

DIARY OF A COUNTRY DOCTOR

John Clarence Dingman (1881-1971) was a country doctor who in 1904 took over the medical practice of his ailing father who had come to rural Spring Valley, N.Y. in 1876. In those days one could enter medical school straight out of high school and both Clarence and his brother Alva completed the two year course of studies at Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1904.

Office hours were held three times a day in his home office. The rest of the day (and night) was for house calls. Clarence ground his own medicines with a mortar and pestle and, often as not, was paid in goods instead of cash. There were few telephones and the customary way of summoning the doctor was to rap on the door. His early career saw the advent of the automobile, but frequent flat tires, breakdowns and treacherous roads made traditional conveyances more reliable in bad weather – e.g. horse drawn sleigh, even snowshoes.

In 1997 Jeanne DuBois Crawford became aware that her mother Ruth Dingman Crawford had discovered trove of some 400 "courtship letters" that Jeanne's grandparents, Clarence and Louise had exchanged between the years 1898 and 1908. Most were written during a seven year period when Louise Berry was living in Minneapolis. These were published in two volumes by Jeanne in 2009.

Amidst expressions of longing for Louise, there were numerous brief vignettes which depicted the stress and occasional discouragement of a country doctor working in relative isolation. But all wasn't gloomy and Clarence Dingman sometimes described moments of exhilaration about the beauty of nature as he made his lengthy circuits. What follows here are selections from the letters of this conscientious physician who was blessed with a romantic soul.

A real blizzard is in progress without...I had the pleasure of contending with the elements the whole afternoon and I was very glad to reach home again. Had it

not been for the storm I would now be on the road for Pearl River where a pneumonia patient is awaiting. But the storm is too severe and as they have plenty of medicine and advice already, I will wait until tomorrow. (January 4, 1905)

I have been called out the last three nights and have been in bed just six hours during the last two nights. Night before last about midnight, I was called to see a man in Monsey who was taken suddenly ill with great pain. Well, I did all that I could do for him and then took him up to the Suffern Hospital where we operated upon him. When I reached home at about eight o'clock the next morning, I was pretty nearly done for – not from loss of sleep but from the nervous strain and responsibility. (October 16, 1905)

It seems to me that the life to live is one in a country...unhampered by the demands and restrictions of our crowded civilization. It emphasizes all the more forcibly that the farther one gets away from nature, the harder it is to live a true life. I am all the more thankful that my lot is cast in the country, and among a comparatively simple people. (September 20, 1907)

I have had some very sick people this week. Sometimes, I feel as if the responsibility would be too much for me and I have to tell myself not to care about results but to go ahead and do the best I can. One man...died here Friday night. He was only thirty-seven and had such a promising future it seemed hard not to be able to do anything for him. (November 25, 1907)

I might be able to do some good this afternoon for there is a little two year old boy waiting for me to take off his plaster jacket and put on a new one. And then there is an old man who has been sick a few days and yesterday I found him fully convinced that he was going to die and consequently was much worse. It took me some time to convince him that he was going to get better and in order to do so he must believe that he was. (January 8, 1908)

Most of my work is out in the country and that means long drives over rough roads. Yesterday I sat in a wagon all day long until ten last night – probably thirty-five miles in all. It was fearfully muddy and I was a sight. Until today when it has snowed and rained the weather has been splendid for some time....This is indeed God's country...it was beautiful. Snow clad hills in every direction. ...The world is so beautiful and it is so wonderful to live and the possibilities are so great...((March 7, 1908)

I had a bad day yesterday. Everything seemed to go wrong. Had some very sick people and everything seemed to go to delay me until I became nervous and irritable which only made matters worse....I had a long twenty mile trip to make and couldn't seem to get away from the village. Had sent for a nurse for a sick patient and she didn't show up and I was afraid to leave the patient until she did. Well at last she did and I finally started...Once out of the country in sight of the dear old hills I felt better at once and quite enjoyed the long drive home behind the team. (March 9, 1908)

I am dog tired....I have had only six hours sleep since Monday morning and since then have driven over eighty miles of muddy roads and have made over forty sick calls, not counting office patients, you might imagine how tired I am tonight. (March 12, 1908)

