

Chapter 8 - Health Care and Education at Theodore

Theodore's First Doctors

W. E. J. Ekins, MD.

Theodore's first doctor was W. E. J. Ekins, who arrived from Thorold, Ontario in 1906.¹ Dr. Ekins soon became an active member of the community both in his professional capacity as a doctor and at the social level as well. For example, a 1910 news report stated that, "Another good dance was held in the hall on Friday night inst., under the managements of Messrs. Ekins and Wales."² He was also credited with raising a large sum of money which was forwarded to Halifax following the disastrous explosion in 1917.³ Dr. Ekins was also mentioned as being among the first few owners of automobiles, and an early visitor at Gunn's hotel at Good Spirit Lake, then known locally as "Devil's Lake."⁴

Professionally, Dr Ekins had many important duties in addition to tending to the needs of his patients. He performed medical examinations for all the school children.⁵ He was also called as a witness in a famous court case of the time.

In 1918 Barney Bellcourt, an employee at the Beaver Hills Forest Reserve murdered Mrs. Beatty, the wife of Edward Beatty, the reserve ranger or manager, and kidnapped their daughter. Bellcourt was arrested within a day or two, and the daughter returned, unhurt to her father. Doctor Ekins, as the local coroner who examined the body of Mrs Beatty, was called as a witness in Bellcourt's trial, and Bellcourt, was later executed for the murder.⁶

According to one newspaper report from 1908, Dr. Ekins was appointed to the presidency of the R.M.A. (Rural Municipalities Act) for the Theodore area.⁷ (The R.M.A. regulated the

functioning of the Rural Municipalities in the province.) He also served as the first vice-president of the newly formed Board of Trade in 1908, and in 1912 he was elected to serve on the Village Council.^{8 9} At that time the village overseer or mayor was chosen by the council from among its own members, and Dr. Ekins, the newly elected councillor, was chosen as mayor for 1913, and in April, 1913, he and a gang of men were busy building sidewalks and trying to prevent further flooding of the sidewalk in front of Brown's furniture store, which was already partially inundated.¹⁰ Dr. Ekins was elected to the Village council for a second term in 1915.¹¹

In the fall of 1908 Dr. Ekins purchased the drug store in Theodore and moved his offices in the building.¹² When in 1919 Theodore needed a new postmaster and a new post office building Dr. Ekins erected a building next door to his drug store.¹³ That little building would serve as the Theodore postoffice for the next 45 years. In the fall of 1920, prior to his departure from Theodore, Dr. Ekins sold his drug store and stock to eastern buyers who took over the business.¹⁴

As a medical practitioner, Dr. Ekins was exposed to a number of serious illnesses. When in early October, 1911, for example, there was an outbreak of typhoid fever in Theodore, Dr. Ekins and two other local men, Wally Anderson, and Walter Merkley, became ill and were treated in the Yorkton hospital.¹⁵ His illness was severe enough to require about two months for his recovery, and it wasn't until December when he could return to work.¹⁶ Six years later, in October of 1918, Dr. Ekins became ill with the deadly Spanish Flu that swept that world.¹⁷

The first quarter century of Theodore's history was characterized by a general shortage of cash and a reliance on bartering, and there is little information on how Dr. Ekins was paid for his services. It is very likely that Dr. Ekins could not rely solely on the income of his medical practice, and it appears that he took advantage of several options. His first source of income after his

medical practice was his drug store. His second source of income was from his homestead on NE-25-28-07-W2. News reports from the period indicate that he was a successful farmer. There is some evidence that Dr. Ekins bought and sold real estate in the Theodore area. In 1919, for example, he bought Edward Diebel's one-section farm at Beaverdale and three months later, he sold it to John Palaga for more than \$17,000, giving the doctor a good profit.^{18 19} Finally, there was direct financial assistance from the local municipalities. In 1909 the Saskatchewan government amended the Rural Municipalities Act to allow local municipalities, to offer yearly salaries of up to \$5,000 to doctors who provide medical care to the municipalities's residents.²⁰

Although it was known in the spring of 1920 that Dr. Ekins would be leaving Theodore, it was not until mid November that he, his wife and their two sons, both born at Theodore, would actually leave. A farewell tribute to him reads as follows:

