

STYLE

WEEKLY

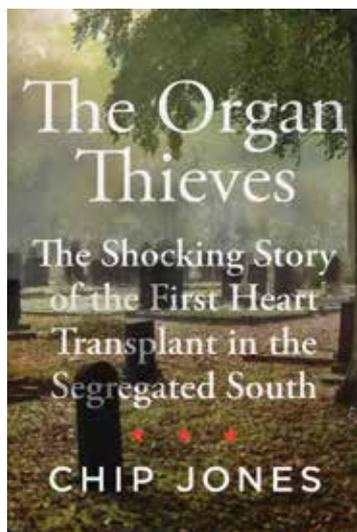


Telltale Heart

New book "The Organ Thieves" tells the troubling story of the first heart transplant in Richmond.

by Peter Galuszka

Author Chip Jones, a former Richmond Times-Dispatch reporter, has written three other books.



SCOTT ELMQUIST

“The Organ Thieves” explores the troubling story of the first heart transplant at MCV in the late 1960s – when a Black man’s heart was put into a white businessman without the consent of the donor’s family.

by **Peter Galuszka**

Telltale Heart

AT ABOUT 3 P.M. ON FRIDAY, MAY 24, 1968, Bruce Tucker finished his job for the day as an egg sorter at a plant in downtown Richmond.

He walked to meet some friends behind a gas station at 2200 Venable St. where they chatted and passed around a bottle of wine.

As a thunderstorm began rolling in, Tucker, 54, suddenly fell off a wall where he had been sitting and struck his head. Upset, his friends called an ambulance that rushed him to the Medical College of Virginia, now part of Virginia Commonwealth University.

Tucker was in trouble. Emergency room staff noted that he had a serious brain injury. They made perfunctory efforts to find his family, but somehow failed to dig into his pocket and discover the card of his brother, a cobbler named William Tucker, who owned a business not far away. After about a day and a half, Bruce Tucker was dead.

But ambitious surgeons had a plan for him. During this time in the 1960s, MCV was caught up in a global status grab of doctors transplanting organs. So they went ahead and cut out this Black man’s heart and placed it into the body of a

needy patient, a white corporate executive from Orange County – a first transplant for MCV.

All the while, Tucker’s brother William was frantically calling the hospital and other sources to locate him. MCV had already begun touting its medical triumph through standout articles in the Associated Press and the Richmond Times-Dispatch that left off the name of the organ donor.

This is the story that begins the engrossing new book, “The Organ Thieves: the Shocking Story of the First Heart Transplant in the Segregated South” by Chip Jones, an

author and journalist who reveals many important details of the little known and horrific scandal that the medical school is still apologizing for today.

Jones worked as a reporter for the Richmond Times-Dispatch and was part of a Roanoke Times reporting team named a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 1990 for work on the Pittston coal strike in southwest Virginia.

As a high school student in the 1960s, Jones had been fascinated with Christian Barnard, the world-famous South African surgeon who performed the first human heart transplant in 1967, and who had studied at MCV a year earlier.

Years later, Jones would work in communications with the Richmond Academy of Medicine, and his interest was renewed. Having started researching the university's archives, he was puzzled when files did not reveal the name of the donor of the school's first heart transplant. He contacted the medical school and was told "it was against regulations to reveal his name," Jones tells *Style Weekly*.

The Times-Dispatch eventually did reveal Bruce Tucker's name but the story did not get much attention. Tucker's family members sued the school for not informing them about the transplant. They hired L. Douglas Wilder, a 37-year-old lawyer who later became a pioneering politician and the state's first African American governor.

While writing the book, Jones found that Wilder, who lost the case, was reluctant to talk with him, as was Tucker's family.

But eventually, Wilder came around. Jones was off and running.

A History of Grave Robbing

Organ snatching was a hot business in Europe and the United States in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Adding fascinating background to his story, Jones' deeply reported, highly readable book reviews the history of robbing graves and snatching bodies so aspiring physicians would have specimens to dissect.

Those activities were euphemistically dubbed "resurrections." Robbers were "resurrectionists" who were assigned their jobs by brokers called "demonstrators" who were often students or professors at medical schools.

Burial spots were status symbols and the rich usually got choice lots that were near churches. The farther from the church, the better chance for robbery. Some of the best opportunities were provided at cemeteries for people of African descent.

