

Carrie Chase Davis: pioneer

I have had a full and
life... My profession gave
me all the thrills and
satisfaction every one needs
for a good life.

Dr. Carrie Chase Davis

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CARRIE CHASE DAVIS - PIONEER

Humphrys County in 1925 compared poorly with the other ninety- five Tennessee counties. With a small population, the county offered no city of any size, Waverly being the largest. Instead of towns, Humphreys County had only communities. Northeast of Waverly lay the Belvue community, one of the poorest in the county. Mostly farmers, they plowed with mules, drove a buggy to town, and lived without the luxuries of automobiles, telephones, or electricity. Another luxury the large community lacked was a doctor. Even though at least three doctors practiced in Humphrys County in 1925, making the patient- doctor ratio about 2000 to one, with almost no means of speedy communication even if those busy doctors could find time to visit Belvue, a person might die before a doctor could be summoned.

Into this poor community in a economically deprived county came a lady who helped change its history. She came to farm and rest from her work in Indiana; at sixty- four, she had reached retirement age . But after she settled down, she began to see an urgent need for her skills. Dr. Carrie Chase Davis came out of her brief retirement and for twenty years ministered to the people of Belvue community.¹

She was different from the rest of the community . Her family line reached to 1017, and to David Davis of Caermarthou, Wales. Her ancestors included Cwen Davis, 17th in decent from Edward III , King of England and 32d in decent from Alfred the Great ,² Samson Davis who participated in the Revolutionary War , Jefferson Davis , President of the Southern Confederacy and John W. Davis, 1924 candidate for the United States Presidency.³

Besides being "quality" people , she was a foreigner, twice over. Being born in Castilla, Erie County, Ohio, August 13, 1862, made her a northerner and her daddy being a Yankee soldier in the war between the states made her a Republican of the worst sorts.⁴

Carrie's daddy, Thomas R. Davis , a farmer and cattleman ,studied medicine but never practiced. Carrie's mother died when Carrie was only eleven. She then became the woman of the home and a mother to her younger sister , May. As the years passed they became more than sisters : they were best friends.⁵

Today you are knighted, tomorrow you go forth equipped for the battle ... The platform of your alma matter is as broad as humanity, her curriculum is unsurpassed , her method of instruction up to the hour. 10

Dr. Davis interned in 1898 at the Lying- in - Hospital for charity patients in Philadelphia. Around 1898 she moved to Sandusky, Ohio, and worked with the Good Samaritan Hospital . She also had a private practice in obstetrics. She remained in Ohio until around 1909, when the physical labor of having to dig her car out of the snow became too great . 11

Dr. Davis's medical records for 1900-1905 reviled a glimpse into her medical practice while in Ohio. In November of 1900 she treated a Brookly baby for congested lungs , a tight cough, and fever with a camphorated oil and cotton jacket and whiskey for a stimulant . In December , 1900, malt and cod liver oil was prescribed for nervousness. Dr. Davis delivered the child Mrs. Caroline Curth in 1905 ; then she set about curing the mother's addiction to morphine. The records, filled with normal births and happy mothers and babies , also told of Carries failures. Viloa D. Hitchcock had been married only eighteen months when Dr. Davis went to deliver her child. The umbilical cord, wrapped arround the child's neck, was to short to be deliverd. She cut the cord and the baby was deliverd but it could not be resuscited. The mother revived from unconsciousness two hours later and talked rationally. Five hours later, 3:10 a.m., the husband telephoned that Viola had severe abdominal pains. Carrie dressed hastily and went to the home. But when she arrived, respiration had ceased; the heart stopped within moments. The autopsy showed no

cause for Mrs. Hitchcock's death. Carrie wrote in her records, "inexplicable case of sudden death." 12

Before Carrie left the Good Samaritan Hospital, she became its president. However Carrie, now 48 found the winters too hard, and in 1910 she moved to Fairfax, Virginia. While there she received a letter from her aunt Sarah Chase and her young son, Grant. Grant wrote to tell Carrie of his attempt at raising Poland China hogs. The letter indicated that Carrie had been to visit and showed great interest in Grant's success with the hogs. The letter emphasized the tremendous range of Dr. Davis's interests. 13

