity, the heating oil, the housekeeping, and most anything else that comes up--fifty-fifty. There hasn't been anything yet in the way of major repairs and maintenance, though that will have to be discussed pretty soon probably, but for the moment there is no urgency.

It has worked out very amicably. As a resident I am taking care of the maintenance of the house--seeing that things are kept in repair--and feel responsible for the good order of the house. In return I am not pulling a salary commensurate with my work as treasurer. I am--well, while my wife was secretary and drawing a salary as secretary, I refused any reimbursement as treasurer, because for one thing, she did part of the work, and for the other, even though I did the heavy work of doing the auditing and the making of statements, etc., I wished to contribute and that was my contribution. Since then I have drawn a hundred a month salary in addition to the residence.

D.- Sort of a nominal salary.

L.- Yes. And there may be some adjustment on that at the coming meeting, but that is up to the trustees. I might mention first, though, my gratitude to the trustees. When my wife was sick, at first I was able to cover the tremendous medical expenses--she had to be hospitalized and operated on, and the cost of hiring nurses, equipment, and hospital beds--at first I was able to cover that out of the government insurance that I had (called a low-option insurance) and by taking the balance out of our savings. But I got to the point where I was running out of insurance money and out of savings. The trustees saw the situation, and asked me how much I needed to keep things going. Then they voted me as--let's see, executive secretary I guess it was--a salary that would make my personal books balance. I ran on that for some months until

I was able to get from low-option to high-option when the government changed it's insurance books, so that I could go back under full insurance again. Then I went back to the hundred a month. But as I say, there has been, you might say, a family relationship between the Lavelles and the homeopathic organization, all of the organizations.

D.- Yes, obviously Dr. Green was one of the leading forces in the group. Well, did she leave a trust fund to maintain the house or just the property itself?

L.- No, she left the property to the Foundation. She left the funds to her church and other interests, and to her family--nieces and nephews--she left some funds, and she left her personal property to her brother, Arthur B. Green. As long as we are talking on that subject, she left a very odd will in some respects. The Foundation lawyers look at it as somewhat of a classic example of tying legal knots.

The property was left to the Foundation with certain strings attached. The Foundation had to qualify in certain ways, and it's qualifications would be judged by a panel which she named. If the Foundation did not qualify under her will within ten years the panel would so rule, and the property then would be sold and divided among her nieces and nephews, and their heirs. Of course I have two sons who would be in that category, and my sister-in-law and brother-in-law would also qualify. But to go back a little ways, the panel decided that the Foundation had met the conditions of the will, and

that is when the property was transferred to the Foundation. Now, the decision of the panel was not unanimous, and because there was a possible bit of money involved for some of the nieces and nephews, some of them have initiated a suit to upset the ruling. But the indications are that they would just like to settle out of court for the most they can get. That is the current situation as we see it.

D.- I suspect five acres in the middle of Washington...

L.- Not the five acres, no. Only the property owned by Dr. Green.

D.- Oh, I see, that is right. The Foundation bought the extra.

L.- That is right. This particular lot here, and the vacant lot along side which is the garden. The property which the Foundation owns down the hill it bought.

D.- Right, right. Of course it is still a valuable piece of property in the middle of Washington.

L.- Yes. But there is a problem of zoning. We can't put up the building that we would like to. We would like to build a headquarters, a true headquarters for all homeopathy, but we would have to have the land re-zoned from single-family residence zoning, and the indications are that that would be next to impossible. There are others who argue that nothing is impossible in zoning but it is a question of degree. I don't know.

D.- There are problems, in any case.

L.- Definitely.

- D.- You mentioned that your work as treasurer has now become virtually a full-time job. Has it been this, or more than a full-time job? I mean have you served as a full-time job, are you retired, or...
- L.- I retired from government back in '65, the beginning of January, '65. Incidentally, I haven't covered all of myself. I am an epileptic. I had a seizure--a single seizure back in somewhere the tail end of 1940, I think it was, but it wasn't followed up by anything. So I just rested up and went back to work. I didn't know what the score was, of course, and let it go at that. And I didn't have any more seizures until the 1940's somewhere--maybe '45, somewhere in that general area. And then that was followed by more, and it was then that I became aware that these were epileptic seizures that I was having. I still didn't know anything about epilepsy, or anything more than that Dr. Hayes, who said I was having Jacksonian seizures. Well, that is just a way of giving someone a different name for the same thing, apparently.

