A PIONEER DOCTOR OF MARSHALL COUNTY

ELMER YOCUM LAWRENCE

Elmer Yocum Lawrence came home from the war with a crooked leg, a cane, a great admiration for General Grant, and an ambition to be a doctor. He always had the crooked leg and at times needed a second cane, while his admiration for General Grant never wavered.

He had been born in Wayne County, Ohio, on August 25, 1831, his parents moving from Ohio to Indiana two years later and to Illinois when he was twelve years old. After a country school education, he became a successful country school teacher, serving for ten years in Iowa and Illinois. When the Civil War broke out, he enlisted in the 34th Illinois Infantry, and was wounded in his first engagement — the battle of Shiloh. Recovering from this, he reënlisted and was severely wounded and crippled for life in the battle of Stone River. As a result he was honorably discharged in 1863. It was then that he chose medicine for his profession.

It was customary then for a medical student to "read medicine" with an established physician for a time before entering a medical college. His brother, Dr. J. S. Lawrence, was in partnership with Dr. Frazey at Forreston, Illinois, and Elmer Lawrence went into their office for a period of study. He then attended the Chicago Medical College in 1865 and graduated in 1867. Here he acquired a new ideal, Dr. N. S. Davis, the President of the College.

Dr. Lawrence commenced his practice in Oregon, Illinois. He waited two weeks before a patient came to his office. One day a light wagon stopped at the gate and a

woman climbed down and assisted a small boy to alight. She hitched the horse and led the boy slowly up the path. As the child seemed to need help the doctor went out to meet them. They were apparently foreigners and the mother's speech was hard to understand. When they were seated in the office she made it known that the boy was ill and in need of the new doctor's attention. He took the patient's hand and found a rapid pulse. Then he asked the boy to show his tongue. Only a stupid stare in response.

"Open your mouth, my lad, and let me see your tongue." No comprehension. Again and again the request was repeated in vain. Then the mother took a hand in the conversation.

"Wullie can no get what ye're sayin', Doctor. Wullie, hoppen thy gobbler an' thrust out thy lollicker!" Willie opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue, thus giving the needed information. The doctor liked to tell this story but never stated whether his first patient profited by the treatment.

In 1867, after a few months at Oregon, Dr. Lawrence came to a farming district some twenty miles north of Marshalltown, Iowa. The neighborhood had been settled in 1866 by a group of families from Wisconsin, and for that reason the community was known as "Badger Hill". They were a fine class of people, thrifty, pious, and intelligent. There were doctors in the thriving county seat, Marshalltown, but none in any other direction for many miles. His territory took in part of Grundy and Tama counties as well as northern Marshall County. The country was new and thinly settled; the roads were bad the year round. The doctor bought an eighty acre farm, built a house and barn, set out fruit and shade trees, and in 1870 married a pretty school teacher, Alice Money. The land was rented to neighbors as his practice kept the doctor busy. The office

was the living room of the house and the young wife was office girl, bookkeeper, and surgical assistant.

I was the only child born to the couple. My first recollections center around my father's office equipment. There was a tall black medicine cupboard surmounting a table with drawers beneath. On the shelves of the cupboard were bottles containing liquids, powders, and the unpowdered drugs which he pulverized in a mortar. The drawers of the table held a few surgical instruments, a set of forceps for pulling teeth, obstetrical forceps, smooth boards for splints, clean papers for powders, and a roll of bandages made from old sheets and tablecloths. All these things were as familiar to me as my dolls and toys. Father had a few medical books brought from Chicago and he took a medical magazine published there. Drugs and supplies were procured in Marshalltown, twenty long, hard miles away. Part of the road was through the bottom land of the Iowa River and was always rough, very muddy part of the year, and almost impassable in winter. When we made our rare trips to town they were planned long in advance. Mother made a list of every possible need and father spent much time looking over his stock of drugs.

About ten years after father established his practice in Iowa, a man from the Truax drug company of Chicago began making annual trips out from Marshalltown to take orders. We were accustomed to tin pedlars and to agents for fruit and shade trees, sewing machines, and cabinet organs, but this was the first travelling salesman I remember — that is, a man who sold from samples. His visit was an important event. I recall plainly the first capsules we ever saw. He brought a line of different sizes and explained their use. Father bought a supply, for the capsule was a solution of the problem attending the use of quinine and other bitter drugs.

A few days later a man called to get medicine for his wife.

"Now, Doc", he said, "She says she don't want no quinine, for she just can't take it, in strong coffee nor no other way. She can't seem to git it down. Can't you give her something that won't taste so bad?"