Jones notes that in Richmond and other places, Black families referred to the

The Weather

Today: Considerable cloudiness, chance of showers in southwest. Fair elsewhere. High in 70s and 80s.

Local Date, Page B-3

118th Year

Number 147

Volume 118

Richmond Times-Dispatch

200,831

Largest Sunday Circulation in Virginia

20 Cents

Richmond, Virginia, 23211, Sunday, May 26, 1968



Volunteers Cleaned Up Rue Gay-Lussac After Friday Riots

Viet Cong Holding Out In Suburbs of Saigon

SAIGON (U.P.) — Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces struck on three fronts Saturday, probing on Saigon's fringes, attacking three U.S. outposts in the Central highlands and blowing up an American fuel dump near the demilitarized zone with a 100-round artillery attack.

In a northeastern suburb of Saigon, Viet Cong took over a civilian home during an apparent attempt to penetrate the city. A South Vietnamese armored column blocked the way to Saigon, and U.S. Army helicopter gunships blasted the enemy pockets with rocket fire by the light of flares.

On the southern fringe of the capital, troops of the U.S. 10th Infantry Division fought another Viet Cong unit near Y Bridge, where enemy troops seized a residential block in the May 5 offensive against Saigon.

15 of Five Slain
The infantrymen and national police reported killing 15 Viet Cong. One American was

Other enemy forces fired 300 mortar rounds at the district capital of Ben Cat, 25 miles north of Saigon, wounding one American soldier and 12 Vietnamese.

Most military officials expressed doubt that the enemy was preparing any major offensive in the capital.

Spontaneous Fighting
The fighting on the northeastern fringe began in daylight and continued sporadically.

Eight government troops were slain.

Other enemy forces fired 300 mortar rounds at the district capital of Ben Cat, 25 miles north of Saigon, wounding one American soldier and 12 Vietnamese.

Most military officials expressed doubt that the enemy was preparing any major offensive in the capital.

35% Boost in Minimum Wage Is Given French Workers

From Wire Dispatches

PARIS — France's striking workers gained an unprecedented 35 per cent increase in minimum wages early Sunday after six hours of negotiations with Premier Georges Pompidou and representatives of the National Employers' Association, The New York Times reported.

The first break in the negotiations to end the 19-day-old strike came shortly after midnight. It concerned wages only, with many other demands still pending. The other demands involved the union's freedom to organize and abrogation of last summer's government decrees raising medical contributions by workers under the national social security program.

Pompidou apparently had bowed under all but irresistible pressure. The country's economy has been almost totally paralyzed by the strike.

France's new industrial wage will rise from an average 2.22 francs (roughly 42 cents) to three francs (just over 60 cents) an hour. There are slight regional differences, the Times said.

The increase will give about three million workers raises totaling \$1 billion a year.

It is presumed that substantial increases due will be given to workers already earning more than the minimum wage. The total increase in the nation's payroll cost may be \$4 billion or \$5 billion a year.

It is believed that a large part of the workers' pay raise

speculators and helped police to clear away felled trees, cobblestones, chunks of structural steel and other debris.

But fighting broke out anew in Bordeaux, 250 miles southwest of Paris. Students mounted rooftops and bombarded police with rocks and roofing tiles. Police countered with tear gas grenades. Three students and three policemen were hospitalized.

Death in Latin Quarter
In announcing suspension of the right of assembly, Pompidou told a news conference that the measure applied particularly to the Latin Quarter, where Philippe Mathenon, 26, a real estate agent and former student of electronics who had remained interested in university affairs, was found dead in a street of stab wounds in the heart and abdomen.

The other riot victim was a police commissioner in Lyons. Hundreds have been injured in clashes across France.

577 Injured
Officials said 120 policemen and 447 civilians were injured in the Paris disorders. Of the civilians, 170 required hospitalization. The police rounded up 765 persons and jailed 45. The rest were sent to the Besancon police station for examination of their identity papers.

President Charles de Gaulle, meanwhile, was preparing a law detailing changes to modernize France's economy and education system. He announced Friday night that it would go to the people in a referendum next month for a yes-or-no vote. If the vote is no, he said, he will resign.