At any rate, Dr. Green didn't want to prescribe for me at that time, because I was a member of the family. She wanted to bring in someone from the outside to get an objective view of the case. Dr. Hayes, who has since died, was in Connecticut at the time. He came down specifically for this case, prescribed sulfur iodide, and it worked. Not immediately, but after I had been taking it for awhile, I had a period of eight years without a single seizure in which time I would

just take an occasional dose of sulfur iodide. I don't know what potency, whether it was just 20,<sup>10</sup> or whether it was higher. My record would show that, but I don't know what it was. All I know is that I reacted every time I took it in feeling worse for a few days, and then feeling all right again. And then it ran out. After eight years it had no further effect. My trouble has been due to pressures ever since. Whether it is job pressure, emotional pressure, or what--when that pressure builds up, I build up trouble. And if I go off on a trip with no work, no worries, no emotional problems, I can go months without any trouble, even now. So at least we know what the score is, and I think after a few changes in remedy that I am on the right track now. At least I hope I am.

At any rate, I had to retire, or shouldn't say I had to retire, but it was apparent that it was a good idea to retire from government when I could. I retired after thirty years of service. I had a choice of retiring under disability, or thirty years straight, and I took the straight thirty years. I figured that I hoped to get over it, and I didn't want to have a disability background, or anything like disability. I have continued on that basis. When I quit government, I took on more time with the Foundation, and then, of course, it was very soon after that that my wife became ill and unable to do any further work, and I took over all of the treasurer's work from there on. And it has built up since then, so that this year I now have the Institute as well as



the Foundation, and HOMPAC as well as that.

D.- And of course the work is growing again, thanks to all of your co-workers happily adding to your duties.

L.- I have to watch it. Even now my main problem is not letting the job pressure build up to the point where I have too many things that have to be done at the same time. That can lead me right into a seizure, so I have to take time off.

D.- Mrs. Vargo was telling us that one of the aims of the Foundation's leaders was for the Foundation to become more or less self-supporting through its membership, but I gather you still have some distance to go on that field.

L.- We do. We need to be living off income rather than available funds or capital. It is not our idea to spend all that capital. It is not good policy, but then, on the other hand, if we put all our capital into investments and say that we have to live off the income from the investments then we won't accomplish anything. There won't be any activity, and if there is no activity we will have less money from the field, and less organization. So we are building up the activity, and in that way I know we are building up our income from membership.

D.- Hoping it will be productive, in a sense.

L.- It is showing. It is showing now that the results of our activity is just a matter of degree--getting it up to the point that we can really start putting our investment funds into permanent investments rather than just month-to-month.

K.- How many members does the Foundation have?

L.- Now you are getting out of the line of the treasurer. The treasurer doesn't keep those kind of records. You will have to ask the secretary.

D.- I think the secretary said about five hundred, if I remember correctly.

Mrs. Kay Vargo:  
Twelve hundred subscribers, and five hundred members.

D.- Do you have another question, Martin?

K.- Do you want to pursue this any further? Background?

D.- No, I think we have covered this quite well.

K.- All right, fine. I would like to ask you some specific questions on the history of the American Foundation for Homeopathy since you have become affiliated with it. The period from 1940 to about 1955 has been characterized by at least one of our previous interviewees, as a period in which the strife between the International Hahnemannian Association and the American Institute of Homeopathy was growing.

L.- Now you are in an area where I mentioned I was keeping aloof from, activities other than that of the treasurer. I kept my ears open to a degree, and was aware of some of these differences, but not involved in them. So that I don't think I am the one to ask these questions. I would agree that there were these differences, and that they apparently were building up in that area in that time, but beyond that I couldn't give you anything specific.

K.- Well, to get even more specific, and to ask the same question that we asked Mrs. Vargo and several others in our previous

interviews, during the early and middle 1950's there apparently was an attempt by some members of the Institute to take over the lay work of the Foundation.

