



‘Doctor Woman’ became a legend

If people who lived in Tennessee 100 years ago could speak to us today, they’d tell us that we are spoiled. We have stores where we can buy just about every type of food, medicine or clothing produced in the world. We have electricity. Every one of us has access to a clean, safe water supply. We have entertainment options (most notably television) that they couldn’t have imagined. We have roads. And we all have some degree of access to a doctor and a dentist.

You might be surprised to know that, as recently as the 1920s, large numbers of Tennesseans had access to none of these things. They lived on small, homestead-type farms and got by on what little they could produce. They had no electricity and depended on their fireplaces for heat, often insulating their walls with mud and old newspapers. Their homes were located on horse trails, not roads. And they did not have access to medical care of any kind.

There is a wonderful book called “Doctor Woman of the Cumberlands” by May Cravath Wharton. I have read it twice. It tells you all about the living conditions in rural Cumberland County from about 1918 until World War II, and I think it is safe to say that the situation was probably about the same in many remote Tennessee counties of that era.

Dr. Wharton had lived and practiced medicine in many sections of the northern U.S.

Above, Dr. May Cravath Wharton practiced medicine in the early 1900s in Cumberland County, where people referred to her as the “Doctor Woman.” At top, Wharton at first made house calls on foot but later acquired a horse to ride to appointments. At right, patients wait to be examined by the “Doctor Woman” at the hospital she established.



prior to 1917, when her husband, Edwin, accepted the post of principal of Pleasant Hill Academy, a private institution in Cumberland County supported by the Congregational Church. When she came to Pleasant Hill, Dr. Wharton’s plan was to teach science and math full time and practice medicine part time, but that’s not the way things worked out. As soon as word spread among the people who lived in Pleasant Hill and the small communities near it such as

Browntown, De Rossett, Whittenburg and Neverfail, people began turning up on her doorstep, begging the “Doctor Woman,” as she was known, to come to their homes.

When she first got to Pleasant Hill, Wharton had no other way to get to these remote cabins than to hike, often at night, across high mountains and over ravines. Eventually she acquired a horse, but the going was still quite rough. Take, for instance, the time that she had to cross the Caney Fork River at night to reach a woman in labor on the other side:

“At that time there were only two ways to cross the river — by ford and by swinging bridge. The ford could be crossed in a car by one who knew where all the deep holes were and where the ledges dropped off into space. I had driven over it in daylight several times but always with a half-formed determination never to risk it again. In this tricky half-light of early dawn, I refused to try it.





End on the Cumberland Plateau

Photographs courtesy of Uplands Retirement Village

“There remained the swinging bridge, and if I was to be any use to the young girl who was waiting for me to deliver her first baby, I should have to cross it quickly. No doubt that long footbridge swinging lightly over the gorge some 75 feet above the rushing torrent of the river was a picturesque sight. But I knew well how wind and weather had worn and loosened many of the boards on the walkway and how the wire rope handrail, now much-worn, offered treacherous sharp points to the grasping hand.

“The messenger had picked up my bags and was waiting politely for me to enter the bridge. My abiding fear of crossing water was never more empowering. Yet I must cross. I grasped the handrail and staggered giddily along the seeming miles of the madly swaying thing.”

Today, people have a tendency to call the doctor when they really don’t need to. The people who lived on the Cumberland Plateau in that era were reluctant to ask for a doctor until it was absolutely necessary — mainly because they didn’t have any money to pay. Therefore, Wharton often arrived to find patients with advanced cases of pneumonia, cancer or tuberculosis or in the middle of a difficult delivery. Using what instruments and medicines she could carry, Wharton did the best she could to help her patients. But it was very obvious to her that the excessive health problems of the people of that area were largely due to the limited diet, ignorance and lack of access to health care.

In 1920, only three years after she came to Pleasant Hill, Wharton’s husband died, and she began to make plans to leave the mountain. The heads of 50 families — representing just about every household within several miles of Pleasant Hill — signed a letter asking her to stay. “Doctor Woman,” the

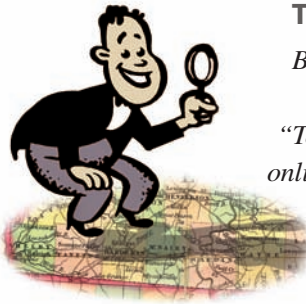
letter read, “we feel that we cannot do without you.” Because of this appeal, Wharton stayed on the mountain, continued her house calls and eventually started a tiny hospital in a vacant commercial building. It proved to be way too small, which is why she raised money to start a 30-bed hospital a few years later known as the Upper Cumberland Mountain Sanitarium. This remained the primary medical

At left, Dave Harsh, Uplands Retirement Village director of communications, stands in front of photos and mementos of Dr. May Cravath Wharton. The retirement community traces its heritage back to the doctor who brought health care to Cumberland County. Below, a building that was once part of Pleasant Hill Academy, where Dr. Wharton’s husband was principal, houses a museum honoring the school. Photographs by Bill Carey



facility for this area until the Cumberland Medical Center opened in Crossville in 1950.

To this day, Wharton’s name is associated with several institutions in the area — including the Cumberland Medical Center, Uplands Retirement Village and Wharton Nursing Home (which will be replaced this spring by a new group home concept called Wharton Homes). I visited there not long ago and was happy to see that they are still very proud of their association with the extraordinary “Doctor Woman” of the Cumberlands.



Tennessee History for Kids
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