

Country doctor marks 50 years in practice

filed Sept 17/83 PE Co - 50 - 3

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Staff Reporter

Ethel Dempsey was the new doctor in town, pestered by the patient complaining of chronic back pains.

She prescribed codeine tablets but wondered about the lady's persistence.

"Finally I recommended a specialist in Toronto... that was the last I saw of the woman. Only later did I discover she was a drug addict and practised the same ruse on every doctor who came to town."

The year was 1936, the month March. Dr. Dempsey (then Noble) - a 1933 graduate of the University of Toronto's faculty of medicine - learned the death of popular city physician Dr. Emma Conner had left an established practice open.

She moved to Belleville, living with the Conner family and practising out of their home, a house that still stands on the corner of Campbell and Pinnacle Streets. Dr. Dempsey was one of four females graduating from a class of 125.

It was an era when home births were considered commonplace. One particular delivery, however, was somewhat less than routine.

Late one night a man pounded excitedly on her door. He had brought his pregnant wife into Belleville to shop for baby clothes when she suddenly went into

labor. Rather than simply driving to the hospital, Dr. Dempsey loaded equipment into her car and followed the man and his wife along bumpy gravel roads to their country home north of Shannonville.

"There were no facilities...the husband lit the coal lamps and helped with the chloroform. Then I stayed with the mother while he went to get the baby's grandmother."

Five years later she decided life as a general practitioner wasn't her cup of tea and moved to Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital and a specialist's position on the anesthesiology staff. During her Royal Vic tenure, Dr. Dempsey often worked with renowned pioneer neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield.

Research deeper into her specialty led to a paper on refrigeration anesthesiology presented to the Ontario Medical Association during a stint at Ottawa's Civic Hospital.

Marriage to Allan Dempsey - recently returned from Britain and the Royal Air Force - in 1948 brought her back to the Quinte area and a rural practice she found time for between more than two decades of anesthesiology duties at Belleville and Trenton hospitals.

"I didn't hang a shingle out...wasn't even intending to practise at all because I was trying to raise a family. Living in the country meant people coming to the

door at night and on the weekends when they couldn't get to a doctor in town."

The Dempseys have lived in their Rednersville home 35 years.

Her "unofficial" practice soon caught the attention of Ameliasburg Township council which demanded she pay business taxes. But when her husband reminded councillors of her work with the area's poor, the politicians quickly backed down.

In a letter this year to organizers of 50th anniversary celebrations of the graduating class - it became part of a yearbook detailing the career of each graduate - Dr. Dempsey noted her life "has not been spectacular in any way but to me rewarding and satisfying, if at times turbulent."

Unlike many of the class of '33, Dr. Dempsey hasn't put away her stethoscope and locked her black bag for the last time. After 50 years she remains registered with the Royal Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons.

And, she's somewhat of a medical anomaly: a doctor who still makes house calls. But familiarity with most patients means mixing business with pleasure: a house call often also means time for a chat and cup of tea.