

THE STORY OF DR. DORA LEE WILDER SMITH OF MONTEREY

Cumberland Tales

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Dora Lee was the first woman in Tennessee to pass the state medical exam. She was the first female doctor in Monterey and may have been the first female physician in the Upper Cumberland Region. She also made contributions to the profession by presenting and publishing papers concerning medical treatment.

Dora was born in 1875/76 in Buncombe County, N.C. Folklorist E. G. Rogers reported that her father was a physician. By 1900 she had acquired enough education to be listed in the census as a nurse, still living in her father's house. Dora had moved to Knoxville by 1904 and was working as a nurse, hoping to become a medical doctor. She met Gen. John Wilder in Knoxville hospital. Wilder was a Civil War hero who had led the U. S. Army's Lightening Brigade through Tennessee during the conflict.



Seventy-four-year-old Wilder was admitted to the hospital for treatment, and Dora was assigned as his private nurse. Gen. Wilder's first wife, Martha, had died in 1892, and the general and his nurse immediately liked each other. Wilder may have been attracted to the young woman as a nurse, and Dora may have been attracted to the general because of his wealth. In 1904, Wilder was U.S. Pension Agent in Knoxville, and he was a millionaire after developing the iron smelting business in Rockwood and in Chattanooga. Dora wanted to attend medical school in Knoxville, and she was saving money from her work to enroll.

(Pictured Brevet Brigadier General John T. Wilder (1830-1917))

The couple married at Lake Toxaway in 1904, a newly developed resort inn in western North Carolina. Built in the mountains on Toxaway Lake, the resort attracted wealthy persons. Some famous guests were Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone and Thomas Edison. No record of the Wilder-Lee wedding could be found, but, considering the general's wealth, it was probably a lavish affair.

Returning to Knoxville, Dora and her husband lived on a small farm named Cherry Hill. Dora entered medical school at the University of Tennessee, and General Wilder continued to act as pension agent for a short time. By 1910 she had completed her degree in medicine and the general had resigned his position.

The couple moved to Monterey in 1913. Monterey had always been a residence of Wilder, but he had other houses around Tennessee. Since his first iron smelting operation was in Rockwood, he maintained a home there. Later he moved his industry to Chattanooga, and he was mayor, so he built a house in that city. He also built and owned the Cloudland Hotel on Roan Mountain near Johnson City; he constructed a house for himself in the village of Roan Mountain. After he left Knoxville, the house he built in Monterey was his main residence, although he enjoyed leisure time in Florida every year.

The Monterey home, on Holly Street, is presently owned by Ruth Ann Woolbright. The general left the house to Dora, and she occupied it with her second husband. The Pugh family owned the house after Dora died.

In addition to building the Cloudland Hotel in 1885, Gen. Wilder built the Imperial Hotel in Monterey.

Although the Cloudland was a resort hotel, and although Monterey was a resort town, boasting six resort hotels, the Imperial was not considered a resort hotel. It was a railroad hotel, located close to the tracks and the depot. Opened in 1909, the Imperial had 30 rooms within its three-story frame. It boasted running water, inside plumbing and steam heat. The dining room and the chef were locally famous. One

newspaper editor lauded it as one of the best hotels between Nashville and Knoxville. Gen. Wilder enjoyed the hotel food frequently, and after he died. Dora acted a hostess in the dining room.

The only evidence the authors could find, either in print or in interview, that Dora Wilder practiced medicine in Monterey were some incident mentioned in a newspaper columns by E. G. Rogers. He mentioned the case of Tennessee Central Railroad employee with a “severe arm injury.” Dr. Wilder repaired it. He also repeated a story of W. T. Ray that Dr. Wilder amputated the “mangled arm” of a man in Monterey. And she delivered babies, said Rogers.

Gen. Wilder “persuaded” her “to discontinue medical practice” after some time. She did attend meetings of the Upper Cumberland Medical Society, and she wrote and delivered papers on medical subjects. In 1911 Dora was first vice president of the medical society, and her name was listed at meetings in 1912, 1914, 1915, 1916 and 1917.

