Yorkton Stories
The audio version of this and all other podcasts can be found at www.yorktonstories.ca and on all podcast directories.

This transcript was produced using voice recognition software, which is not perfect. It has been edited for clarity, to correct misspellings and to delete duplication.

Sigga Houston: the purposeful life of a pioneer doctor

Published 22 June 2025

Dick DeRyk
This is the story of Dr. Sigridur (known as Sigga) Christianson Houston, who with her husband Clarence Joseph, CJ, practiced medicine in Yorkton for 50 years. She was well known and in great demand in the 1930s and 40s as a pediatrician with a well-deserved reputation to make babies thrive, which brought mothers and children from as far as 100 miles away to Yorkton.

Less well known, if at all, at the time, was the fact that when she graduated medical school in 1925, she was only the fourth woman of Icelandic descent to become a doctor, and the first Icelandic Canadian woman to achieve that. Although we haven't been able to verify this, she was very likely also the first female doctor to practice in Yorkton. None of that seems to have been all that important to her, but it was to her son Stuart, himself a doctor and prolific author and ornithologist who wrote extensively about his mother in the 1990s.

We owe much of what we know about Dr. Sigga Houston to an article written in 1993 by Stuart for Logberg-Heimskringla, an Icelandic newspaper published in Winnipeg since the 1950s. Other sources include the website of the New Iceland Heritage Museum in Gimli, Manitoba, and IcelandicRoots.com, an Icelandic genealogy site, many of them using Stuart's article as a source. Links to all of these can be found on the page with this podcast at yorktonstories.ca. But the story of Sigga Houston cannot be told without also talking about her marriage partner of 60 years and medical partner of 50 years, CJ, or without their only child, their son Stuart, who was married to Mary Belcher. She died in 2019, Stuart in 2021.

Stuart and Mary had three sons and a daughter. We talked to the oldest, their son Stan, who lives in Edmonton, and the second oldest, daughter Margaret, who lives in Rochester, Minnesota, about their grandparents for this podcast. Their younger siblings are Don in Winnipeg and Dave in Rochester, New York. Stan is an infectious disease specialist at the University of Alberta. Margaret is a family doctor and epidemiologist at the Mayo Clinic. Don is a hematologist at the University of Manitoba, and Dave is a mathematician and works in computer programming. And we spoke with Nancy Morrison, who, as a girl growing up in Yorkton would visit with the Houstons, who were close friends of her parents. Sigga was also her doctor, who treated Nancy when she was struck with polio.

Nancy Morrison
She loved beauty, I think, and she created beauty. And the home inside and outside was lovely. I had a chance to live at their home for a week or ten days. Mom and Dad went traveling, which they didn't do very often. I mean far away. And my older sister was at school in Winnipeg. Sigga had

volunteered to take me in. They had a housekeeper. But Sigga herself was a wonderful cook. And she was a pioneer cook. I had seen a root cellar several times because she would always say, I want to give you a jar of this, and you'd go down to the root cellar. And I mean, the cooks of today would kill for it. There was everything from jams and jellies. They would go out and pick. So she had Saskatoon preserves and pincherries and she knew what to do with everything that grew in the ground on the prairies. I mean, she truly was a pioneer cook and wonder woman.

She was my doctor as a kid, and I saw her quite a bit because I had asthma very badly as a kid. And they would bring in the vaccination squad into the public school. My mom became concerned because after every time the squad came in to vaccinate us all, I would have a huge asthma attack. So Sigga finally said, she's had enough, her immunity is okay.

Her home was as beautiful inside as it was outside. She was just wonderful. She loved beautiful things and had them around her. She was a wonderful hostess. So there would be dinner parties back and forth. And if it was around Christmas, I mean they would all, Christmas New Year's, they would all be in formal in the homes. So she entertained. How she did it all, it's amazing because she was practicing full time. And her sense of fashion. She dressed beautifully. She was a seamstress. She could sew anything. And when I was in bed for quite a while with polio she brought beautiful nightgowns and bed jackets that she'd sewn trimmed with lace.

She had a magic with babies with whooping cough. It was legend. Mothers brought sick babies from miles and miles around. I mean, Flin Flon, I remember someone came from Flin Flon bringing their baby. And whooping cough was very dangerous and still dangerous. I don't know when vaccination for whooping cough started, but I just remember there was a lot of whooping cough when I was a kid. I didn't have it, I was lucky. But it could be fatal for children, I think. And Sigga, one of her suggestions, I remember my dad really liked it because he's Scottish, was oatmeal. So they wanted to feed these babies who couldn't keep anything down. And she had the magic touch. She never talked about that, but I heard that almost throughout her lifetime.

