

Lady Doctors

YPSILANTI GLEANINGS

PAST SCENES and OLD TIMES

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The Lady Doctors Of Ypsilanti 1860-1899

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The Sentinel of July 7, 1899 stated that according to a Governmental Survey made that year there were 6,882 practicing women physicians in the United States. In Ypsilanti at that time there were three "lady" doctors. In fact, from the period of 1860 until early in the new century there never was a time that there were more than three or four women practicing medicine at the same time in our city. All of these women were interesting and courageous; virtually all of them played a vital part in the community life of Ypsilanti.

Probably the best remembered is Washtenaw's first woman doctor, Helen Walker McAndrew. Helen and William McAndrew, newly married, came from Scotland to Michigan in 1849. After a short stay in Detroit and Rawsonville the young couple came to Ypsilanti, which was to be their home for the rest of their lives. Helen, who had had some nursing experience in Scotland, soon discovered that the life of a "housewife" was not enough to fill her days. So with the blessings of her husband and the encouragement of her friends she took herself to Trail Institute in New York City to get a medical degree. At the time this school was the only one west of New York City which accepted women medical students. Mrs. McAndrew had learned the art of bookbinding in Scotland and obtained work at that trade in New York City. With that income and some nursing work she was able to get her medical degree in October of 1855.

Back again in Ypsilanti she found that the life of a woman doctor was indeed not as easy as she thought. If she had dreamed that she would have to turn patients away she was sadly awakened for her only patients were poor people, both black and white and if she was paid it was usually in food or fire wood. With much more time on their hands Doctor Helen and her husband, throughout their lives champions of the underdog, were active in the abolition movement. Indeed,

William McAndrew, helped hide runaway slaves in barns and drove them in wagons at night, covered with hay, to the outskirts of Trenton, where rowboats ferried them to Canada.

When the wife of one of Ypsilanti's most prominent men, (Samuel Post), was ill and recovery seemed doubtful, he was advised by his gardener to try Dr. McAndrew. Mr. Post obtained the "lady doctor's" services and Mrs. Post recovered. Mr. Post and Dr. Parmenio Davis praised Dr. Helen's methods to their friends, the Uhls, the Folletts, the King family and others. In a small brochure prepared for the Business and Professional Woman's Club by her son William in 1931, he quoted Samuel Post as saying: - "She knows what she's about. She's a very superior woman. There's no nonsense about her." Her son wrote: - "She was great in confinement cases. Whatever men and women born in Ypsilanti are now between forty-five and sixty five the chances are more than even that Helen McAndrew first held them in her hands and gave them their first baths."

Dr. McAndrew firmly believed that a clean body helped much towards a healthy body. In the spring of 1870 she opened her "Water Cure" Sanitarium at 105 South Huron. Not only could her patients bathe under supervision in the Huron River but receive special health giving baths and well balanced meals in the Sanitarium as well. She called her establishment "Rest for the Weary".

This was the period in which there were many such "water cure" semi-hospitals here in Michigan as well as in the east and they were most popular and well patronized. Ella, young daughter of Charles Pattison, editor of The Commercial, spent a week at the "Rest for the Weary" and her papa published her article telling of her stay. She wrote of receiving "homeopathic medicine", rest, delicious meals and swims in the river. She describes the beauty of the setting and ended her article with purple prose: -

"The Rest for the Weary" is an appropriate name. Dr. McAndrew is a very pleasant and talented women, making the "Rest" a sunshiny one for her afflicted patients. I am told that this is the only water cure in the country embracing a swimming park. This is the crowning glory of the Institution, the patients learning to swim during the summer months, in the limpid currents of the Huron. On the banks of our beautiful river, though right in the center of the city, yet possessing fine landscape views, it is a place where those desiring rest and recovery of health, can find an abundance of both cheerful society, plenty of fun, and faithful medical attendance.

In the summer of 1871 the following advertisement appeared in The Commercial:-

DROWNED DROWNED
THAT WOMAN WHO COULDN'T SWIM ----
AVOID HER FATE BY PROCURING TICKETS OF ADMISSION
TO THE SWIMMING YARD OF HELEN McANDREW, M.D.