While in Fairfax Carrie wrote her last will and testament. In it she requested that her body be cremated and her ashes scattered to the winds. She bequeathed her father \$3,500 of insurance money and the rest, except \$200, she left it to her sister, May. But perhaps more significant in the study Dr. Davis's personality was the \$200 not left to her family, but bequeathed to the National Americans Womens' Suffrage Association to advance the cause of womens suffrage. Also some significance might be found in the insurance companies with whom she had policies; The Supreme Hive of the Ladies of the Maccabees of the World, Royal Neighbors of America Protected Home Circle and Independent Forresters. 14

Carrie taught first grade in Virginia and practiced medicine in both Virginia and Washington D.C. The teaching certifact issued by Virigina stated that Carrie, besides being qualified in the usial courses, Spelling, Wrihting, Reading, and Arithmetic, Qualified in the areas of History (American, Viriginan, and English), Cival Government, Drawing, They and Praticce of Teaching, Physiology and Hygien and Agriculuture. While teaching school and managing her small farm, she also found time to help several young men orginice Elder's Hospital in

Hopewell, Virginia, and to practice medicine at Western State Hospital during her eight year stay in the Virginia-Washington, D.C area. 15

World War I began and all available men doctors were drafted by the army. Carrie then moved to Wilmington, Delaware, to work with Dupont. In so doing she became one of the first women industrial doctors. From Wilmington she transferred to the Old Hickory Powder Plant in Tennessee to help stem the flu epidemic of 1918. 16

Dr. Davis later mentioned being a veteran of W.W. I and risking her life under shell fire for weeks on the Hindenburg line. Whether she was speaking of herself personally or whether she spoke only of the American soldiers on the line remains a mystery, for no person remembers her participating as an enlisted officer, indeed, women as a rule were not even allowed in the armed services. Nevertheless, Dr. Davis became a member of the American Legion and referred to herself as a W.W.I veteran. 17

While Dr. Davis worked at the Old Hickory Powder Plant, according to Mrs. Guy Tripplett, who cared for Dr. Davis in the last two years of her life, she read an advertisement in a newspaper for the sale of a farm in Humphrey's County, the Hugh Stockard place. She came to McEwen to look over the place. Age 54 then, her fiery hair beginning to streak with gray, she rode out across the ridge, down into the hills of the northeast part of the county in the middle of December. Thinking of it as a fine farm, Dr. Davis bought the 751 acres. 18

In 1921, Dr. Davis went to North Madison, Indiana, to work at Cragmont, Southeastern Hospital for the Insane. She worked at the hospital four years and headed to the Women's Department for three years. While working with the insane, Dr. Davis wrote a paper on Dementia Praecox. In

it she described the symptoms, voices and hallucinations, and applied the disease to history the Salem Witch Hysteria. She then explained the different cases of Dementia Praecox. The tone of the scholarly study implied her urgent wish for the public to understand the medical reasons for insanity and to dispel the superstitions and ignorance surrounding mental illness. 19

In 1925, Dr. Davis, when asked by her superior why she believed there was so much influenza at Cragmont, she replied that the patients were forced to walk through water caused by heavy rains for about twenty feet on their way to the dining hall. The superintendent, infuriated by what he considered to be impertinence, called for Dr. Davis's resignation. She did resign but she also wrote the governor of Indiana to repeal her case and to call for a complete investigation of Cragmont.20

During her stay in Indiana Dr. Davis had employed a worker for her Tennessee farm and bought seed oats, corn fertilizer and lespendaza seed and a second hand cultivator. When asked to resign at the Indiana hospital, Carrie thought to return to the Tennessee hills, and in 1926 found the Belevue community with a doctor.21

And so it was, that Dr. Davis, a high born and well educated yankee republican who had never attended church for she believed only in God through nature, came to live among southern democrats who couldn't trace their family tree, many who could not, in fact, read or write, and who attended the church of their choice regularly. She came bringing with her good paintings, good books, a view master, a typewriter, a victrola -all new and unseen to the community. Disregarding the differences, the clannish country people accepted the woman doctor for she brought with her a humble spirit, wit, friendliness, love of all people,

and a dedication to her work that was no respecter of persons.22

Reflecting her personality her home was sparsely finished with antiques, immaculately clean, rustic, and plain, but with character. The I-shaped farmhouse contained of a living room and a kitchen and in the wing was a room she used as an office. In the first years her kitchen table served as an examination table ; later she used a folding hospital bed. Dr. Davis introduced the skylight to the community when she had part of her roof removed and panes of glass put in its place. She did this in the area above the stairs going up to her room, so she could see day or night.23