Calling on nearly every door in town on Sunday morning, Dr. Ekins bade good-bye to his many friends before leaving on the Great West Express for California and other western points. During the fourteen years spent here, the doctor endeared himself to the hearts of cores of friends who sincerely regret his departure. Though deferring with him often on matters of public interest, there were few indeed who failed to appreciate his kindness of heart. And readiness to assist in time of trouble. We trust the doctor's sojourn among us has not been unpleasant and that he carries away with him many pleasant recollections of the years gone by. Here's luck to you, old boy.²¹

Dr. Ekins made several return visits to Theodore after leaving it in 1920. A 1921 report of a visit back to Theodore indicated that he spent the year in California.²² From California he went to Chicago where he took training in diseases of the eye, ear, nose, and throat.²³ During his second visit to Theodore he and his successor performed a number of operations for adenoids and tonsils.²⁴ Dr. Ekins purchased a practice in Vancouver where he ended his career.²⁵

While living in Theodore, Dr. Ekins married Miss Eileen Walmsley, one of the teachers at

the school and they had two sons, William, and Walter.²⁶ Eileen Ekins died in March 1976 at the age of 87²⁷. Dr. Ekins lived to celebrate his 100th birthday on April 3, 1977.²⁸

Oscar A. Turner, MD.

During the short period following the departure of Dr. Ekins, Theodore's medical needs were met by Dr. Meredith of Winnipeg.²⁹ When Dr. Oliver A. Turner, who grew up in Invermay, arrived in early December 1920, Dr. Meredith returned to Winnipeg.^{30 31}

Dr. Anthony Oscar Turner was born in Durham Ontario, and received his medical education at the University of Manitoba. During the First World War he served with The Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps from 1915 to 1918.³²

Doctor Turner soon found himself busy treating patients and performing surgeries in Theodore. In December, 1920, it was reported that the first surgical operation ever performed in Theodore had taken place when a number of school children were operated on for the removal of tonsils and adenoids, and that the patients were all progressing well.³³ When Dr. Ekins returned to Theodore for a visit in 1922, the two doctors performed more surgeries for tonsils and adenoids.³⁴ Since Theodore did not have a hospital at that time, it is not known exactly where the surgeries were performed but it may very well have been in the doctor's office in the drug store.

When he arrived in Theodore, Dr. Turner purchased the house and furnishings of Mr. J. A. McIntyre, located in the west end of the village, and in February 1921 the village welcomed the doctor's new bride, Edith Lee of Winnipeg.^{35 36} In the summer of 1922 the Turners sold their house on the west side of the village to Mr. K. M. Lewis and purchased the residence of Mr. and Mrs. O. A. Thomas on Main Street.³⁷ In the summer of 1926 Dr Turner exchanged his property

on Main Street with James McCrae for a different house, also located on Main Street. It is interesting to note that the house which Mr. McCrae sold to Dr. Turner had originally been built by Dr. Ekins and sold to Mrs. S. Westergaard, who used it as a boarding house, and in turn sold it to James McCrae for about \$4,000.00.³⁸ It was said at the time that it was one of the finest residential properties in the village.³⁹

In the spring of 1924 Dr. Turner purchased a couple of valuable lots on Railway Ave. from the North American Lumber Co., and like doctor Ekins before him, opened a business, a stable and garage.^{40 41 42}

Dr. Turner left Theodore in 1941 and practised medicine in Melville until he moved to Saskatoon in 1945. He retired in 1952 and died in Saskatoon in 1955.⁴³

The Great Depression Challenged Theodore's Doctor

As the only doctors in the area, both doctors Ekins and Turner answered calls both day and night. Often they were required to travel over snow covered roads with horse and sleigh in extremely cold and dangerous conditions.⁴⁴ An item in the Theodore news column from 1930 stated that because of the number of cases, Dr. Turner had been busy day and night with little time for sleep, and goes on to describe an incident when his cutter upset and he was dragged through the snow for some distance.⁴⁵

The difficulties and challenges faced by Dr. Turner during the years of the great depression did not go unrecognized by the people of Theodore. In the spring of 1932 the doctor's difficult position was described for the readers of the Theodore news column.

