

Women in Medicine in Lancaster County

By Mary Ellen Smith Meiser, M.D.

In order to discuss women physicians in Lancaster County we should first talk about women as physicians. As you know this was absolutely unheard of 130 years ago. It was in 1848, when a school teacher in Cincinnati, Ohio, while nursing a sick neighbor, decided she wanted to be a physician. To satisfy this longing, Elizabeth Blackwell applied to all nine Philadelphia medical schools. They all turned her down flat except one that told her if she would dress like a man they would accept her. Miss Blackwell refused.

One day her plea reached the medical school in Geneva, New York. The faculty did not want a female enrolled there, but in all fairness agreed to accept the lady if there was complete agreement by the whole student body. The student body had never been known to vote unanimously on anything. This time, however, the students seemed to be in prankful mood and every ballot favored Miss Blackwell's entry! There was nothing to do but to admit her. Thus, Elizabeth Blackwell became America's first woman graduate of a medical school.

There was an increasing general interest of women to be doctors. In Philadelphia Dr. Joseph S. Longshore, father of two daughters, led the campaign for the first woman's medical college in the United States. This was established in 1850 and was known as the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania. The male medics were furious, and they stiffened in opposition at the College's first graduation in 1852, when eight women, including both Longshore sisters, were given medical degrees.

For the next forty years ostracism against women built up. But in an Annual Announcement from the Corporators and Faculty of the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania it states that they are "sustained by the profound conviction that their object was right, and was destined to succeed; and every year's experience has but confirmed their belief that the study and practice of medicine

are admirably adapted to woman's nature; that the world and the profession need her; that success awaits her when duly educated for her office; and, that her entrance into this fitting and enlarged sphere of virtuous activity is the harbinger of increased happiness and health for woman and for the race." This was in 1862.

Soon after the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania opened its doors, our Pennsylvania State Medical Society adopted a resolution forbidding professional recognition of, or consultation or collaboration with any medical graduate of a female college, or with any of the faculty members of such institutions.

Now it seems that our own Lancaster County Medical Society was much more liberal. They tried for more than ten years to have this resolution of prejudice rescinded. At each annual meeting the subject was brought up until finally in 1871 the resolution was changed. However, a provision was inserted that "the new resolution does not commit this Society to acknowledge the right of women to representation in the Society."

This liberal attitude of the Lancaster County Medical Society, and the fact that the hospitals in Lancaster allowed women to intern much earlier than hospitals in other areas, surely played a part in the reason for the great number of "hen" medics finding their way into Lancaster County.

In April 1977 the physicians of Lancaster gathered to honor Dr. Elizabeth Bricker who would celebrate her 100th birthday on 25 April. After attending Pennsylvania State University for premedical studies, she was graduated in 1903 with thirty-three other women from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania. She stayed in Philadelphia doing hospital work, and then answered a call to work at Wernersville Mental Hospital. This she considered quite an honor. However, because of the very sudden death of her father, followed in one week by the death of a younger sister, she went home to Lititz to live. She opened an office there and practiced about eight years until 1915 when she accepted a position in Harrisburg with the State Department of Labor in the Division of Women and Children. In 1935 she returned to Lititz and resumed her practice. She never married.

Dr. Bricker had a very close friend who was in the class ahead of her in medical school. This was Dr. Georgianna Walker Jackson from Christiana, who would be 100 years old in 1978.

After Dr. Georgianna received her M.D. she returned to Christiana, delivered a few babies but soon gave up her private practice in her hometown because of the intensity of the prejudice against her. She returned to Philadelphia to work in the hospitals, and went to Wernersville, too, to work with Dr. Bricker. Later she became an assistant bacteriologist on the Philadelphia Board of Health. She was married in 1909 and later lived as a widow in Christiana. She continued to keep current on medical advances and kept up her registration for many years.

Now, let's go back to the year 1839 when in New Providence, Mary Eleanor Conyngham Wilson was born. She finished Girls High School in Lancaster and after attending the Washington Institute at Columbia for two years became the first woman to teach in the public schools in this county. She taught at Girls High School in Columbia and also at Bart Township.

