

Ella N. Ritter, M.D.

A colorful
character
disguised in
monochrome



SUN-GAZETTE FILES

Williamsport physician, Dr. Ella N. Ritter, formerly of 1211 W. Fourth St., was one of five physicians honored at a war conference of doctors from the Sixth and Seventh Councilor Districts of the Medical Society of Pennsylvania. This picture was published on May 16, 1943, in the Williamsport Sun-Gazette, at right. In 1906, Ritter purchased the 1209-1211 W. Fourth St. home, a three-story building, as pictured in this provided photo. It served as her home and private hospital until she was moved to Darlington Sanitarium in West Chester.

4/12/20 By JUDITH GOULDIN, M.D.
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Ella N. Ritter was born on Jan. 12, 1866, in northern Lycoming County, an area so rural that bears were believed to outnumber people. Her half-brother, James, forged a career path meandering through education and medicine.

Eventually he settled into a physician position at a private hospital in Jersey Shore.

Following his lead, Ella went to Mansfield State Normal School, now Mansfield University, to study the prerequisite subjects for medical school — Latin and the sciences of biology, chemistry and physics — and

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to earn her teaching certificate. She graduated in 1885, and after four years in the classroom, she matriculated at Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania. She earned her medical degree in 1893 and then remained in the city for a post-graduate year, 1893 to 1894, at West Philadelphia Hospital for Women.

Practice in Williamsport

Dr. Ritter decided to practice in Williamsport — the metropolis of her home county. She rented rooms at 600 Seventh Ave., just a block from elegant Millionaires' Row, along which lived a number of patients who needed "female" surgery, Dr. Ritter's specialty.

Two years later, she moved to more spacious quarters at 1217 W. Fourth St. and her parents moved in with her. In 1906, the opportunity arose to buy 1211 W. Fourth St., a three-story building with charming bay windows. It would serve as her home and private hospital until, suffering from cerebral atherosclerosis, she was moved to Darlington Sanitarium in West Chester, where she died from a stroke in 1948.

Soon after her arrival in Williamsport, she joined the county, state and national medical societies. She was an active county society member for 53 years, serving as treasurer from 1909 to 1912.

An avid teacher, she was a frequent presenter at the educational sessions of the county medical meetings. She also volunteered to speak on health-related issues in the community such as the Florence Crittenden seminars on virtue.

Of the new generation of female physicians who had settled in the city, Dr. Ritter most closely resembled the revered

Dr. Jean Saylor-Brown. Both women preferred surgery to other types of medicine. When Dr. Saylor-Brown began her final battle with valvular heart failure, it was Dr. Ritter she asked to her bedside, and on June 21, 1928, it was Dr. Ritter who sadly announced her colleague's death to the community.

Gardner tribute

Delbert Gardner, a faculty member at Lycoming College during the 1950s, wrote a remembrance of Dr. Ritter, who had treated his family during the Depression years. It was published on Sept. 2, 1956, eight years after Dr. Ritter's death, in the Elmira Sunday Telegram:

"Dr. Ella Ritter, of Williamsport, Pa., looked like a figure out of the past when I knew her in the early 1930's. Her brown hair was done up in a bun and covered with a hair net. ... She drove to her appointments in an old model T Ford which she cranked herself. Dr. Ritter had an excellent background ... (had trained in Europe), and she was a skillful surgeon. None of us knew how old she was, but we knew she had treated our grandparents for years."

"At the hospital Dr. Ritter was feared and respected as only the truly dedicated can be. No nurse or patient would think of disobeying her. ... They knew her basic concern was the good of the patient."

"Dr. Ritter came to the house countless times. ... Too often she didn't get paid for the visit, but she never mentioned money. ... And we were never afraid to call her when we needed her, no matter how much we owed her."

"After she had examined us in her precise manner, she would open her medicine case, take out several vials and mix

her own medicine in a glass of water, giving specific instructions for its use."

"Kind as she was, Dr. Ritter expected bravery from her patients, and consequently she usually found it. 'This is going to hurt,' she would say, looking with her stern brown eyes, 'but you can stand it.'"

"The patient knew that she had no doubt of his courage. It did hurt, but we found to our surprise that she was right. We could stand it. And we felt better because of it."

"Perhaps that was her greatest gift ... (she) lent dignity to the human race."

Travel

Dr. Ritter never married or raised children. Without obligations tethering her to home, she indulged her twin loves of medicine and travel. In 1903, she took a sabbatical year to upgrade her surgical skills at Philadelphia Polyclinic Hospital. Her itineraries took her to medical centers in Europe, South America and throughout the United States. She thrived on the discussions between physicians from different medical cultures.

In 1913, she sailed to Germany for the International Congress of Medicine. Some of her fellow American physicians on board were eager to fly on a zeppelin and invited colleagues along. No one would have guessed that the unstylishly dressed woman had the soul of a high-flying adventuress, but Ritter was all-in for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Trans-Atlantic dirigible travel remained 15 years in the future, so few Americans had experienced the feeling of floating on an ocean of air.

Initially the group was disappointed, because the zeppelin, normally based in Berlin, was 300 miles away in Frankfurt.

However, after a number of phone conversations, including one with Count Zeppelin himself, they were advised that a round-trip flight from Frankfurt to Weisbaden could be arranged if they were in Frankfurt by mid-afternoon that day. They were.

Their airship, the 485-foot Viktoria Luise, floated 800 feet above the Rhine River Valley at 40 MPH. They felt none of the vibration or shaking typical of travel by train or automobile ... and no motion sickness! And the memory of that dirigible ride remained indelible.

— Gouldin is a retired physician who practiced in nuclear medicine in Lycoming County. Since retiring, she has pursued her fascination with history, including preserving local medical history. The Lycoming County Women column is part of the Lycoming County Women's History Project. For information, email life@sungazette.com.