- L.- Well, there, you see, I had no connection at all with the Institute, nor any awareness of their activities, except what I might have heard as gossip, and I wasn't paying much attention to what the Institute was doing.
- K.- This wasn't mentioned at any meetings?
- L.- At the Foundation meetings there again I tended to concentrate on my treasurer's reports and questions that might come up thereupon. I stayed completely out of any of the discussions and activities of the trustees. Not being a trustee I did not associate in the rest of the meeting. I gave my report, and I was through.
- D.- While Martin is thinking, let me ask you about your duties and your knowledge of HOMPAC, and as you saw it how effective has it been, what has been accomplished?
- L.- There again, I only have heresay knowledge of it. I know of Dr. Baker's activity in that line. I think it is a good thing. I am glad that I can do a little to help with it. I am hoping that my being treasurer of HOMPAC will not cause someone to question the fact that I am treasurer of the Foundation, a non-profit educational organization, at the same time that I am associated with a lobbying organization, but I think I can keep the two separate as to my personal activities, and since I won't be taking any active part in HOMPAC--only the signing of checks and keeping of the records and giving treas-

urer's reports--I don't think that there is any legal problem there.

D.- How large a group is it?

L.- I really don't know. Outside of Dr. Baker and Mrs. Vargo, I don't know who else is connected with HOMPAC, and who would have any active part in it.

D.- I assume that the fact that you have a treasury indicates that there has been some money put up by individuals.

L.- The Institute transferred five hundred dollars to HOMPAC to start it off.

D.- We are dealing with relatively small amounts of money, in any case.

L.- That is right. To date it is very small. It is just a matter of setting it up so it can operate.

D.- Yes, and I assume it will be more or less a permanent group to keep an eye on legal<sup>and</sup> political problems related to homeopathy?

L.- To see that homeopathy gets a fair representation wherever it should, and that it is not eliminated from any of the Health, Education and Welfare activities where it should be considered. For instance, the question of having the--what is it...?

K.- The homeopathic pharmacopœia?

L.- Yes, pharmacopœia is the word I was trying to think of. I miss the word every once in awhile. Having it known is a very important thing, and where any pharmacopœia is mentioned in law, the homeopathic pharmacopœia should also be mentioned. So that, I think is the major part of this HOMPAC activity.

- K.- I think we have pretty much covered the specific aspects as related to the Foundation. Do you have anything that you would like to add, or clarify?
- L.- No, I think I have covered everything. As I say, I feel a part of it. I am very happy that I am a part of it. I will add as much as I can to it any time that I can. I have to watch that I don't overdo it, but I can't help doing that to a degree. I believe homeopathic activities will, as Kay Vargo has mentioned, increase as time goes on. I don't think we are going to die on the vine anywhere.
- D.- You all have an air of confidence. That is what it takes in part, isn't it?
- L.- I think that it breeds confidence. I think that anybody who feels that the organization is self-confident will believe it must have something.
- D.- Well, it is interesting talking to you because in a sense you are a lineal descendant, you might say, of Dr. Green, and her niece--in other words, the family connection--and obviously I think that Dr. Green and Mr. Green apparently are two of the key figures in the organization. Both strong personalities, both contributors, so we have appreciated the fact that you were willing to come and talk to us, and go officially on record and give us interviews.
- L.- I am willing to go on record for anything that I have in connection with homeopathy.
- D.- Well, fine and thank you again. It has been very pleasant.

L.- I agree, it has been pleasant.

End of tape.

## Footnotes

1. Organization founded to protect the interests of homeopathy, and to work with its A.M.A. counterpart to prevent passage of laws believed detrimental to the medical profession (i.e., MEDICARE).
2. Patent medicines.
3. Margery B. Green.
4. American Foundation for Homoeopathy.
5. Mrs. Frank G. Vargo, Silver Spring, Md., Secretary of the American Foundation for Homoeopathy.
6. Miss Annette DiMattina, Washington, D. C., a clerk with the Foundation.
7. Wyrth Post Baker, M.D., Washington, D. C., President of the American Institute of Homeopathy and a trustee of the Foundation.
8. Maesimund B. Panos, M.D., Washington, D. C., a trustee of the Foundation.
9. Arthur B. Green, Needham, Mass., editor of the Foundation's organ, The Layman Speaks.
10. Diluted twice with 100 parts alcohol or water.

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