The doctor hastened to say that he had a new way of giving powders and there would be no taste at all — it would be like swallowing a pill. The man watched curiously as the capsules were filled from a little heap of powder. He took them rather dubiously and departed. A week later he returned for more medicine.

"Doc, she's better, but if it's all the same to you she'd rather have the medicine in the powder papers like you used to fix it. It's such a lot of trouble to empty them little cases into a spoon!"

Homeopathy had long been established in the east but was a novelty in the west. Father, being an ardent Allopath, had no use for any other system of medicine, but one day he brought home from Marshalltown a small sample case of the despised Homeopathic medicines which his druggist had persuaded him to try. Soon after this he was called to attend a woman who had a mild form of a disease which he thought might yield to these remedies. He left a bottle of the tiny pellets with directions for their use. In two days the woman's husband came to say that she was out of medicine.

"Out of medicine!", exclaimed my father, "I left a large supply, enough to last a week."

"Well", explained the man, "when you count out a hundred and twenty of those little pills for each dose, they go fast."

"A hundred and twenty! I can't understand — I wrote the directions plainly — two after each meal."

"Yes", replied the man, "but on the bottle it said one hundred and twenty, and we thought you had made a mistake!"

The label read "One hundred and twentieth dilution". The patient was none the worse for the heavy dose but father had a strong argument against the Homeopathic system.

One big bottle in the medicine cupboard was never allowed to become empty. It was the chloroform bottle. Ether and chloroform were both in use as anaesthetics at the time, but ether was not used in country districts since it is inflammable, and when kerosene lamps or candles were used for lighting and open stoves for heating, the use of ether was impossible. To be out of chloroform meant hours of agony for women in childbirth or for accident cases. One evening we were preparing to retire when we heard the sound of a wagon approaching at breakneck speed, horses on the gallop. In the bottom of the wagon lay a man who had been cruelly mangled in a threshing machine. His right hand and arm were torn and crushed and he was unconscious from loss of blood. He was laid on the couch in the living room by the two men who had brought him. Mother knew how to give chloroform and set quietly about her task, but it was necessary for someone to hold the kerosene lamp so that father could see to cleanse the wounds and do his work. One of the men came toward the couch to do this, but fainted away. The other man sickened from the odor of the chloroform and had to leave the room. There was no time to lose. Father looked at me and then at mother. She nodded her head.

"Daughter, can you hold the lamp?", he asked. I answered that I could and grasped it in my small seven year-old hands.

Mother said, "Hold the lamp steady, but look at *me*!"

I held the light, mother gave the anaesthetic and father worked quickly and skilfully. The patient came through with a maimed hand but no infection followed.

In that day asepsis was unheard of. Father was very neat and clean and always scrubbed his hands thoroughly in hot water before he touched a patient. I used to wonder why he spent so much time in doing what seemed most unnecessary to me! His instruments were washed in hot water but not boiled, yet women lived through awful complications in childbirth and men recovered from terrible accidents. There was no "pneumonia"—it was called "inflammation of the lungs"; no "appendicitis" for the appendix had not been discovered—people had "inflammation of the bowels". Teeth were not filled. If they ached hard enough, the family doctor pulled them, and when a majority had gone, a trip was made to the Marshalltown dentist and the remainder were extracted under gas. A set of fearfully white, ghastly false teeth was then acquired and ever after referred to as "my set". They never looked natural, never fitted, and always caused discomfort. An entry from my mother's journal under date of Sunday, January 29, 1871, is of interest. "Some folks were here today to have teeth extracted. The usual thing for Sunday!" Evidently the sturdy pioneer could endure the toothache until Sunday brought the leisure to have it relieved!

There were no trained nurses, not even practical nurses. The good neighbors took care of each other, sitting up night after night and doing all that kind hearts could suggest. Every neighborhood had one or two women who had a natural knack for nursing, and they helped the doctor when babies arrived.

Father kept good horses, for he was out day and night on long trips. He cared for them himself and they were

like members of the family. He could not stand without support from his cane, so in harnessing he leaned on one horse while putting the harness on the other. These horses were well trained and could find their way home in the darkest night. Their driver never attempted to guide them in the dark but let the lines hang loose. Country folks, it seemed, used to wait until night to call the doctor — sickness seems worse after night-fall. Many a time I have been wakened by the sharp sound of a horse's hoofs clipping along the road at a brisk trot, or galloping, if the need was dire. Father was always up and had the lamp lighted before the horse slowed down at the turn into our lane. He would raise the window and call, "What's wanted?" The rider scarcely gave the message before father was out and on the way to the barn to hitch up. Then away in the single buggy over rough roads or through hub-deep mud. If it was winter, the deep drifts must be encountered with the sleigh. High water was universal in the spring, and the frail wooden bridges, often without guard rails, made driving dangerous in daylight. The hazards of night travel can be imagined. It was hard enough for an able-bodied man, but for a cripple it was heroic. The following extracts from mother's journal give a striking picture of the conditions under which she and her husband lived and worked.

