



DR. ANNA

THE PIONEERING WOMAN DOCTOR OF NEW LONDON

BY John Walters

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Beth Rexford*

Two pairs of wood-and-leather snowshoes hang inside the back door of the old house. One pair is so small, you might assume they were made for a child. But no: they belonged to Anna Littlefield, who began her practice at a time when woman doctors were a rarity.

“She was just barely five feet tall,” says her great-nephew Lloyd Littlefield. “She wore a size five shoe. But she was a big woman in other ways.”

Indeed. Dr. Anna practiced medicine from the late 19th century into the mid-20th, when small-town doctoring was a much different thing. She might be called at any hour of the day or night to treat anything from a bunion to a critical injury. Babies were sometimes delivered, and surgeries performed, on a patient’s kitchen table. Dr. Anna — that’s how she was known to one and all — often wore those tiny snowshoes on house calls in the dead of winter.

And her contributions went far beyond medical practice. She was a respected community leader. She was a devoted gardener, and the first president of the New London Garden Club. She was a skilled artist, specializing in portraiture and the depiction of plant life. And even late in life, she was a strong willed, energetic individual — a licensed physician at the age of 87.

The Littlefield home

Lloyd Littlefield is now 79, and lives in the Pleasant Street house that was Dr. Anna’s home for most of her life. Today, the house is still full of Dr. Anna: her medical gear, furnishings, notes and journals, and quite a few of her paintings.

This has been his home for decades, but Lloyd almost seems like a

caretaker, the docent of the Dr. Anna museum. He’s proud of his great aunt, and pleased at his role in keeping her memory alive.

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Dr. Anna’s great-nephew, Lloyd Littlefield, holds a photo of his great aunt.



Top to bottom: Empty medicine bottles; Lloyd Littlefield holds an old stethoscope; Dr. Anna's snowshoes

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Lloyd got to know Dr. Anna toward the end of her life. He grew up in Alcoa, Tenn., where his branch of the Littlefields were from. “I can remember when she would come visit us. She was well into her 70s. We didn’t have a car, and we lived about a mile from the business district. She would walk over to town with my mother, and my mother had difficulty keeping up with her,” he says.

A few years later, young Lloyd began spending his summers with the New Hampshire Littlefields. At the

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time, Dr. Anna shared the house with Ira, her brother and Lloyd’s grandfather. “The first time I was up here was

1942,” he recalls. He was 12 and she was 82, but he enjoyed her company. “She was getting pretty feeble, but she was still sharp in her mind. She told me stories of her youth.” She also shared her knowledge of the natural world; because of her, Lloyd developed a lifelong love for New Hampshire, which led him to eventually settle here.

The plaque on the front of the house reads “1796” — the date of construction. The house has been well maintained through the years, and remains a solid, comfortable structure. Lloyd has lived in this house for many years, but it still holds some secrets. He displays a recent discovery: Dr. Anna’s medical license, dated Aug. 31, 1897. New Hampshire had just begun issuing licenses that summer; before then, the state’s doctors practiced with Massachusetts licenses.

When New Hampshire began issuing licenses in the summer of 1897, a doctor had to apply in person at the New Hampshire Board of Medicine in Concord. The fee was one dollar. An examination of the board’s archive indicates that Dr. Henry Clay Call was the first person to apply; he did so on July 15. When Dr. Anna traveled to Concord on Aug. 24, she became the 13th woman to apply for a New Hampshire medical license. Almost all the others practiced in Manchester, Concord or the seacoast area; at the time, Dr. Anna was the only woman doctor within 25 miles of New London.

Before she was a doctor

Anna Littlefield was born on Dec. 1, 1859. At the time, her parents lived in her grandparents’ house on the Grantham-Croydon town line; her uncle and aunt lived in the Pleasant

Street home in New London. When she was 9 years old, the two families swapped houses so that her aunt could care for Anna's elderly grandparents. Except for a few years at medical school, Anna would live in that house for the rest of her life.

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She taught art at Colby Academy (now Colby-Sawyer College). That career came to an end on April 25, 1892, when the old Academy Building burned down. (It was located on what is now the site of Colgate Hall.) The fire prompted Anna to ponder the course of her life. "She told me years later that she had always wanted to be a physician," Lloyd says. "So when the building burned down, she figured this was the Lord's way of telling her that if she's going to be a physician, she'd better get with it."