In 1864 she began to study medicine with Dr. John K. Raub of New Providence. She then entered the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania and received her M.D. in 1868.

After working in clinics in New York she returned to Lancaster and began to practice as an assistant to Dr. John L. Atlee, grandfather of Dr. John L. Atlee, Jr. and Dr. William Atlee. Except for one woman who practiced only a few years, she is considered to be the first woman to practice medicine in this county.

Her success attracted a number of young women, who under her instruction prepared themselves for the successful practice of their profession in different parts of the United States.

Dr. Wilson was a censor of the Alumnae Association of Woman's Medical College. She took a deep interest in scientific investigation and research. She built an extensive practice, and remained active until a few years prior to her death in 1898. Her office was at 134 North Duke Street where the Bell Telephone building now stands.

Dr. Wilson was declared "an outstanding pioneer of her sex in the medical profession in this country, and displayed an unflinching interest in bettering the welfare of this community and its people through a long and distinguished career."

Dr. Mary Conyngham Wilson was the grandmother of Nathaniel Hager, Sr.—his mother's mother. In February 1948, fifty years after her death, a memorial to her of \$23,000 was given to the Lancaster General Hospital by the William H. Hager family. The memorial consisted of a doctors' lounge and conference room.

Dr. Letitia Frantz, born near Lancaster in 1858, finished Millersville State Normal School and taught school until she decided to be a doctor. After receiving her medical degree at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1884, she returned to practice in Lancaster specializing in nose and throat.

Dr. Marcella L. Schweitzer, born in Lincoln in 1883, finished Woman's Medical College in 1905 and was registered in our records in 1906. Her address was given as Ephrata.

In the census of 1897 is mentioned Dr. Marie R. VanHess, 332 North Lime Street.

Now let's talk about Dr. Elizabeth Kendig, born 1854, who finished Woman's Medical College in 1886, and began practice in her home at 32 South Duke Street. She said when she opened her office she put an ad in the newspaper and then waited. However, she was busy from the beginning, treating a sister,

Nellie, who had been given six weeks to live by her attending physician. She was so thin and weak she could not walk up steps. Dr. Kendig accepted the challenge from Nellie's doctor. She encouraged her sister to eat and watched her carefully. Gradually Nellie recovered from her neurasthenia and in three years her weight was 160 pounds. So pleased was her father that he gave his daughter, Dr. Kendig, \$100 for curing Nellie. She said that was the highest fee she was ever paid in all her practice!

Dr. Kendig was interviewed at age 87. She was in good health and still had a few patients. Her recommendation at that time was: "close observation of a patient, then one can give more thought to a case. I sometimes think that women take more pains in this way, even though they may have less ability than men." She is also quoted as saying: "the elixir to a long life is simply more sleep." These tidbits were taken from a newspaper clipping in August 1941, not her obituary.

Dr. Adelaide M. Underwood has the distinct honor of being the first lady physician admitted as a member of the Lancaster City and County Medical Society. This was on September 6, 1899. She had applied for membership 1½ years before this but according to the minutes of the Society on March 2, 1898, the Board of Censors reported favorably on the application of Dr. Adelaide Underwood for membership, but she was defeated by a vote of 36 "yes" to 17 "no." When she was elected the vote was 26 "yes" to 6 "no."

Dr. Underwood was the author of two scientific papers, one on leukemia and one on infant feeding that were accepted and printed in the State Medical Society Journal in 1900.

In 1909 and 1912 there are registration records of two osteopathic women physicians, R. Annette Ploss, 217 Woolworth Building, and Bessie Mabel Spencer. For some reason neither physician was listed in the city directories, but in 1909-1912 the directories did list Emma Purnell and Emma Green Wood, both with offices at 217-219 Woolworth Building.

Mary R. Bowman, M.D., Mount Joy, did premedical work at Wilson College and finished at Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1907. She worked in New York in the area of mental health, then began practice in Mount Joy in 1910. She was awarded her 50-Year Plaque in 1957. Her grandfather and two uncles were also physicians. She died in 1970.

