Sperry’s Own
Dr. Kennedy

With the death of Marion Francis Kennedy, M.D. on January 2, 1950, came the end of an era in which rural America was served by men known as “country doctors.” It was a period in history before truly modern medicine, during which one’s best hope for a physician often lived next door. “Doc” Kennedy, as he was commonly known, was considered the consummate example of the country doctor, filling the roles of healer, neighbor, and friend.

He was born on January 4, 1878, and spent his youth on a farm 14 miles northwest of Memphis, Missouri, during which he attended rural schools. His education was continued for one year at the Keokuk (Iowa) Medical College before he attended the St. Louis School of Medicine, from which he graduated in 1907. He paid for his advanced education by working on a threshing crew, a group of men who run a steam engine separating the grain from the straws. Barnes Hospital in St. Louis was the site of further study and observation for the young Dr. Kennedy. Upon leaving St. Louis, he entered into private practice with his brother-in-law, Dr. Charles A. Gibbs. They practiced together in Bible Grove for the next nine years.

Following the loss of the doctor at Sperry in the fall of 1916, a representative of the community asked Dr. Kennedy to fill his position. They offered a house, built and once occupied by Dr. Wilford Martin, who later died on the battlefields of France. He had suggested that the house be occupied only by a doctor in order to assure that the town would not be without lodgings for future physicians. Upon “Doc’s” first visit to Sperry, he found the community to be both aesthetically pleasing and professionally opportune. These aspects, in addition to its close proximity to the Kirksville First District State Normal School which would provide higher education for his children in the future, persuaded him to accept the hospitality of the people of Sperry. Thus, in October, 1916, he, his wife, Martha Kerr Kennedy, and his two children, Mildred and Kermit, moved into the house that would serve as his home for life and is occupied to this day by his oldest child, Mrs. Mildred Ambrosia.

“Doc” Kennedy was known as a dedicated professional who always made time for his work and seldom had time to spare for himself, although he was considered a model family man. The service he provided for his patients was foremost in his life, and it was convenient that his wife was a registered mid-wife. While no records were kept of the actual number of deliveries they performed, many of the current residents of the Sperry area are living testaments to their skill. Tragically, his wife’s life prematurely ended in 1934 when she died of cancer at age 44. He continued on without her until 1945, when his health failed.

His style of medicine, by today’s standards, was archaic, inefficient, and rather unscientific, but there were aspects that epitomized the country doctor, and those that, ironically, made him superior. His warm, compassionate style, which included such forgotten concepts as house calls and “bedside manner,” was a far cry from today’s high-speed medicine. In fact, he was so devoted, not only to his practice in general but to his patients as human beings, that often he would spend all night with a sick neighbor. This sort of care was not due to any requirement of professional ethics, but because of a genuine, personal concern for the well-being of his patients. While he was often limited by primitive technology, his dedication to the people he served puts many of our modern medical institutions to shame.

Generally, “Doc” would ask $2.50 per visit, but naturally, he understood the financial problems of his patients and was not strict about payment. This fee barely covered expenses and,
according to his daughter, "He didn’t make anything." Often, if a patient had many debts owed to the doctor, he would pay with a pig, chicken, or even a cow.

From time to time, "Doc" was asked to help patients by looking after not the person, but their livestock. Due to the convenience of his location, Dr. Kennedy's neighbors would occasionally come to him with various problems generally reserved for veterinarians, but "Doc" would apply what he had of this field to care for the animals. If his knowledge proved insufficient he would refer them to a veterinarian. He did this sort of work only because he realized how important these animals were to the rural farmers he served. While many doctors might see this work as a condescension, "Doc" Kennedy was a man willing to do anything and everything in his power to help a friend in need.

He had a certain empathy with his patients that at times would instinctively help him understand what they required. A prime example of this ability was shown one night when a neighbor's child had pneumonia. Often it was a custom for neighbors to come to a sick friend's house and perform a vigil, sitting and watching the suffering person. This very ritual was being enacted when "Doc" arrived, and he realized that this poor child, who was having such a hard time breathing, was being suffocated by his well-meaning watchers. He promptly asked everyone, save the mother and the boy, to please leave, which it turned out, saved the boy's life.

Consistent with the stereotypical image of the "country-doctor," Dr. Kennedy's main mode of transportation was not a car, but a horse, despite the fact that he would often go to the edge of Schuyler or Scotland County. When conditions would allow he would use a buggy, but otherwise he and his faithful steed would travel without such hinderance. Until 1921, when he obtained his first Model-T, his horse would often be called upon in the middle of the night to carry him miles away to a sick patient, often through blizzards or floods. If not even the horse could make it, "Doc" would go on foot, no matter how far he would be asked to go.

"Doc" Kennedy was known as a patient and easygoing man, who was more humanistic than materialistic, and more giving than wanting. He was the model country doctor, in the truest and best sense. But like all good things, the era of the old-fashioned physician has been replaced by technology, never to be seen again. The traditions of yesterday have been filed away in the back of some medical school library, but the legacy of "Doc" Kennedy stands as a standard of warmth and caring, against which modern science is compared, and found lacking.

With doctor's bag in hand, "Doc" Kennedy answers to the call of duty on a winter's day.

By David May

Photos courtesy of Mildred Ambrosia.

"Doc's" faithful horse, attached to the family buggy was always ready to serve, and was often called upon until the purchase of an automobile in 1921.