The polio epidemic. I got polio four years before there was a vaccine. I was having a problem with my back that was curving. So Sigga sent me to a specialist in Winnipeg and he checked me over and said it was just bad posture and that I should wear a metal walking cast for six months or whatever to correct my posture. Mom and dad did not like his diagnosis or prognosis. Neither did Sigga or CJ. They didn't agree with it. So Sigga said, let, you know, let Nancy enjoy the summer. We're gonna send her in to another specialist. So they did. They sent me in the end of August to Dr. Deakin who checked me over and he said to Mum, Dad, this this child has polio. Of course it was terror at that time. It was panic. You know, swimming pools closed, they discourage you from going and swimming at Bowes River. It was a scary time because it was so contagious, they thought they didn't know, they didn't know what caused it. He recommended I would need treatments, polio treatments for a year and he said it would take place in Winnipeg at the children's hospital. So mom and dad brought me back and well Jesse (Nancy's mother) and Sigga decided I was not going to Winnipeg. I was staying home. And between those two women, I had polio treatments for a year at home and Sigga was very much part of that. She and mother were conspiring in a wonderful way. So I didn't have to spend a year in a hospital.

The volunteer work they did around Yorkton, they were very active members of the Anglican church. Every bazaar, I mean, Sigga donated everything. She could clean out her closets, even her jewelry box. She was so generous with everything. Generosity was one of her beautiful traits.

Dick DeRyk
Stuart attended school in Yorkton and graduated from the University of Manitoba College of Medicine in 1951, the same school his parents had attended. And in fact, he boarded at the same house of Mrs. Thorvaldson, where his mother had lived when she was at the university. That same year he married Mary Isabel Belcher, and they moved to Yorkton, where he joined his parents' medical practice. He was here from 1951 to 1955, went away to study for a year, and came back to Yorkton in 1956. In 1960, the Stuart Houston family moved to Saskatoon, where Stuart began training in diagnostic radiology at Saskatoon's Royal University Hospital. He joined the radiology department at the University of Saskatchewan in 1964 and became a professor in 1969, retiring in 1996.

Ornithology, the study and conservation of bird life, was a passion for Stuart and Mary, dating back to Stuart's Yorkton youth and the family cabin at York Lake. Together, the two banded about 155,000 different birds from about 200 different species. Stuart holds the record for the most banding of turkey vultures and great horned owls. Mary Houston banded 5,385 Bohemian waxwings, which in 2017 was more than the next three bird banders combined. Stuart is the author and co-author of more than 250 articles about medicine and the history of medicine. He is the author or co-author of more than 500 publications in ornithology or natural history, and was the author and co-author of several books, including Birds of Saskatchewan.

Stan Houston
Of course, my dad was a very enthusiastic historian. He got very interested in Dr. Patrick, got very interested in the history of Fort San and Tommy Douglas and so forth. So that was one of his things, to dig into Saskatchewan. That's kind of cool.

Dick DeRyk
Clarence, C.J. Houston, was born in Ottawa in 1900 and raised on a farm near Tyvan, Saskatchewan, north of Weyburn. Outside medicine, he made significant contributions to health care in Saskatchewan. In 1943, the Health Insurance Committee of the College of Physicians and Surgeons endorsed a proposal submitted by C.J. Houston and R. A. Dick of Canora, calling for a universal provincial health plan governed by an independent commission. He was a member of the Council of the College and its president in 1947, the year that hospitalization coverage was introduced by Tommy Douglas's NDP government. He was one of two doctors on the Saskatchewan Health Survey Committee from 1949 to 1951, and one of three doctors on the Saskatchewan Health Services Planning Commission.

While a strong supporter of hospitalization coverage, Houston insisted on a commission for Medicare that would be independent of the provincial government. When that didn't happen, he joined others in dissenting, but stayed away from the strident opposition to Medicare when hospitalization coverage was expanded to universal Medicare, with doctors threatening to leave the province instead of, as they called it, working for the government.

Stan Houston
I mean, he grew up on a farm and got to medical school and then had some provincial and national recognition, medical political roles. He wasn't in that kind of anti-medicare vanguard the way people perceive that era. He was very interested in surgery and actually got American certification in surgery which I think was quite a remarkable achievement and he used to go off and do training for surgery in the States, for example, to learn some new skill. I think he was an excellent surgeon, and excellent, you know, clinically, and my dad really admired that. And I think maybe aside from his attraction to radiology and his probably recognition that he wouldn't be able to pursue, you know, his interest in ornithology and so forth, if he was in a really busy general, rural general, a smaller city general practice. I think maybe he felt he would never really be equal to my grandpa. Those might been some of the reasons that he chose to leave and specialize. And I learned much later that my grandmother in particular was very upset by this. And apparently lots of people in Yorkton were really surprised. Why would he leave? You know, the ideal situation? My grandfather probably had a more open-minded view of the distinction, but my grandma was apparently quite upset by this.

Dick DeRyk
But let's go back to the start of the quite remarkable life of Sigga Christianson Houston.
Her parents were Geir Kristjansson and Seselja Sveinsdottir, who had met briefly in Iceland while working in the hayfields in summer. The following summer Geir learned that she had emigrated to America, and he boarded a ship and ended up in Winnipeg. He asked fellow Icelanders there if they know Seselja, and some did – she was working in a hotel in Pembina, North Dakota. He found her there and they were married in 1890.