In 1913 we find Dr. Winifred Thome, Milton Grove, registered and practicing in Mount Joy.

The Lancaster General Hospital opened its door in the year 1893. Ten years later—1903—Dr. A. L. Henry became its first intern. Twenty years after this—1922—Hannah Seitzick Robbins became its first woman intern. Dr. Seitzick was from Trenton, New Jersey. She did not stay in Lancaster after internship but returned to her hometown to open her office.

However, the following year, 1923, our own Dr. Wilhelmina Scott Bomberger interned and soon became a prominent member of the local medical group

in Lancaster. She was active in tuberculosis work at Rossmere Sanatorium. She then joined the Department of Radiology at the Lancaster General Hospital where she remained for 34 years, becoming the head of the department.

In 1973 Dr. Scott received the Medical Society's Distinguished Service Award, together with a 50-Year Service Award, and a citation for "a half century of Outstanding Service to Her Community and to the Medical Profession."

By 1924 the General Hospital was accepting as many as two, three, four, or even five women as interns each year. In 1926 Dr. Anna Place Klemmer interned and was chief resident the following year. She interned with four women and one man. That man was Dr. Harold K. Hogg.

Dr. Klemmer was married to Dr. Roland N. Klemmer and became active in the practice of pediatrics. She was a Fellow of the American College of Physicians and of the American Academy of Pediatrics. She died in 1974.

There were five women interns in 1927 when Dr. Irene Bott Davis came to Lancaster from England. After her internship and a brief sojourn to her native England, she returned to Lancaster to be married to Dr. Henry Davis, and then established a general practice specializing in obstetrics. In 1976 when she received her 50 Years of Service Award from the State Medical Society, the newspaper headlines reported, "50 Years and 6,000 Babies Haven't Dulled Her Interest."

In 1928 Dr. Harvey Seiple interned with four women doctors and one man. These women left Lancaster after internship but the following year gave us two more of Lancaster's women in medicine. They were Dr. Marvel Scott Kirk and Dr. Sally Rutledge Johnson. Dr. Johnson died suddenly after doing general practice for about eight years. Dr. Marvel Kirk received her 50-Year Service Award in 1979. She died 19 December 1991. She had been married to Dr. Norris Kirk who had interned with her. There was, indeed, a cupid at work in the corridors of the Lancaster General Hospital!

Dr. Marcella Deprez began the general practice of medicine and pediatrics after completing her education at the School of Osteopathy in Missouri in 1927. She was married to Al Czapf, a chemistry professor. In 1956 they moved to York County.

In 1930 Dr. Charlie Weaver interned with four women. But none of these women stayed in Lancaster.

About this time, B. Elizabeth Herbert, M.D., Columbia, became active in general practice in her hometown. She was another Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania graduate, class of 1927, and did her internship at Misericordia Hospital in Philadelphia.

Dr. Louisa E. Keasbey, a brilliant pathologist, was the head of the Department of Pathology at the Lancaster General Hospital for a number of years, about 1927 to 1940, when she left Lancaster for California with her surgeon husband, Dr. Ross Proctor.

Dr. Corrine Dryer, Ohio, came to Lancaster where she opened her office for general practice in 1935. She was active until 1960 when she returned to Ohio.

In the year 1935 Dr. Clara May Hileman, Dr. Catherine LaRue Hayes, and Dr. Mary Ellen Smith came to the Lancaster General Hospital to intern. Dr. Hayes went home to Force, Pennsylvania, to practice, but Dr. Clara May Hileman stayed on in the pathology laboratory for a few years before she married Dr. Robert Lehman and moved to Pittsburgh.

Dr. Mary Ellen Smith became chief resident physician at the General Hospital for two years, and then married Dr. Edgar W. Meiser and opened her office for general practice in Lancaster in 1938. After nine years of practice and eight years of motherhood, she resumed practice as a part-time physician at Millersville State Teachers College, now Millersville University, as well as an examining physician in the Lancaster city schools and in the Solanco School District until she retired in 1980.