"Tuesday, Feb. 7th, 1871. Cold, roads very rough, with snow on top. Elmer called out at three in the morning, gone all day. By night-fall I was so nervous I did not know what to do with myself. Alone all night for the first time in the eight months we have been married.

"Wednesday, Feb. 8th. 1871. Got up at five and built a fire. Very anxious about Elmer. He returned at eleven A. M. and had just lain down to rest when a man came for him to go down the creek. Storming badly — worst storm

we have had all winter. He got back at nine o'clock, very tired.

"Friday, Feb. 24th. 1871. Elmer gone all evening. Was worried about him as he was away much longer than I expected. The creeks are all so high — am afraid to have him out after night. Even if I am a doctor's wife I can't help being anxious when he is out at night.

"Sunday, Feb. 26th. 1871. Iowa river higher than for sixteen years. Mail did not come up this week because of high water. (The mail came every Monday to the neighborhood post-office)

"Monday, March 6th. 1871. Elmer went to see a patient seven miles away. Roads so bad it took him all afternoon to go and come. Did not get back until after dark."

One summer night we were wakened by someone pounding on the window. Father had been out the night before and had not heard the approaching horseman. He went to the window and asked what was wanted.

"Oh, Doc!" came the voice of an old German farmer. "I vant you to coom quick und see my vooman — she awful seeck. You coom right avay queeck?" Father turned away to dress, but the old man spoke again.

"Say, Doc, how mooch you sharge to coom see my vooman?"

"It's four miles to your place, Henry, that'll be two dollars."

"Oh, Doc!" wailed the distressed man, "I'm a poor man, I ain't got the money. Can't you coom for feefty cents?"

"No", answered my father, who was rapidly losing his patience, "You've got a good farm and you can afford to have a doctor for your wife when she needs help. Think how hard she works all the time."

"Oh, but Doc! Two dollars is a awful lot of money. Can't you make it yoost one dollar?"

"No", exclaimed father, "I can't, and you've no business to stand here arguing while your wife is suffering."

"Vell, Doc, I guess maybe you better coom. My vooman she *is* goot vooman. I rather lose one of my best cows as lose my vife! I go out und help you hitch up!"

We lived on a side road where few travellers came. No tramps were ever seen until the right-of-way of a new railroad was begun. The Chicago and Northwestern Railway was completed to Marshalltown in 1862 and had been our nearest railway, but in 1879 work was begun on a branch of this road from Tama (then called Tama City) to Jewell Junction. This came within three miles of our home and was completed in 1880. Stragglers hung around the workmen's camps and wandered through the nearby neighborhood.

One morning my father was called to a case twelve miles away. He left at seven o'clock and we had no idea when he would return. Shortly before nine o'clock mother saw an ugly looking tramp coming up the road. She locked the doors and windows and we went upstairs. We watched through the curtain. The man had an evil face and we were terror-stricken. Mother hid me under the bed and told me to keep quiet, no matter what happened. The tramp knocked — knocked again and pounded on the door. Then he went to the pump and rattled the handle, looking toward the house and shouting vile threats. He tried the back door, the windows, and the cellar door. This went on for some two hours. He sat down occasionally on the pump platform and drank from a black bottle. The idea of breaking a window seemed not to have entered his befuddled mind. Suddenly he saw the woodpile, ran toward it, and picked up a heavy stick, then ran toward the house shouting, "I'll get you now!" Mother crept under the bed beside me and we waited in an agony of fear, hardly daring

to breathe. It seemed that hours, rather than minutes, passed. But there was no crash of window glass or shattering wood, instead of that fearful sound we heard rapid footsteps and the voice of our good neighbor, John Fleming, calling loudly, "Are you folks all right?"

Fleming had been plowing his north forty that morning and when he reached the crest of the hill he looked toward the doctor's house. Sometimes he could see the doctor's little girl playing under the apple trees. Often his own children were with her. She was not there this morning, but he saw something that made him drop the lines and run across the pasture toward the house, shouting as he ran. The tramp saw him, threw down the stick, and made off up the road. When Fleming reached the house the vagrant was out of sight.

The next time father went to Marshalltown he brought mother a strange gift, a revolver. It lay in the table drawer for many years, mother and I being almost as much afraid of it as we had been of the tramp.