Informants said the bill would go to Pompidou's Cabinet Monday for approval. There was speculation that the vote would be held Sunday, June 16.

The French Communist party was the first to take a formal stand against the referendum. It called on French voters to say "no" to the referendum of "the harmful Gaullist power, which has lasted too long." The Communist vote in France has been 20 to 35 per cent in recent years.

Trade union leaders, opposition politicians and some of the country's top editorial writers complained that the referendum will in effect be a plebiscite for or against De Gaulle, who has four more years to serve in his latest term as chief of state.

Friday night's disorders
Continued on Page 4, Col. 3

A heart transplant was completed at the Medical College of Virginia yesterday. The patient is reported to be in satisfactory condition.

A statement was issued by Ralph M. Ware Jr., director of development at the Medical College, about 8 o'clock last night confirming that the transplant operation had been completed. The statement said that

"there will be no further bulletin issued until the end of next week."

The hospital declined to identify the patient or the donor. The Associated Press early today, however, said an official source identified the recipient of the heart transplant as Joseph G. Klett, 54, of Orange.

Dr. Richard R. Lower, chairman of MCV's division of cardiac and thoracic surgery,

about a month—twice at Charlottesville and later at the Medical College of Virginia Hospital.

A former purchasing agent at the Virginia Metal Products Co. at Orange, Klett moved to Virginia from New York City about 20 years ago.

Dr. Richard R. Lower, chairman of MCV's division of cardiac and thoracic surgery,

transplanted organ is more likely to occur than later.

Dr. Humre is a noted authority on the problems of organ transplant rejection and methods of overcoming it.

The transplant was the world's 16th. The first was performed by Prof. Christian Barnard at Cape Town, South Africa, on Dec. 3, 1967.

Dr. Barnard was at the Medi-



Dr. Richard R. Lower
Pioneered Transplant

Heart Transplant Operation Performed Here by MCV

The Times-Dispatch put MCV's first heart transplant operation on the front page of its May 26, 1968, issue.

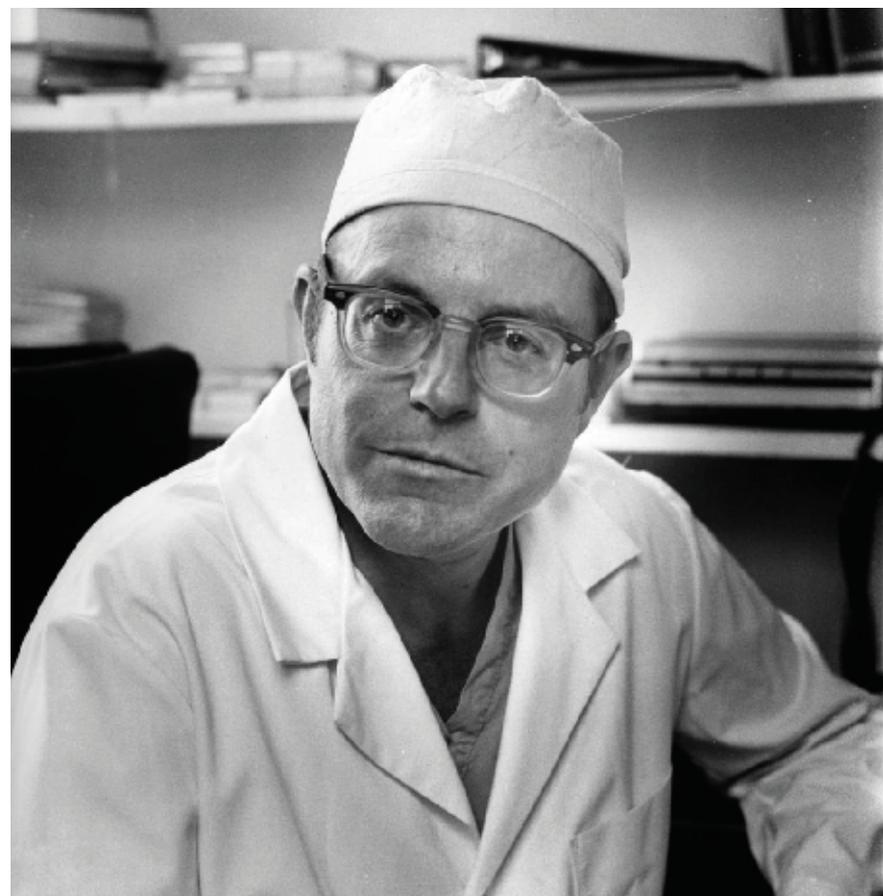
"night doctors" who worked ghoulishly in cemeteries at midnight. There were fears that sick Black patients somehow vanished when they were put in an infirmary.