Back in Scotland Helen McAndrew had been most active in the unpopular temperance movement and an early member in that organization's "Band of Hope" which was for teen-age temperance workers. Helen and her husband started such an organization in Ypsilanti which met every Wednesday after school. Both she and her husband were active in the Temperance Sunday School and Church and the doctor regularly attended Temperance Conventions. She traveled around Michigan speaking in favor of Temperance and marching in Temperance parades. The doctor was also active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Salvation Army and extremely active in Suffrage. Such leaders in the Suffrage movement as Susan B. Anthony, Frances Willard, Mary Livermore and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were visitors at the McAndrew home. Son William says of his parents: "They marched in the streets in their old age with the same grim determination to back up some despised reform that they showed for abolition when it wasn't respectable, for women doctors when they were despised, for temperance when it was unpopular, for woman suffrage when it was ridiculous."

When after 1879 "life giving" mineral springs were founded in Ypsilanti Dr. Helen had mineral water piped into her establishment and along with the other sanitariums of Ypsilanti listed her daily patients in the pages of the local papers. Her advertisement read:-

Mineral Baths at Mrs. Dr. McAndrew's
South Huron Street
Pleasant sitting rooms for ladies. No
gentlemen admitted after 6 p.m.

Dr. Helen McAndrew died on October 26, 1906 at 80 years of age. It would be sometime before her two favorite "causes" Temperance and Suffrage would be legalized in the form of Constitutional Amendments. She missed marching in the streets of the big Eastern cities, she missed heckling President Wilson and other Government officials, but every cause has to have much ground work done to make it successful and no one could say that our Dr. McAndrew did not do her share.

Ypsilanti had another "lady" doctor who started practicing here at about the same time as Helen McAndrew. She was Dr. Ruth A. Gerry. Ruth and Seth Gerry, a dentist, came from Otsego in New York State. Dr. Seth Gerry received his education at the University of Michigan and Dr. Ruth at Woman's Hospital in Philadelphia.

Dr. Ruth Gerry was also most interested and active in the Suffrage movement, but her chief concern was for the poor of the city and county who could not afford medical attention. In 1872 she was instrumental in founding a local organization in Ypsilanti, called "The Ladies' Free Hospital Association". At that time she and her husband lived at 57 Pearl Street (615 Pearl after the change in house numbers), and they had the house enlarged to give the use of rooms in it for Ypsilanti's Free Hospital. An article in The Commercial for February 17, 1872 spells out the need for the new facility:-

Mrs. Dr. Gerry, moved by the need of such an institution, put all of her available means into a building for this purpose on Pearl Street, 53x76 feet, including wings, and three stories

high. Poor, sick students from abroad, especially Normal students, have been befriended, nursed and restored to health at this hospital. The faculty have come to regard it as an invaluable blessing to our city. In a growing community like our own - so many strangers from abroad - it is indispensable ... Quite a number of our citizens have contributed nobly towards this Hospital. The ultimate design to make it a free one for friendless sick woman.

In June of 1872 Dr. Ruth Gerry was elected to membership in the County Medical State Society. This was a big step for men of the medical society to make, for just a year or so before when Dr. Gerry had applied for membership one male doctor complained in an article in the paper that he didn't see why women doctors wanted to join an organization where they knew they were not wanted.

In the summer of 1876 Dr. Gerry also started a bath establishment in connection with her hospital. In The Commercial of August 15, 1876 she advertised:-

Dr. R.A. Gerry Turkish Baths for Ladies and gentlemen. Hot, cold, shower and plunge baths with or without electricity. If you wish to enjoy real luxury, patronize the above. Cleanliness is next to Godliness, and essential to perfect health, and nothing cleans so effectually as the TURKISH BATHS. An experienced matron in charge for the Ladies' Department - Open daily from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sundays 6-10 a.m. 2-5 p.m.
Single baths .50 12 Tickets \$5.00
Tickets \$2.50

And in September of that same year the editor of The Commercial reported that Dr. Gerry had had her new "bathing rooms" running for over six weeks and had two hundred lady and gentlemen bathers up to that time.

Dr. Gerry had still one other pet project on which she spoke and wrote often; the stupidity of women wearing tight clothing and their vain pride in achieving small waists. In The Commercial of January 6, 1872, she was most melodramatic in her condemnation of such habits:-

...What an achievement! How beautiful!
How nice it would look on her tomesstone.
'She died early, but in her short life she
succeeded in making for herself the smallest
waist that was ever known!, noble creature!
She died in the undertaking - but what of that!
After such a pinnacle of glory has been reached!