There is one class of citizen who has received very little consideration from the powers

that be in our province, when handing out relief and we refer to the rural doctors who are called out in all kinds of weather, to attend all kinds of patients, whose lives would often be in danger were it not for the fact that they have secured medical service. which many of them will never be in a position to pay for. It is doubtful, if any class of businessman has taken the risks, and given the service that our doctors have given, with as little return. and it seems only reasonable to expect that our government, and especially the Health Department should pass some legislation that will, at least guarantee the medical men against loss. in cases where the patients are financially unable, or at least meet the expense of a call. Hiring livery rigs and driving from ten to twenty miles, often in storms, and over roads that are almost impassable, just to be told afterwards that the patient has no money with which to reimburse the doctor for his outlay, is something which is occurring in the life of our doctors almost every day in the week. and something that cannot go on forever. The writer has reason to know that many of these rural medical men, at the present time are financially embarrassed to the point of bankruptcy for the reasons given. When one considers how necessary to the life and welfare of these rural communities are the services of these medical men, It does seem strange that no provision has been made, to guarantee them, at least sufficient of their charges to allow them to live. There is one more point that we would stress, and that is the fact that many who are able to pay their doctor bills, seem very loath to do so, which also increases the hardships suffered, The writer is not a doctor not a chiropractor, not even a veterinary surgeon but his sympathies are with the men who are labouring against great odds, to provide against sickness and death, and doing it single-handed. In making provision in our annual provincial budgets for health and sanitation it seems only just that some consideration should be made for the medical men, who are far more important to the physical well being of the people of the province than all the health inspectors and employees of the health department, necessary as these may be. Let others express their Opinions on this subject.⁴⁶

It does not appear that anything was done to relieve the difficult condition under which the rural doctors in Saskatchewan laboured during the depression. The following three news items from 1937 give a clear picture of the conditions Dr. Turner experiences on a regular basis while serving the people of Theodore.

Dr. Turner has been very busy of late, answering calls both night and day until one wonders how he lives with so little rest of sleep. Monday night of this week might be recited as one night's service so willingly given by this popular member of an unselfish profession. After dodging around all day from one home to another both in town and miles out in the country, he was called on in the evening to drive to Yorkton and obtain a trained nurse for a family of whom every member was ill. Arriving back with the nurse in the early hours of the morning he found it necessary to remove the mother of the household to Yorkton hospital and accordingly made her as comfortable as possible in his

car and made the return journey to Yorkton and back, arriving at 5 a.m. thence to bed for three hours. Who would be a doctor?⁴⁷

Dr. Turner has been very busy of late, attending cases on all sides of his territory, ushering in babies and digging his bus out of snow banks. Those who think a doctor's lot is an easy one, should spend a few cold nights on the road or digging out of snow drifts. It is a tough life from any angle that one views it.⁴⁸

Mr. Fichtner's snowmobile, "Grey Ghost" is being called into action quite frequently of late by travellers who have been hung up by the cessation of car traffic, but it has been found especially useful by Dr. Turner, who has been called on to make several long drives over roads that would be difficult for horses to travel.⁴⁹

Dr. Turner's willingness to brave all kinds of weather while tending to his patients in the Theodore area earned him the respect of many people in the Theodore area. The following tribute appeared in the Theodore news column in February, 1939.

The blizzard that raged all day last Saturday was one of the worst seen for some years. Commencing in the early hours of Saturday morning it raged until about 8 p.m. and during that time about twelve inches of snow fell. Householders generally stayed indoors all day, except the doctor . . . one wonders who would wish to be a rural doctor in Saskatchewan under the conditions that prevail at the present time. Our local doctor, Dr O. A. Turner, has been acting the part of Good Samaritan for the past few years to people who have not been able to pay one cent in cash or kind for services rendered. Trip after trip, over snow-blocked roads in storms such as raged on Saturday have been unrewarded in any way and out of the goodness of his heart the doctor has given freely of his time and money to cases that he knew in advance could not possibly pay the cost of livery alone. In fact it has reached the stage where the doctor can not any longer perform the service that, he would wish to, and an appeal has been made by the village council as well as the councils of rural municipalities in this area to the Department of Public Health for assistance to provide medical attention to destitute cases. So far nothing has resulted although doctors in other relief areas are being bonuses by way of assistance. We are informed from Regina that we are not, in the relief area as set out by the Department of Municipal Affairs and consequently no assistance can be given to doctors in this area. It would appear that the government has been interested in the past in the matter of providing against sickness and they have their medical health inspectors all over the province to guard the health of its citizens, but it would appear also that if a person should be unfortunate enough to contract illness there is nothing to be done for him except to bury him, unless the unfortunate one is in a position to finance his own cure, or induce the overworked doctor to attend him at his (the doctor's) expense. One would naturally think that lifesaving, and provision of medical attention in destitute cases, should be the government's first consideration, but it appears otherwise. Thousands of dollars are being spent on relief, on youth-training courses and other worthy matters, but surely preservation of life should be the first, and should our