Surrounding her house lay a strawberry patch, a blueberry patch, a blackberry thicket, fruit trees, and her herb garden for she believed fresh fruit necessary for a balanced diet. This idea along with others formed an unique philosophy for the 1920's. She traveled throughout the community preaching about her doctrine of cleanliness and good nutrition. Believing that heat caused food to spoil, she built an underground cellar; thinking that the vitamins of vegetables lay in the peeling, she cooked them with the skins on and with only a small amount of water. 24

Belvue welcomed Dr. Davis's ideas because they were accompanied with genuine fondness. As the years went by she delivered their babies, visited in their homes, and made them well when they were sick. In 1932, her sister, May, and her niece Ruth, came down to visit with Carrie. While they were there they went to a baseball game, where they watched in amusement as the umpire demanded all the players remove their knives. May and Ruth laughed, but Carrie told them that the players fought and cut each other up so often she could not afford to use catgut anymore. She just pulled some hairs out of her horse's tail, and sterilized them and sewed them up. In anycase, the dark horses hair made the

removing of the stitches easier to see; after all, she was seventy years old.²⁵

All of her life Carrie had been aware of governmental policy. She thought Teddy Roosevelt true to the core and a wonderful, she praised Woodrow Wilson for his progressive ideas and his passage of the 19th Amendment, but she thoroughly disliked Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1935, she wrote C.W. Turner, her congressman in the house of representatives, demanding that he vote soldiers bonus bill that the F.D.R opposed and denouncing his scholastic schemes and those of the "young intellectuals." Later when Roosevelt started the plans for farm relief and made fertilizer available, she would have none of it to make her own lime she hauled bricks from miles away; some men helped her clean her bricks, and she built a lime kiin. Not only did she use her own lime for fertilizer, but she gave work to local people who needed it. Though she wanted none of Roosevelt's schemes for herself, when she heard of his economic relief plans she went to the mayor of Waverly and announced that she could tell him who truly needed help. The mayor kindly but firmly told her the federal government had their own ways of determining financial needs.²⁶

Her thoughtfulness of other people often caused her personal inconvenience. Without an automobile, she found other ways to travel. For the first few years she rode a horse side saddle, later she drove a horse, and finally she had a young girl to drive the buggy for her. She went on calls anytime of the day or night, many times leaving a meal unfinished; other times she would come home from a call only to find that someone else needed her and had left a note on the front door; without going inside she would climb back into her buggy. She kept bricks around her fireplace, wrapped them in newspaper, and put them in the bottom of the buggy to keep her warm. She'd also put a lantern by her

legs and cover them with a lap robe to keep them from freezing. No matter what the weather, how far the trip, how poor the people, or how black their skin, she went where people needed her.²⁷

Carrie's dedication to the community showed itself again and again. She converted a small building below her home into a sort of hospital, where those who needed extended treatment could stay. She owned another building across from her house in which she put families unable to find work or sick. She would feed them and take care of them until they could take care themselves. Such was the case in the 1930's when a family with many children and a pregnant mother developed sscarlet fever. Carrie moved the family from their shell of a house to her two room tenament. She doctored the children and husband and delivered the woman of twin babies. One babe could not be saved, but the other Dr. Davis cared for as her own. The mother had dropsey-her legs swelled and burst. Dr. Davis doctored them all until the whole family got back on their feet, and then she sent for the welfare agent to visit to consider their needs. Until 1946, when she sold her farm, that tenament almost continually had some needy family there.²⁸

Dr. Carrie did not limit her help to medical efforts. Through her A.Brown, a girl from the community, got a nursing job in Grundy, Virginia; a local girl, Dean Scholls, went to Washington, D.C. to live, and many young people attended 4-H camp. That Carrie loved children in her younger years was evident by her teaching first grade, and as she grew old her love did not die. If possible she would chaperone 4-H club day, but if she could not, she would make it possible for a needy child to attend. In the late thirties, a client paid his bill in cash (a rare occurrence). The money, four dollars, Carrie put into envelopes, and sent to

four children who needed some spending money for a 4-H convention in Nashville.²⁹