On December 8 of 1876 Dr. Gerry died at the age of 48.

Her good friend, Charles Pattison, eulogized her in his paper.

..She was kind and large hearted; could not
endure to see suffering without rendering
all the assistance in her power to alleviate.
She established a hospital in our city of high
order. The Free Hospital Association was
contributory to this institution, but over
and above the aid rendered, nearly \$1,000 per
annum was expended by this sacrificing woman
and her husband in the aid of the suffering sick.
Though she had a large practice in the city and
vacinity she devoted one day a week to patients in
Detroit. She possessed a consecrated seal in her
profession, and this remarkable zeal made her a
martyr. Rising from a sick bed to attend a patient
was her last professional work...She felt that somebody
must be sacrificed to pave the way for women to
successfully practice medicine and be professionally
recognized by the regular school, and that she was
commissioned to make the sacrifice. Mrs. Gerry
fought the battle, and drove the entering wedge
for admission of our women to the Medical department
of the University...Our city physicians acted as
pall bearers, thus in the last sad rites showing
a commendable professional recognition.

In 1878 the Ladies' Hospital Association erected a marker
on Dr. Ruth A. Gerry's grave in Highland Cemetery.

Ruth A. Gerry, M.D.

died

December 8, 1876

48 years

"She hath been a succorer of many"

Romans, 16c and 9th v.

Erected by the Ladies' Hospital Association
of which she herself was the founder.

Harriet, the Gerry's only child, received her medical degree
from the University of Michigan in 1883. She practiced in
Detroit and was the second woman on the staff of Harper
Hospital. She contracted tuberculosis and died in 1899.

Dr. Seth Gerry returned to Otsego where he died in 1886. His obituary in The Commercial tells us that after Dr. Ruth's death the Sanitarium and Hospital were closed down. The house was then purchased by a Rev. E.P. Goodrich, passed through other hands, stood empty and Ypsilanti's "Free Hospital" is now an apartment house at 615 Pearl Street.

In September of 1877 Dr. Ruth A. French came to Ypsilanti. The notice of her arrival tells us: -

Miss Ruth A. French has taken Dr. Gerry's place. Rooms at Mrs. Wells on Adams Street and gives special attention to obstetrics and diseases of women and children.

An article in The Commerical for September 29, 1877 informed the public that Ruth French was a graduate of the Womans's College of Philadelphia, two years junior to Dr. Gerry, and that she had just returned from a year's study in a Parisian Hospital. Also in the same issue there is a letter of testimonial from ministers and doctors of the Philadelphia area telling of Dr. French's abilities.

Dr. French quickly became a part of the social life in Ypsilanti as well as the medical. She was a member of the Ladies' Literary Club and on the Board of the Ladies' Library Association. She joined the Methodist Church and was an active member. On February 26, 1881, perhaps her birthday, she was given a surprise party at the home of N.M. Thompson where - "numerous friends presented her with a black walnut bookcase, an office chair, an album, and 'other articles' presented by patients and friends.

Although Dr. French was a popular doctor here and had many friends she seemed to find our climate not to her liking and left Ypsilanti and Michigan many times before she left for good. At various times over the years The Commercial tells of the comings and goings of this lady.

6/10/1882 Miss Dr. Ruth A. French left Tuesday to spend the summer in Topeka, Kansas. She has been a faithful friend and physician in this city, a worthy successor of the lamented Mrs. Dr. Gerry. Her many friends hope to see her return rested and improved in health.

She returned from Kansas, located in Detroit and came to Ypsilanti on Saturdays where she held office hours at the home of Mrs. E.N. Follett near the depot. In March of 1883 Dr. French settled in Knoxville, Tennessee to continue her practice and while there wrote many letters to friends here about her life and the people of Tennessee which were printed in the pages of The Commercial. In July of 1884 Dr. French returned to Ypsilanti and on November 1 of that year advertised:-

Dr. Ruth A. French after an absence of two years, returns to resume her practice at her office, on Huron Street near Cross Street and desires to correct a false impression made on a portion of the community that she sold her business at that time, as there was no consideration whatever received for anything except her furniture and household goods.