doctor's have to be responsible?⁵⁰

Keeping the Doctor's Busy

Accidents

According the Farm Safety Centre, an Alberta charity agriculture ranks as Canada's third most hazardous industry, and in terms of absolute numbers of fatalities, there is no more dangerous occupation.⁵¹ Those engaged in farming and ranching activities during Theodore's early years experienced a number of accidents, some of which had tragic consequences. Some of the accidents occurred while doing ordinary, every-day, farm chores, some while working with new machinery, others occurred while helping a neighbour. Accidents relating to the use or misuse of firearms also kept the doctors busy. Because wild game was plentiful and was a dietary staple for Theodore's early residents, it comes as no surprise that there were numerous accidents related to hunting.

It is important to remember that during the early years of the twentieth century Theodore, like many other small communities at that time, had no hospital, and those who met with a serious accident were often transported to the hospital in Yorkton. Because there was no ambulance service for transportation to Yorkton in the days before there were automobiles, transporting patients to Yorkton would have required using horses and wagons and travelling over rough and poorly maintained roads. After there were daily trains to and from Yorkton, patients who didn't need immediate medical treatment could be transported to that city on the evening train.

There are several reports in the Theodore news of people dying as a result of an accident or the delay in getting to the hospital in Yorkton. In such situations it was not unusual for the

community to rally around the bereaved family. Sometimes, if the accident did not result in a serious injury people would simply ignore the wound, and it would become infected. There are numerous accounts of people being treated for infection and blood poisoning.

Serving as Medical Health Officer

In 1909 the Saskatchewan legislature passed *The Public Health Act* which provided for the appointment of medical health officers. Under the provisions of the act the medical health officer was the chief health and sanitary official for the municipality, health district or other portion of Saskatchewan for which he was appointed.⁵² According to the act the medical health officer had a wide range of powers to visit and inspect property and enforce provincial legislation and municipal by-law on matters that concerned the health of the residents. *The Public Health Act* also provided for inspections by members of the public health department in Regina. During their time in Theodore both doctors Ekins and Turner were appointed to the position of Medical Health Officer for the village. It was the general custom of the village council to make this appointment at its first meeting for the year.

In Theodore the Medical Health Officer often worked with the Village Sanitary Inspector to ensure that property within the village was kept in a sanitary condition. In the spring of 1923, for example, the residents of the village were informed that Medical Health Officer Turner was determined to effect a general clean up of the village and that those who failed to obey the bylaws and clean their premises could be in trouble.⁵³ Another responsibility was to report all cases on Communicable Diseases the Department of Public Health and remind people those who fail to report even minor cases of communicable diseases were placing their fellow citizens in grave

danger, besides running risk themselves.⁵⁴

One very important public health issue that needed to be constantly addressed arose from the simple fact that horse drawn wagons and sleighs were the principle mode of transportation. News item from the 1920's give an indication that these horse drawn wagons posed a very real health problem. During the shipping season grain would often pour into Theodore from every imaginable direction every day, and by noon the back yards and lanes of the village would be literally packed with teams of horses and grain sleighs.⁵⁵ In 1924, for example it was noted in the Theodore news that back lanes and vacant lots were again being blocked with teams and wagons, which made them unsightly with a litter of straw and rubbish.⁵⁶ Not only was this unsightly, it was also unsanitary as much of the rubbish was manure. In an attempt to alleviate this problem the village considered purchasing several lots to be used as a tying place for farmers' teams, while their owners were doing business in town.⁵⁷ The in 1925 the village council, acting on instructions from the provincial Department of Public Health informed those people who came to Theodore in horse drawn wagons that they were required to tie their teams while in town, and that wagons and teams could no longer be parked in back lanes.⁵⁸

Another aspect of the manure problem arose from the fact that many of Theodore's early residents kept livestock in the village. Cows and chickens were kept to supply families with milk and eggs, and horses were required to pull buggies and wagons. This practice gave rise to a series of warnings such as the following.