In 1911 Dr. Wilder gave a lecture on “Preventable Blindness” at the meeting, and the next year she suggested that a public health department be established. Dr. W. C. Officer of Monterey appointed her chair of a committee to investigate the possibility and feasibility of such an office. In 1915 she read a paper on “Twilight Sleep in Labor,” and she invited the society to meet in Monterey in 1916. Accepting the invitation, the society met in the assembly room of the Imperial Hotel. Dr. Wilder presented a paper titled “Should a Tubercular Mother Nurse her Child.” The next year the society met in Cookeville; Dr. Wilder gave a paper on “Infantile Paralysis.”



(Pictured: The Imperial Hotel)

The 1901 issue of the Southern Medical Journal published a four-page paper titled “the Cure of Tuberculosis by the General Practioner (sic).” In the essay Dr. Wilder referred to “those of us who are especially interested in the treatment of the disease,” and she noted that “it is now admitted everywhere by the ordinarily intelligent that tuberculosis is a curable, preventable disease.” She prescribed the “cardinal remedies” of “air, food, rest and mind.” “All patients should be required to sleep outdoors.” Make it possible for your patient to stay in bed all the time.” “The chief articles of diet are milk, eggs, fresh meat and pure olive oil.” “If you encourage your patient I the belief that he is improving, soon the mental state is showing in actual weight.” These were the same treatments that Dr. May Wharton, the first female physician in Cumberland County, used in her early tuberculosis clinic.

The hospital in Monterey was Officer Sanatorium, owned and operated by Dr. William Carson Officer. It specialized in the treatment of tuberculosis. Officer built and operated the hospital from 1925 to his death in 1935.

A newspaper article indicated that “Dr. Officer has made a life study of tuberculosis,...and has surrounded himself and his offices with the very best in modern equipment. The patients’ rooms are large and each one so situated as to get a maximum of fresh air and sunshine....His Sanitorium (sic) is practically filled with patients and many more come and go at intervals for diagnosis and treatment.” Although Dr. Wilder expressed an interest in tuberculosis, there is no evidence that she was associated with Dr. Officer and his hospital.

In the autumn of 1917 Gen. Wilder and Dora left Monterey to make their annual trip to Florida. Stopping in Chattanooga, they journeyed on to Jacksonville. On Oct. 20, Gen Wilder died suddenly there, with Dora and two of his daughters at his bedside. His body was transported back to Tennessee, and he was buried with his first wife, his parents and two of his daughter’s in Chattanooga’s Forrest Hills Cemetery.

Some time after Wilder died, Dora married Percy Berkley (P.B.) Smith, an official with the Tennessee Central Railroad. (E. G. Rogers said it was 1924.) Smith had often stayed at the Imperial Hotel, and he became a close friend of the Wilders, serving as a pallbearer at the general’s funeral. Dora received title to the hotel when Wilder died, and she and Smith continued to operate the establishment. They also continued spending the winter in Florida.

Smith died in Monterey in 1959, and Dora died there four years later on July 29, 1963. She was 87. Her death certificate listed her occupation as “housewife.” Evidently her medical degree and career were long behind her and forgotten. The Smiths were buried in Alexander, NC, Dora’s family home.

*Cumberland Tales is a service of the Cookeville History Museum. The editors, Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell, invite anyone to submit a story of 800 words concerning the history/folklore of the Upper Cumberland region. E-mail stories in Microsoft Word to cdickinson@tntech.edu or birdier@tntech.edu.

***Gen. John T. Wilder** was one of the 20,000 Union veterans who immigrated to the South by 1866, attracted by the possibilities of places that they had seen during their military campaigns. For a time, he was mayor of Chattanooga and in 1865, he and a friend, Capt. Hiram S. Chamberlain of Knox County, purchased 728 acres of land in Roane County and founded the town of Rockwood.

As an industrialist, he had numerous business interests in coal, timber, iron, railroads and more. He built a hotel in Monterey, the Imperial Hotel, which still stands today, and the town of Wilder, located in Fentress County and once a large coal mining areas, was found by him.



Monument to Wilder and his Lightning Brigade at Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park.

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