Professor Shawn Utsey, the chairman of the VCU department of African American studies, says that a big issue was convenience: Richmond was a domestic center of slave trading before the Civil War, so there were plenty of bodies available. Burial grounds were often on public land and not enclosed.

Utsey's research led to his 2011 documentary film titled, "Until the Well Runs Dry: Medicine and the Exploitation of Black Bodies." Some readers may remember the human remains found during the mid-1990s in an underground well on the medical campus, which came at the expense of Blacks, often slaves, used for experimentation and research. During filming, Utsey heard rumblings about the Tucker case but didn't discover the truth for some time, he says.

Resurrections provided a status symbol among medical schools. These deeds were transmitted in secret language to medical professors at universities such as Harvard and Columbia. Jones notes it extended into medical schools in Richmond and Charlottesville as students or professors sought fresh bodies.

The author writes that they often found



Dr. Richard Lower, shown in 1977, was recruited to MCV from Stanford University.

VCU LIBRARIES

August 19 2020

STYLE WEEKLY

5



The pioneering heart surgery was performed at VCU's venerable West Hospital.

they were being had by “criminal elements” who stole at will and defied promises to be exclusive cadaver providers to each medical school. MCV got its start in 1838 as the medical department of Hampden-Sydney College and “soon got into a competition with the University of Virginia over which could steal the most Black bodies,” Jones told *Style*.

When the public found out what was going on there were riots against grave robbery in cities where there were medical schools. Among those schools was Yale University. In Richmond, the grave robbing practice ended years later – but only after the Richmond Planet,

an African American newspaper, lobbied against it.

Although it was prominent in the “resurrection” business, Richmond’s medical school did not have the panache of more prestigious institutes in the Northeast, mid-Atlantic and Far West.

About 20 years before the Civil War, the city had started to grow quickly with factories, an ironworks and the second largest slave market in the country after New Orleans. As more wealth flowed into the city, the first medical school was built in 1844. It was an ornate structure known as the Egyptian building. The department at Hampden Sydney changed its name to the Medical Col-

lege of Virginia in 1854.

In the ensuing years, MCV wasn’t known as a research school. Its chief purpose was to produce general practitioners and doctors of all trades who could bring new professionalism to medicine. Before then, barbers often moonlighted as medical doctors.

Like many other schools, MCV’s faculty was made up of doctors who had outside practices and acted much like adjunct professors. The best research was often done at schools out of state with full-time professors.

Hard Partying Docs

In the mid-20th century, a wave of medical research breakthroughs won global attention. Hidden heart disease issues got more panache when President Dwight Eisenhower didn’t hide his ailment after nearly dying of a heart attack while playing golf in 1955. But MCV was behind the curve on this pivot in research.

In his book, Jones ably explains what happened in the chapter, “Breaking the Heart Barrier,” a play on the title of Richmond-born Tom Wolfe’s popular book and movie titled “The Right Stuff” about glamorous pilots and astronauts, he says.

One way to generate fresh buzz as research hot spots, medical schools found, was to move into transplanting organs, skin or limbs. Doing so had been tried for centuries but recent successes made it sophisticated and stylish. And if a medical school didn’t have homegrown talent, it could import some.

That’s what MCV did in 1955. School Dean John Truslow had graduated from Harvard Medical School and asked an old colleague to identify an upcoming research star. The answer was easy: Dr. David Hume, 38, was part of the medical team that won a Nobel Prize for transplanting a kidney from one twin to another at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, a teaching hospital at Harvard.

Hume had the right stuff. He was internationally known as a transplant expert and since “they were somewhat limited by their own modest budget” they wanted someone “who was affordable,” Jones writes.