Carrie's methods of doctoring included home remedies, patent medicine, and prescription drugs. The first typhoid inoculations in Humphreys and Houston Counties, Dr. Davis administered. The physicians in Nashville, after their initial shock of meeting a lady doctor in her seventies, praised Carrie and they respected her ability to diagnose medical problems. Never ashamed to pass a patient on to a younger, more skilled surgeon, Carrie sent many Belvue inhabitants to Vanderbilt. A seventeen-year-old Wall boy had a tree limb to hit him in the eye. Dr. Davis, unable to open the eye to see its condition, suggested that the boy be sent to Nashville; she rode with the family. When the Vanderbilt doctors carried him into the emergency room, Dr. Davis started to go with them. The doctors advised he that only doctors were allowed. "I am his doctor, and I'm going in and see what is in that eye!" she laughed. The Vanderbilt doctors cleared the way. After examination of the eye, all the doctors returned to the family to express admiration for Dr. Davis's promptness and medical skill.

In 1941, a young boy came to her having been to other doctors of the county. The boy had been sick with ear trouble the whole winter. Dr. Davis examined him and asked how soon he could be taken to Vanderbilt. Two days later the doctors following Dr. Davis's advice performed a mastoid operation. Another time Margaret Thompson, fifteen years old, after visiting every doctor available, visited Dr. Carrie. Dr. Carrie told the family the lungs were filled with fluid probably too heavy to draw out with a needle. She suggested that the child be taken to a Nashville hospital for surgery, something that the other doctors had never suggested. Dr. Davis's diagnosis of Margaret proved correct; Margaret had surgery and recovered.³⁰

Dr. Dorsey Gould
of Waverly said
of Dr. Davis :

enormous amount of good that remarkable
woman has done during her many years of
service among the farmers and their families

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in that section of the country. Many, many times through the years I have received messages from her to come to rural homes and perform operations on her patients. Always when I got there she had an improvised operating room in readiness. She's very gifted at making whatever materials she has at hand, even though they may include little more than a kitchen table and a lantern adequate in any emergency. And I have never performed an operation on a patient of hers that failed to prove that her original diagnosis had been correct in detail.³¹

Occasionally Dr. Davis, forced by an emergency, had to operate. Waunita Allison, age twelve, proved to be such a case. Waunita became suddenly violently ill. Carrie came immediately, she issued the orders to build a fire, fill pots with fresh water from the spring, and boil all the white rags available. She then instructed Mrs. Allison to iron the rags dry. She then boiled her instruments, prepared the kitchen table, and then operated on the child there in the kitchen by lamplight for acute appendicitis. The child recovered, and the people of Belvue never forgot the incident.³²

There were other incidents the community remembered, like the time an expectant mother contracted kidney poisoning and went into a coma. Dr. Davis stayed by her side for two days and nights, refusing other calls. Another time Dr. Davis visited a two year old child with colitis every day. For twelve days, she did everything she knew to do. Finally the child worsened so that she had to send for an extremely potent prescription. She decided to go for the medicine herself for sometimes druggists would substitute ingredients, and she felt it urgent to have exactly the right medicine. The baby died in spite of everything she

did, but the family never forgot her concern and her tremendous efforts for the child.³³

Carrie's main concern, as it had been from the beginning of her medical practices, remained in obstetrics. She delivered about 1,200 babies in her medical career, 400 of them in Humphreys County after she reached age sixty-five. Dr. Davis realized the poverty of her community; she charged ten dollars per baby. Most of the payment came to Carrie in the form of corn, wheat, livestock, and working time on her farm. One doctor in the county thought Carrie a quack because she charged so little and sent the sheriff to examine of diploma.³⁴

Childbirth in the 1930's and 1940's was difficult. Dr. Davis always carried with her leather straps to tie the patient's hands to the bed frame to pull on during contractions. In the case of unbearable pain the patients would receive chloroform. An aid for less severe pain included sitting on a chamber pot filled with boiling water. Mothers always had their babies delivered at home; sometimes in a difficult birth the father assisted Dr. Davis.