Dr. French's chief interest outside of the daily interest in her patients was in the prevention of commutable diseases through the improvement of sanitary conditions - and on this subject she gave many talks in Ypsilanti, all faithfully reported in the pages of The Commercial.

In May of 1886 Dr. French again went to Kansas. If she did return once more to our city it is not noticed in the papers. In The Ypsilanti Press for June 12, 1905, there appears some sad news for her friends.

Word has been received in the city of a painful accident recently suffered by Ruth French, a former well known resident of this city, now of Petatuma, California. Last week while driving Dr. French, who is a prominent physician in Petatuma, was kicked in the head by her horse, receiving the full force of the blow from both horse's high feet, and suffering a severe fracture of the skull. Reports are to the effect that the patient shows no signs of improvement.

Dr. Ruth French died a few days after the accident.

When Dr. French left Ypsilanti in 1882 to go to Detroit and Knoxville, Dr. Belle Warner, "successor to Ruth A. French" came to Ypsilanti. Dr. Warner graduated from the University of Michigan Medical School. Her main interest outside of her practice of medicine was with Foreign Missions for there is an occasional report in the paper of Dr. Warner's attendance at Foreign Mission Conventions. On September 6 of 1884 the following notice appeared in The Commercial:-

We regret to report the leaving of Belle Warner, M.D. Miss Warner will remain until about the middle of the month when she proposes to visit her native home in New England. When she returns she will make her home in Detroit. Her successor is Mrs. Flora H. Ruch, M.D. who comes here from Adrian where she had had a successful practice. She is a graduate of the Medical Department of the University. She will retain the same residence and office so long occupied by Dr. Warner.

Dr. Warner came as successor to Dr. French and left when Dr. French returned to take up her practice in Ypsilanti again. Thinking back to Dr. French's paid announcement in the fall of 1884 concerning the fact that she had not "sold" her practice but only her furniture, one does wonder if perhaps there was a bit of misunderstanding and even hard feelings between the two doctors. Dr. Warner under the belief that she was really purchasing Dr. French's practice and that Dr. French was not planning to return. Perhaps, also, Dr. Warner felt that Ypsilanti did not have need of three "lady" doctors. As we read in The Commercial for December 8, 1886, Dr. Warner's future was a sad one after she left our city.

We were informed by a friend in Detroit, Monday, that Dr. Belle Warner, now Mrs. Reynolds, who was so highly esteemed in this city as a physician, for several years, has been taken to the Insane Asylum at Pontiac. Her insanity is caused by over-work being very anxious to excel, and having an extensive practice.

Dr. Warner's successor in Ypsilanti, Dr. Flora Ruch, like the others before her, quickly became an active member in the social life of the city. She belonged to the Ypsilanti's

Woman's Club, a Chataqua Club and also found time to return to Adrian to attend former patients and to attend State Medical Meetings. However, by August 3 of 1888 she decided to leave Ypsilanti and go elsewhere for her practice of medicine.

Dr. Christine Marie Anderson, successor to Dr. Ruth Flora Ruch, was born in Green County, Iowa in 1862 and died in Ypsilanti in 1904. She was graduated from the University of Michigan Medical School in 1888. Her assistant was a Dr. Emily Benn, also a University of Michigan Medical school graduate, and who came from Guelph, Ontario and died in Ypsilanti in 1902.

By this time the editors of the local papers and the people of Ypsilanti are getting quite unexcited about having "lady" doctors in our community and there is little in the papers about their activities.

On May 14 of 1895 there appeared a small article in The Commercial:-

Among those who will graduate from the Medical School at Ann Arbor this month we notice the names of Miss Harriet L. Hawkins and Miss Ellen Murray.

With no more introduction than that Dr. Ellen Murray, (born in Superior Township, November 22, 1867) started her practice in Ypsilanti. A "lady" doctor, even though she was a local girl, was no longer a novelty. By 1899 Dr. Murray not only belonged to the County Medical Society - she was Vice-President of it!. Before 1917 Dr. Ellen, (now Mrs. Edward F. Brown), had left Ypsilanti to move to Massachusetts.

In just about fifty years, spearheaded by the work of our two pioneer "lady" doctors, Dr. Helen McAndrew and Dr. Ruth A. Gerry, the remale doctor had come of age in our city.