In the winter of 1880-1881 an epidemic of diphtheria broke out in the Badger Hill neighborhood. A visitor from Wisconsin had unknowingly brought the disease. It was in the dead of winter with intense cold and heavy snows coming one after another. The disease spread from one family to another — the doctor was the only hope. He visited them every day and gave the treatment that was used at the time. The throat was swabbed with tincture of iron, stimulants were administered, and the doctor made every effort to keep the diphtheria membrane from closing the throat and filling the nasal passages. Finally the day came when the little sleigh could no longer go through the deep drifts. My own childish journal contains some mention of this.

"Feb. 4, 1881. Papa could not go to see the sick folks

because the snow had drifted so deep. He says there will be more snow tonight.

"Feb. 5, 1881. Blizzard. Snow blowing. Four men from Badger Hill came to break the road for papa."

These men came with four horses hitched to a bobsled and shoveled the road ahead of the doctor's sleigh. It took them from eight o'clock in the morning until four in the afternoon to "break" three miles of road. The next morning all the way was filled with snow and had to be dug out again. This was repeated day after day for more than a week, but the doctor reached his patients. They could not all be saved but many made a good recovery.

In April of 1881, father carried out a long cherished plan of going to a course of lectures at the Chicago Medical College. He had never returned since his graduation in 1867. Doctors did not go away then for medical study frequently and easily as they do now, and this trip was as much of an undertaking as a journey to Europe is today. So many things had to be arranged; someone to stay with us and care for the horses and the cow, medicine for his "chronic cases", advice and remedies for the anxious mothers who dreaded his going, and more than all — a careful counting of the cost. At times he gave up and said it was impossible. Mother urged him to go and largely because of her insistence he finally went. He was gone three weeks, from April 2nd to April 25th. When he returned there was great rejoicing in our little family and among the neighbors. Not a case of illness had occurred during his absence, the babies had delayed their coming, and no one broke any bones. He brought me a wonderful doll with hair, and a box of seashells — marvellous things — from a State Street store. Mother received a back-comb set with rhinestones, the wearing of which forever marked her as a leader of fashion in our community. But what

really interested mother and me the most was the new equipment father brought for his professional use. There was a set of splints for broken bones and dislocations. They were molded to fit and made of a sort of hardened felt. Heretofore father had used boards for splints and sometimes heavy sand bags to keep limbs in place. I remember fitting the little splints to my own elbows and knees, and while I did not wish the misfortune of broken bones to come to any of the children whom I knew, I was very curious to see those cunning things in use!

In July of 1881 a severe hail storm and heavy rains occurred and the floods that followed washed away bridges and destroyed property. The valley or slough between our home and the main road where most of the families lived, was a rushing torrent of water. The same good neighbors who had "broken roads" during the heavy snows of the preceding winter came again to the rescue of their doctor. They calked a wagon box, made oars, and paddled across to our side of the water. The men waded ashore, picked my father up, medicine case, cane, and all, and carried him to the boat. Mother and I watched from the shore with anxious fear. I can see my father waving his cane and calling back to us that the "Ark" would soon be on dry land! The perilous journey was made several times before the water went away. Then came the usual muddy roads, but mud was the common thing and no one expected to see the spokes of any vehicle for weeks in the spring. The wheels were solid mud from hub to tire.

The new railroad brought the town of Gladbrook, with school, churches, other doctors: the pioneer days were over.

Last summer I visited the old home of my childhood. In a comfortable car we were whisked over as many miles in one day as my father could have travelled in a week. Paved and gravelled roads are everywhere; doctors in all

the villages fly about in high powered cars at the summons of the telephone; trained nurses are within call; hospitals are a few miles away. And in the cemetery on the hill are the old friends whose lives were in the pioneer doctor's hands, and whose children remember him with gratitude and respect.

My father died on July 25, 1891, while on a visit to Boulder, Colorado. He was buried in the cemetery at York, Nebraska, where I was living at the time, but on the monument on the lot in the Badger Hill cemetery where my grandfather Lawrence was buried, is inscribed the dates of the birth and death and the place of burial of both my father and mother. When the sons and daughters of the old neighbors visit the quiet, peaceful cemetery on the hill they are reminded by these inscriptions of the old family doctor and his wife, of whom they have heard and whose memory is thus perpetuated.

An old lady of eighty-seven once said to me, "Yes, times have changed in fifty years and maybe doctors have improved, but I can remember when the sweetest sound I ever heard was the tap of your father's cane on the steps when my children were sick."

FLOY LAWRENCE EMHOFF

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