Mr. Walter Collier helped his wife in the birthing of their son. Dr. Davis, after using the chamber pot, leather strap and walking around methods, decided to help the baby be born. She called in Walter, had Mrs. Collier to turn on her left side, Walter to sit on the bed, and Mrs. Collier's right leg to be placed on the shoulder of her husband. Dr. Davis then removed the baby with her hands.³⁵

Dr. Davis believed in herbs for medical purposes and other unusual items. She used a potato poultice for boils, made by cooking a potato and binding it to the boil. A tea made from the leaves and flowers of wild touch-me-not plants that grew along the creek bank was prescribed for nervousness and kidney trouble. She recommended a turnip wrapped in wet newspaper, put in hot ashes in the fireplace

until cooked, and to be bound to any frostbite to draw the frostbite out. Along with her home remedies and prescription drugs she recommended patent medicine from Sears, Roebuck and Company because it was less expensive than prescription drugs.³⁶

Besides doctoring the community, aiding the needy, helping young people to leave the community for a different life, and teaching the community with industry. She had at least three schemes to make the area rich. First she tried to make the area into a lime producer with her anti-Roosevelt lime kiln. Second, she began a search for oil on her farm. Failing as an oil producer and with the coming of WW II, Carrie, age eighty-one, took the time to write seven letters to Memphis, St. Louis, Washington, D.C., among other places, in almost three months of correspondence to find a feasible way to extract iron ore from the farms in the county and a market for the ore. Finally, after her third failure, Carrie went to live with her sister, May.³⁷

In December of 1943, Carrie moved to Rutledge, Pennsylvania, leaving a community that mourned her leaving, but wished the best for her. In one letter, Mr. and Mrs. Carl Osborn wrote that they knew Rutledge would give her more physical comfort and certainly more culture than the Highland Rim. They told Carrie how she had inspired them by her ideals and splendid service to the community. They told her of their love.³⁸

While in Pennsylvania, Carrie did not forget her friends in Tennessee. She sent seeds, corn, and hay to one family, yard goods to a child that had been named for her, and for at least six months she sent magazines (Reader's Digest and Saturday Evening Post) and books to Thurman Winters, a boy from the community that had entered the Navy for the duration of World War II (she also sent him one dollar on his

birthday). Carrie loved Tennessee and the people of Humphreys County; in 1945, she returned.³⁹

In late 1945, Dr. Davis became temporarily paralyzed; by 1946 the paralysis had ended but Dr. Davis from that time on lived with a family that could watch after her needs. Nevertheless, Carrie did not quit living. She again became involved in community activities, by requesting to have a conference on how to grow better fruit; she continued to read the newspapers and Saturday Evening Post even though her eyes had dimmed so that she was forced to wear eyeglasses.⁴⁰

Dr. Davis, according to Mrs. Lea Triplett, in 1947 began to have unconscious periods that would last from four to six hours. She might be in the middle of a conversation and lose consciousness; later she would reawaken asking, "It happened again didn't it?" Mrs. Triplett stated that Dr. Davis had been found to have multiple cancer in 1934, but the cancer grew slowly and Carrie practiced fourteen years after her discovery and the removal of a malignant tumor. In 1947, Carrie retired from medical practice at the age of eighty-five.
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As the years passed, the lapses of unconsciousness became more severe and it would take Carrie a few days to get back to normal. She would write people checks that she did not owe money. Her niece, Ruth Gibson, called Carrie's attention to this matter when she felt better; Carrie replied, "That's no problem, I need a keeper." They developed a method where a person she trusted would co-sign the real checks, and the banks would disregard the others.⁴²

The last acts of Dr. Carrie Chase Davis summed up rather well what her life had all been about. After a particular bad spell of sickness she called her friend and nurse Lea Triplett to help her go through her papers and destroy her medical account books; she had not received half

of the meager amounts she had charged, but she did not want any person to be bothered after she died. They burned the books.⁴³

Dr. Davis in November, 1952, made her last trip to vote. Someone there asked her why she had not voted by absentee ballot. She replied, "I've a stroke - I can't walk, but I love to get out and look around. There are many here that I brought into the world and their mothers and fathers are all friends of mine." Dr. Davis, who wanted to live to see a Republican in the White House, voted for Dwight D. Eisenhower. She stated that she had seen eight presidents inaugurated and had she been well she would have been there for Ike's inauguration.⁴⁴

After doing the last thing she could do for her community, burning her account books, after doing the last thing for her country, voting for a Republican for President of the United States, Dr. Davis did the last thing she could do for medical science by willing her body to the Vanderbilt School of Medicine for the advancement of medical research.⁴⁵

Dr. Carrie Chase Davis, at age ninety, after days of unconsciousness, died, and the people of the Belvue community mourned. Though the community lost its only doctor, and Humphreys County lost its first lady physician, Carrie left enough of herself with numerous families, that her love of life, dedication to humanity, and tremendous amount of idealism will ever live through those whose lives she touched.⁴⁶

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