Early Medical Society Faced Severe Challenges

By Doris Reed

For the early residents of Pulaski County, there were few medications other than home remedies for illness. Aspirin, quinine, castor oil, balm of Peru, morphine and whiskey were all popular treatments. Cloroform and ether helped ease the pain of home deliveries. At the turn of the century, there were sixteen medical doctors in Pulaski County with six in Richland, five in Dixon, three in Crocker and two in Waynesville.

In May of 1903, the first Pulaski County Medical Society was formed in Richland at the offices of Doctors Regan, Monday and Murphy. Doctors Oliver, Thume and Titterington from Richland, Carter, Rolens and Harrison from Dixon, and Orrick and Stebbins from Crocker were also in attendance. Doctors Tice and Cliborn, from Waynesville, were unable to attend, but joined at the next meeting.

Some of these early physicians would live to see the beginning of the age of miracles in modern medicine that would eliminate many of the illnesses that killed early settlers. Hours were long and hard for the early doctors. Travel was long and slow and sometimes hazardous. Many a weary doctor fell asleep while his faithful horse delivered him home.

Meetings of the society were held quarterly with the meeting place rotated between the four towns. Later, all meetings were held in Crocker due to its central location. Lecturing doctors were brought out from St. Louis to update the doctors on new methods to treating small pox, syphilis, traucoma, typhoid fever, diptheria, sexual hygiene and childbirth. Consumption, pneumonia and even gonorrheaic knee were subjects of lectures.

A pressing problem for the medical society was the matter of fees. Due to transient doctors coming through and talking people into expensive treatments they didn't need, the society adopted a fee schedule on January 7th, 1908. Charges ranged from $10 for home deliveries to $1 for passing a catheter.

By 1913, many of the physicians had acquired automobiles making travel much quicker, but only in good weather. A sudden rain shower would mire the hub of a car deep in mud until a friendly farmer would get a mule team to pull out the unhappy motorist.

On Wednesday, June 21, 1916, eight members of the society met at Dixon in the offices of Doctors M.F. and L.E. Rolens with Dr. Howlett presiding. The visiting lecturer was a Dr. F.W. Runde, an ear, nose and throat specialist from St. Louis. Lecturers came by train and were given $5 for expenses. Several tonsils and adenoids were removed and many eye tests were given. Dr. Oliver noted in the minutes of the meeting, "This was a good meeting. If all the scattered doctors in the county could get together more often in this manner, problems of the sick could be better handled."

Pulaski County doctors declined in number following the depression. Small factories and businesses closed and families returned to small towns from the cities to eke out a living. Fishing and hunting were good in the Ozarks and could be supplemented by plentiful gardens. Drought years dwindled even these small advantages. People took to the roads begging and living in any shelter they could find. Hoboes riding the rails were abundant. Doctors worked harder than ever tending to epidemics, malnutrition, accidents and babies... babies... babies.

During the later months of 1940, the building of Fort Leonard Wood brought a welcome economic boom to Pulaski County. Beginning in December , an influx of 25,000 civilians were working in the county within a year. With them came others, bringing various businesses and services, but also came disease and sanitation problems. Six men were left in the society where there had been twenty not too many years before. Their problems were now magnified by the influx of thousands of people. These physicians also took turns examining draftees for the county.

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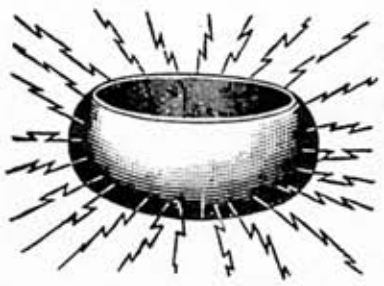

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