Dr. Evelyn Merrick, from Orange, N.J., a graduate of Woman's Medical College in 1936 began practice in Lancaster in 1937 after her internship at the General Hospital. She practiced only a few years before leaving Lancaster.

Dr. Louise W. Slack finished Woman's Medical College and then interned at the General Hospital in 1937. She then began the practice of pediatrics in Lancaster. She became the only local woman physician to serve in the Armed Forces during World War II. The call to duty had arrived by mail addressed to "Dr. Louis Slack"—a typographical error, omitting the "e" from her first name, Louise. This did it. She enlisted in the Navy. After the war she practiced in Silver Springs, Maryland, until her death in 1958.

Dr. Beatrice Weisberg Sandhaus finished Woman's Medical College in 1938, and after interning at St. Joseph Hospital married Dr. Julius Sandhaus, and has been very active in general practice in Lancaster.

Dr. Ruth Crouse Moore, another Woman's Medical College graduate in the class of 1934, was active in the Ephrata area until her death in October 1970.

Dr. Ruth Brenner, Manheim, received her M.D. in 1939 from Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania. She developed a very busy practice and will always be remembered for her extensive occupational therapy efforts. She became an authority on making hooked rugs and she taught this art to many of her patients. She died in 1973.

After finishing her medical studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Jane Findley Hoffman interned at Lancaster General Hospital in 1942, married Dr. Charles M. Hoffman and did a couple of years of pediatrics practice with Dr. George Stoler, obstetrician. She had been active intermittently in school examinations and baby clinics.

Dr. Arlene Schlott's name appears as a practicing physician in the Ephrata area.

Dr. Thelma Boughton spent some time in the pathology laboratory at the General Hospital about 1940.

By 1944 women physicians found themselves very busy. People had less choice of physicians, it's true, because 61 members of our local Society were serving their country in the war. But, also, prejudice against women in medicine was rarely encountered by this time in Lancaster County.

The Centennial Year for the Lancaster County Medical Society arrived in 1944. Of a total membership of 217; sixteen of these were women.

Since 1950 several women have joined the medical field in Lancaster County. Dr. Margaret Eyler, Lititz area, general practice; Dr. Jacqueline Roe, general practice; Dr. Virginia Mears, psychiatry; Dr. Hilary Becker, pediatrics; Dr. Grace Kaiser, Ephrata, obstetrics; Dr. Maxine Montgomery, neurology; Dr. Cynthia Harrison, emergency medicine; Dr. Carol Scatarige, internal medicine; and Dr. Margarite Shultz, radiology.*

There is another woman from Lancaster County who should be in this report even though she had no medical degree. Her name was Susanna Muller. She was born in Lampeter in 1756. Her father was John Rohrer and her husband, Petter Muller, from Switzerland. She became well known as a midwife. So good and respected was she that one time during a delivery she worried about some anatomical irregularity in the case and dispatched at once the quickest messenger to Lancaster to consult a physician. It was in the middle of the night and the doctor inquired of the messenger as to who was attending the case. Upon hearing it was Susanna Muller, the doctor replied, "Then, it is all right, she knows as much about the case as I do." Susanna then proceeded and brought the case to a successful issue.

Susanna kept complete records of all her deliveries. They are on file at our Historical Society, beautiful records, kept from 1795 to 1815. She delivered 1,667 babies.

No doubt some names have been missed in this history of Women in Medicine in Lancaster County. This has not been intentional but is with regret if such is the case. However, let me finish by saying no history such as this would be complete without mentioning the name of Mom Koenich. Her textbook was *The Long Lost Friend*. This is a collection of mysterious and invaluable arts and remedies for man as well as animals. Her system of practice, primarily among the Pennsylvania Dutch, was known as "pow wow." She lived on Cabbage Hill and allegedly cured many when others failed.

* This essay was written in 1977; additional women physicians have opened offices since that time.

Dr. Smith has been serving as secretary of the Edward Hand Medical Heritage Foundation, and is an active member of the 150th Anniversary Committee of the Lancaster City and County Medical Society.