Anna Littlefield was 32 years old. She sought admission to Dartmouth College, and was rebuffed because it only admitted men. She then turned to Women's Medical College of

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Pennsylvania, which had been founded
by Quakers as the world's first medical

Top: In Dr. Anna's notes are "recipes" for mixtures of liquids and powers to give to patients with specific illnesses. Bottom: Her medicine bag contained vials of medicinal powders, chemicals, herbs and already made pills.



college exclusively for women. She started classes in the fall of 1892. After completing her training in 1896, she returned to New London and hung up her shingle.

Years of service

Dr. Anna set up a home office with help from Ira, a farmer and skilled craftsman. He made the snowshoes that hang on the wall; the cowhide came from his own cattle. He built some wooden cabinets to hold Dr. Anna's medical supplies; they are still there today. Off to one side of the dining area sits a wooden desk, also built by Ira, used by Dr. Anna for her paperwork.

At first glance, the desk is a pretty standard piece. But then Lloyd reaches under one side of the desktop and pulls out a long extension. This was more than a desk; it was Dr. Anna's examination table. Attached to the other side of the desk are two iron stirrups, crafted by a local blacksmith.

Ira's wooden cabinets are still attached to the wall. They used to

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contain bottle after bottle of different powders and potions. In the early 20th century, the country doctor was also a pharmacist, not just prescribing, but also mixing and preparing medications for her patients. Some of the bottles are still there; some have been discarded. "We didn't think it was a good idea to have strychnine and some other things around," Lloyd says.

From a closet in a front room, he produces several medical bags used by Dr. Anna for her house calls. They contain more bottles of medicine, various instruments and tools of the trade, and blank forms to record births and deaths.

Lloyd also produces, with great care, two homemade books, completely handwritten. One is an unpublished gynecology textbook, written and illustrated by Dr. Anna, based on her years of practice and observation. It's doubtful she ever thought of publishing the book; it was more likely meant for her own reference.

The second volume contains her notes on patient visits, starting in 1899. They include descriptions of symptoms, diagnoses and treatments, and fees — 50 cents, \$3 and \$1. In a brief scan of a few pages, the largest figure was \$6. Yes, it was a very different time.

It was also not the best time to be a woman doctor. At the beginning of her career, she was a rarity. Even at the end, a woman's role in medicine was usually confined to nursing. Did she face any resistance as the first and only woman doctor in New London? There's no direct evidence, but Lloyd allows that "she had mostly women and children in her practice" — at least for a while — "but during World War I, she was the only physician around!" New London's male doctors had all gone into military service.

By then, Dr. Anna had become a pillar of the community. In 1918, one of her patients was the first ever to be admitted to the new New London Hospital, then located in the building now known as Tracy Memorial Library. On her 87th birthday, the

New Hampshire Medical Society held a banquet at the New London Inn to mark her 50 years as a practicing physician. She remained on the hospital's medical staff into her 90th year, reportedly visiting patients in her wheelchair. Her long service to the community was recognized in 1971, when a wing of the hospital's Clough Center was named in her honor.

Lively to the end

By then, her practicing days were pretty much over. She'd been cutting back her activities for several years. This was the time when young Lloyd Littlefield was spending his summers in New London, and getting to know his great aunt. Even as an elder, she was a willful person, with strong opinions and ideas.

As long as she was alive, the Pleasant Street house never had electricity, running water or central heating; Dr. Anna didn't cotton to such modern conveniences. She thought electricity was "too dangerous," according to Lloyd. "She would carry a kerosene lamp around. And, on this table here, there would be papers piled up high, and a kerosene lamp with papers around the bottom of it." Ira, who'd shared the house with her all those years, wouldn't have minded some upgrades; but as Lloyd says, Dr. Anna "was pretty much in charge."

Dr. Anna Littlefield died in January 1952, one month and two days after her 92nd birthday. Her life didn't leave many traces in the history books, but she left a legacy of skillful caring that touched generations of Kearsarge area residents. **K**

John Walters is a freelance writer, and managing editor of The Bridge, a weekly newspaper published in Montpelier, Vt. His first book, tentatively titled Portraits from Life: Stories of Remarkable People, is due out in the summer of 2009.

Beth Rexford is a creative, enthusiastic, self-learning photographer who has worked at Newport Recreation for the past 14 years. To see more of Beth's work, go to www.bethrexford.com

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