

Dr. Annie Hennigar – “horse and buggy” doctor

by Kate Kirkpatrick

East Hants has many older homes, many of which contain hidden evidence of days gone by. An ideal time to search for clues to our past is during home renovations. Recently, while renovating his home on the Noel Shore, Gary Graves uncovered such a clue. As he was removing some old floor boards, he noticed newspaper glued to the underside of them; one small item in particular caught his attention. It was the announcement of Dr. Annie Hennigar’s graduation from Dalhousie Medical School. It reads, “Miss Annie Hennigar, Noel, will graduate in medicine at the Halifax Medical College in June.” A tiny newspaper clipping with a large story to tell.

Dr. Annie Hennigar was born on 9th July 1873 in Noel. She received her early education in the local one-room school and later taught in the same school. Although she enjoyed teaching, her ambition was to become a Doctor. She raised her needed tuition through teaching and would later attend Dalhousie Medical School. She graduated in 1906 – twelve years after women were first admitted as medical students.

Following graduation, many of her female colleagues practiced in towns or became missionaries. Dr. Hennigar chose to become a “horse and buggy” doctor and practiced in the rural community of Hants County. She began her practice in Burlington and then Cheverie. In 1920, she returned to her home village of Noel where she would practice country medicine for the next 30 years. In an interview towards the end of her life, Dr. Hennigar remarked:

“My ‘horse and buggy days’ were full to overflowing with hardships, thrills, dangers, determination and profit. In looking back, I would not have missed that period for a cool million. Amputations, fractures, dislocations, tonsillectomies, extraction of

teeth, etc., all came my way and I was simply put on the spot as there was no one else to do it.”

Dr. Hennigar was also an accomplished artist. She belonged to the *American Physicians Art Association* and received an Award of Merit in 1946 for a painting she entitled “Courage”. In this award winning painting, she painted a scene in which she is with her horse on a country road traveling to a patient’s home to deliver a baby. On her way, Dr. Hennigar meets with bears. Local Historian Shawn Scott observes, “Dr. Annie’s master stroke was neither the lumbering bears that blocked her path, nor was it her depiction of a courageous country doctor struggling to keep her horse from bolting. No, her master stroke was her decision to paint a dying birch tree that boldly cut through her painting. The birch tree divides her canvas creating sharp angles that give the work unexpected dramatic power. Remove the tree and you have a very different painting.”

Dr. Hennigar died August 9th, 1950, and is buried in Burntcoat Cemetery. She was a talented, extraordinary woman of great determination and courage, a person we should be proud to share our heritage with.

So, next time you are remodeling an older home, take some time and look for traces of the past – you may find it quite fascinating. For instance, this story could have been quite different if instead of telling you about Dr. Annie, I’d explored the reasoning behind gluing old newspapers under floor boards in 1906, but that is another story for another time.