I have had a very, very busy week and am pretty well played out. Mud! Mud! Mud! Nothing but mud — and such mud! The wagon wheels sink in up to the hubs and the poor ponies have a hard time of it. I come in every time almost covered with it and we have even had chocolate pudding for dessert twice this week! (March 16, 1908)

After a visit to a twenty year old “young Jew” dying of tuberculosis:

Four weeks ago he became worse and since then his mother has not been able to leave him so their only means of support is the sister – who makes four dollars per week....I wormed out of him that they had only three dollars left and owed the grocer six. His mother is exhausted and sick from loss of sleep and the poor chap has been fighting for breath for a good many days. When I told him that I would take care of him and to have the medicines charged to me at the druggist, and that I would see that he was supplied with milk and eggs, his gratitude was pathetic. "Doctor" he said, "if I ever get out of this I will pay you back if I have to wash your feet. I never expected to hear such words from a doctor." (March 30, 1908)

We sometimes think that our problems are overwhelming and are going to be too much for us, but what are they to the trials and sufferings of so many? It makes me feel like thirty cents, after I have been feeling blue and discouraged and have wondered if it were of any use to try any longer, to find some poor chap contending with a brave face against odds compared with which my troubles are like those of a spoiled child crying for candy. (March 30, 1908)

Returning from a trip to the nearest garage in Paterson, NJ , there is a mishap: On the way home my supply of acetylene gas gave out and we were forced to come most of the way home with only the oil lamps. Just below Monsey although I was driving carefully, we crashed into the rear of a huge market truck loaded with empty barrels. We all narrowly escaped being cut by the flying glass from the front glass front which was shattered. The whole front of the car was crushed - lamps, bonnet, etc., although the engine and driving mechanism was injured and we came the rest of the way under the car's own power....[The next morning] drove what was left of the car back to Paterson. It will cost me about \$75 to have it repaired and it almost makes me sick to think of it. (April 4, 1908)

A call has just come to see a little baby who has been worrying me for some days. He is a dear little fellow, only six months old, and so friendly. It is a case of

advanced summer diarrhea and he has been sick some weeks already. (July 27, 1908)

Have just seen that baby again. It is quite critically ill, but is no worse tonight than this morning. I have hopes of pulling it through but my heart fails me. It is such a dear baby and I fairly love it. I am going to ask God tonight when I pray to save that baby. (July 28, 1908) Everything seems to go wrong this morning. That little baby is dying. (July 31, 1908)

I have had to drive the horse today and aside from the slowness, have rather enjoyed it. It is so beautiful tonight. There is a beautiful full moon and the air is so cool and fresh... The stars were shining, although dimmed by the splendor of the young moon. (August 4, 1908)

I was late in getting back last night...what pitiful things I saw. It is a little family, just a couple and their three year old child. The wife has been a patient of mine for years. She is inclined to melancholia and some time ago became an atheist. She reads loads of cheap, lurid novels and for some time has believed that everyone in town was busy saying bad things about her. Last night I found her with her husband and two other men holding her in bed, a raving, mad woman. Her strength was almost super human and her cries were pitiful – seemed to be afraid that someone was going to knife her and then she lapsed into a lot of cheap novel phrases about a rich man trying to ruin her and get her to leave her husband. It was so pitiful and, at the same time, so sordid. Genuine, legitimate grief and suffering is often unavoidable, but it seems so strange that a woman would deliberately bring herself to this condition. I stayed until she was somewhat quieter and came away. (August 21, 1908)

I have been just a little blue and discouraged about my work lately. I have been so rushed that I allowed the office to become very untidy and poorly equipped. My memory too, becomes overcrowded at times and something is continually

slipping. I am starting a system of cards for recording cases, so that I will not have to tax my memory so much. (August 27, 1908)

Spent quite a busy evening in the office with patients. Went out once to quiet a hysterical school teacher. She was sobbing as though her heart would break, but I held her hand and petted her until she quieted down – plain case of over-work. (November 16, 1908)

Dr. John C. Dingman practiced in Spring Valley for many years; late in his career a colleague recalled him as “the dean of Rockland County medical practitioners.” (*South of the Mountains*, July-September 1961.) He died at age 90 in 1971.

Michael Nevins, MD