The village Sanitary Inspector has posted notices warning the public that the Public Health by law must be lived up to. Those neglecting to remove manure and refuse to the nuisance grounds are due for a summons to appear before the magistrate. The council has issued instruction to see that these laws are strictly obeyed in future.⁵⁹ Those who are in the habit of depositing manure and refuse elsewhere than on the

authorized nuisance ground, are likely to get jerked up suddenly one of these days, as the village authorities have learned that the law in this regard has been violated almost daily, and will make an example of the next culprit.

The simple fact that keeping swine in the village was against provincial law did not prevent some people from trying to do so, and it was sometimes necessary to remind people of that fact.

Those who are keeping pigs within the village limits are reminded that this practice is contrary to the provincial health laws. Unless those who are breaking this very important law remove their animals at once, the health officials will be on their track.⁶⁰

There were, of course, always some who year after year had to be reminded of their responsibility to keep their property clean, and that the Sanitary Inspector and the Medical Health Officer had the power to enforce all laws regarding sanitation.



Snow Plane - Public Domain Media

Mr. Fichtner's snowmobile, "Grey Ghost" was identified as a snow plane similar to the one shown here. Snow planes were generally home made vehicles driven by a propeller.

Notes:

1. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 August, 1906.
2. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 10 March, 1910.
3. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 13 December, 1917.
4. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 29 April, 1915.
5. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 11 October, 1917.
6. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 9 January, 1919.
7. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 6 August, 1908.
8. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 26 November, 1908.
9. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 12 December, 1912.
10. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 3 April, 1913.
11. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 16 December, 1915.
12. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 26 November, 1908.
13. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 9 October, 1919.
14. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 21 October, 1920.
15. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Times*. 5 October, 1911.
16. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Times*. 7 December, 1911.
17. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*, 31 October, 1918.
18. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 11 April, 1919.
19. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 17 July, 1919.
20. *Saskatchewan Historical Health Timeline*. Retrieved 8 October 2016 from <http://interactivetimeline.com/2282/historical-health-timeline>
21. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 11 November, 1920.
22. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 September, 1921.

23. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 20 April, 1922.
24. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 1 June, 1922.
25. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 11 May, 1922.
26. "Theodore's first doctor is 100 years young," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 23 March, 1977.
27. "Ekins," *Times Colonist*. Victoria, British Columbia. 11 March, 1976.
28. "Theodore's first doctor is 100 years young," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 23 March, 1977.
29. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 11 November, 1920.
30. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 2 December, 1920.
31. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 9 March, 1922.
32. "Retired Doctor Dies at Age 67," *The Star-Phoenix*. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1 August, 1955.
33. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 2 December, 1920.
34. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 1 June, 1922.
35. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 27 January, 1921.
36. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 10 February, 1921.
37. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 13 July, 1922.
38. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 18 November, 1920.
39. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 13 July, 1926.
40. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 29 April, 1924.
41. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 30 May, 1924.
42. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 September, 1926.
43. "Retired Doctor Dies at Age 67," *The Star-Phoenix*. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. 1 August, 1955.
44. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 January, 1924.
45. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 28 January, 1930.

46. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 1 April, 1932.
47. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 22 April, 1937.
48. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 2 December, 1937.
49. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 9 December, 1937.
50. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 23 February, 1939.
51. Farm Safety Centre downloaded from abfarmsafety.com/resources/statistics.htm 3 January 2016
52. "Powers of medical health officer," *The Public Health Act 1909*. Retrieved 29 December 2017 from <http://www.publications.gov.sk.ca/freelaw/documents>
53. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 23 March, 1923.
54. "Important That All Minor Communicable Diseases Be Reported To Health Officer," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 26 May, 1926.
55. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 1 December, 1921.
56. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 29 August, 1924.
57. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 2 September, 1924.
58. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 8 May, 1925.
59. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 14 March, 1927.
60. "Theodore," *The Yorkton Enterprise*. 20 September, 1927.