Rules on patients’ rights weren’t that advanced and it was common for Hume’s assistants to rush just-removed organs from patients for transplants up stairs or in elevators. This cowboy approach was intended to raise MCV’s reputation. Both MCV and the University of Virginia medical schools had been “stuck at half mast,” Jones writes.

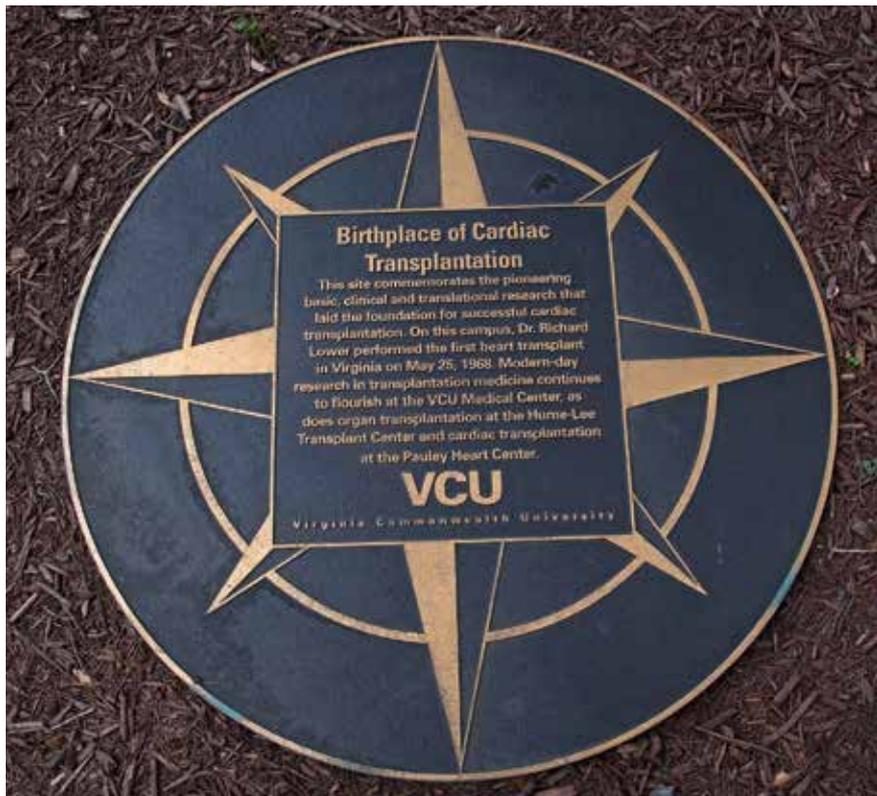
Hume was a wild man in other ways. He was famous for raucous staff parties at his suburban farm and spots such as the Valentine museum where some of Hume’s rat pack got so drunk they vomited on the floor. The museum permanently banned the MCV surgical staff. Hume, Jones says, “built up an extraordinary success with transplants but he also stepped on a lot of Richmond toes and Richmond sensibilities.”

Hume’s alter ego would arrive a decade later.

Another transplant whiz, Richard Lower was recruited from Stanford University, where he developed innovations such as leaving part of the heart’s upper chambers in the donor to shorten the surgery. Compared to Hume, Lower “was much more cerebral and reluctant,” notes Jones.

MCV’s star had been rising so quickly that Barnard, who would perform the first heart transplant, spent time studying at the school, drawn there by Lower’s reputation.

It was Lower who performed the transplant with Bruce Tucker’s heart.



VCU celebrates its success with this marker but offers an apology on its website for not informing Bruce Tucker's family.

A Formal Apology

For months, Richard G. Klett, 54, had been warning friends and family that he wouldn't have long to live. The white corporate executive from Orange, Virginia, had serious, chronic heart problems and had been in an out of the University of Virginia Hospital. He was considered a good candidate for a heart transplant.

Late in the evening on May 24, 1968, things were not going well for Bruce Tucker, either. His fall had caused bleeding and a contusion. Lower had been in touch with MCV's cardiology team about Tucker, Jones writes.

About 3 a.m., the MCV staff called the Richmond police who had twice driven by Tucker's home address but came up empty. No one found his brother's business card in his pocket. The next day, Tucker's health continued to worsen.

At 2:30 p.m., William Tucker was in his shoe repair shop when he got a call from MCV, telling him to drop by. He would go, but was delayed by customers in his shop.

A little more than an hour later, Bruce Tucker was pronounced dead. About that time, his brother called MCV and was told by an unhelpful receptionist that Bruce was in the "recovery room."

At 4:30 p.m., he called and was told that Bruce was at St. Philip Hospital, an all-Black segregated hospital nearby. William went there but could not find him.

Finally, he learned his brother would be having an autopsy and that he could

have the body later and he should make funeral arrangements. Shocked by the news, he was bewildered that he didn't even know what his brother's ailment had been. It would be some time before he was told they had cut out his brother's heart for a transplant without Bruce's or his family's knowledge and consent.

Klett lasted only seven days with Bruce's heart before dying.

Shortly after, the Tucker family contacted Douglas Wilder, who is key to "Organ Thieves" book. Jones told *Style* that Wilder was reluctant to participate in the project but relented and gave Jones a trove of documents that helped the author fashion a proposal for a publisher.

At the time, Wilder dug into the case and came up with enough to file a lawsuit seeking \$1 million with William as the plaintiff. If that sum sounds paltry, it got worse: A judge lowered available compensation to only \$100,000, saying that they had missed a deadline for filing court papers.

According to Jones, there was an outpouring of sympathy for MCV. Times-Dispatch science reporter Beverly Orndorff revealed Bruce's name in print and then was ostracized by the MCV surgical staff, Jones says.

"They were very unhappy that I had done that," Orndorff tells *Style*. "They felt that my story glorified [Tucker] because I had spoken with his boss and learned he

was a good worker."

Orndorff explains that the Tucker trial had national implications because it helped to better define medical death. "Is it when the brain stops, or the cessation of the heart?"

During the trial, the powerful medical community, including visitors from Harvard, closed ranks in favor of the brain being the determining factor.

Medical ethicists Robert M. Veatch and Lainie F. Ross note in the book that the case "leaves many questions unanswered including issues related to the lack of consent for procuring organs."

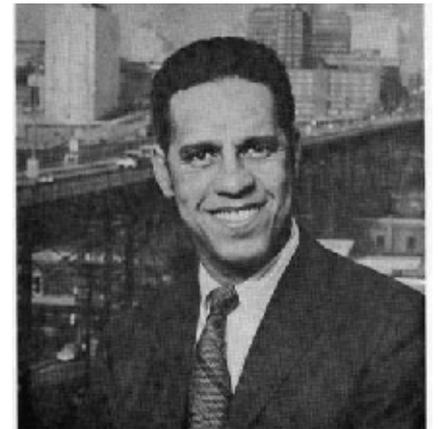
Orndorff doesn't believe that first heart transplant really hurt VCU's reputation because it has developed such a strong international record for transplants.

The MCV Foundation, however, does include an apology on its website explaining the first heart transplant:

"The foundation acknowledges with regret the lack of consent from Bruce Tucker's next of kin before his heart was used in the first transplant performed at MCV. The reality of this incident complicates the legacy of a medical breakthrough and underscores a collective and ongoing imperative for all of us at VCU Health on the MCV Campus to listen to an accept criticism and to learn from our past as we work to honor the dignity of all whom we serve."

Jones says that what happened to Tucker was "abominable." New regulations, procedures and laws should prevent it from happening again. But the legacy of abusing and underserving the African American community is deeply rooted, he notes.

In 1951, Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore harvested Henrietta Lacks' cervical cells before she



Douglas Wilder, then a young lawyer, filed suit against MCV on behalf of Tucker's family.

died of cancer, and then grew them in a lab for researchers. Billions were sold without her permission. That story was the basis of an excellent 2010 book by Rebecca Skloot ("The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks") that compares well to Jones' work.

Utsey says that he doesn't believe the Tucker story will hurt VCU "because they are telling the same story in a different way. The best approach is for the school to own up to what it did and make things right."

He was pleased to learn of the MCV Foundation's website apology, but he says more must be done since the African American community has contributed so much to the success of medical science.

That may seem ironic since there is so much evidence that Blacks are still badly underserved on health matters. Jones points out that Black Americans are currently facing COVID-19 infection rates that are three times the normal average. **S**



Hard-partying Dr. David Hume (far right) and his staff led MCV's research renaissance.