They moved to Grand Forks, where their four children were born, including Sigga, the second oldest and oldest of three girls, born in June of 1893.

In 1905, drawn by the promise of free land, the family moved to the Wynyard area of Saskatchewan and homesteaded on 160 acres near Quill Lake – the lake, not the village -- in an area called the Lake Settlement. They lived in a tent the first summer while the father, a journeyman carpenter, built a 12 foot by 16 foot house.

Sigga, then 12, was not happy with it at all. In Grand Forks she had gone to school and had set her sights early on higher education. But there was no school for her to go to the first two years. After that she completed grades 7 and 8 at Mountain School near Wynyard. But there was no high school. Her granddaughter Margaret explains.

Margaret Houston
Her childhood, she was Icelandic heritage, right? And she came to this farm, this dirt farm by the Quill Lakes, and it was, she never talked about it. We only heard about it from Auntie Babbs and Auntie Dora because my grandmother had she'd had it with the place. She didn't want to even talk about it. And she really never spoke Icelandic. I never really heard her ever speak Icelandic, even with her sisters, and she always had a cook or maid, and that person was Icelandic always, as far as I know, and I never heard her speak Icelandic with them. But later in life, she was very pro-Icelandic. She, you know, I mean, she they made vinarterta, and for my wedding, you know, I had little Icelandic flags on my wedding cake and all kinds of stuff. She, you know, so she was very pro-heritage after she'd gotten away from that farm for a while.

Dick DeRyk
The mother of a neighbor of theirs -- the mother lived in Winnipeg and had a boarding house -- offered her job in her boarding house preparing meals for the workers of Bardal Funeral Parlour, and go to school. Offer accepted! Sigga got up at 5 in the morning and cooked breakfast for the men, and went to high school. She then moved to Saskatoon to attend normal school so she could teach, graduating in 1914. She taught for four years at rural schools in the Wynyard and Bruno districts, saving enough money to be able to go to the University of Manitoba. She took one year of pre-med, and was then one of 13 women accepted into the College of Medicine, graduating as a doctor in 1925.

Margaret Houston
In all those intervening years, you know, there were a bunch of women around the time she was in. And then my time, class of '79, 1974, we went into med school. That was when they first started, that was around the time that women started coming back, right? So there was that dearth of women in between. So I asked her about it. I asked her about what it was like to be in medical school. And she said, oh, it was fine. They just looked after me. And I think they probably did because there were Icelandic faculty, and I think they looked after her. But she never, ever talked about the discrimination that I know must have been there, because it was there when I was in medical school, probably at a lesser extent, but it was definitely there. But she wouldn't talk about it.

Dick DeRyk
While in university, she took the train home from Winnipeg right after the last classes in April, spent the summer teaching at Grandy School near Wynyard until the day before classes started again in September. She put her pupils through a while year's curriculum in less than five months. No summer holidays for her, or her students.

In the 1925 U of M yearbook said this of her: "A Saskatchewan product and a credit to the province. Her tenacity of purpose, and diligence in studies has only been exceeded to her loyalty to her many friends. Hobby: Red hair and fudge-making. A tender heart, a will inflexible."

While in university, a gangly red-haired farm boy a year behind her in medical school became her suitor. But Sigga went to Fort Wayne, Indiana, where she worked in a sanatorium for a year. They wrote letters daily, and when they met again in Grand Forks the next year, they agreed to get married immediately. Not so fast, said the court house clerk when they applied for a marriage license. The law requires a waiting period before a license could be issued. They went across the river to Minnesota – same conditions applied there. But CJ found a loophole, their son Stuart wrote in his mother's biography.

"CJ had the happy inspiration to ask the court house clerk if the fact that both were Canadian citizens made any difference. It did, for the Americans saw no need to protect a couple from another country from a rash and impetuous folly."

They were married that afternoon, December 3, 1926, and Sigga joined CJ in the practice he had set up in Watford City, North Dakota when he graduated. Stuart was born while they were there, but after just over a year the family moved to Yorkton, where Doctors Houston and Houston set up an office in 1928.

Dr. CJ made house calls – many in the surrounding countryside -- and surgery at the hospital. Dr. Sigga worked from the office, drawing patients from Hudson Bay, Kelvington, Binscarth Manitoba, from a hundred miles away. They came from farther away than for any other doctor in town, because she was able to look after babies who, as was the term then, “failed to thrive.”

Margaret Houston
In the practice, I think at the beginning she did everything. I don't know if she did surgery, but she certainly went to the hospital and had patients in the hospital. But eventually, she was a real worrier. My grandfather just put his foot down and said, You can't go to the hospital. She was just wringing herself inside out over a particular patient, and he said, You can't do this. And he put his foot down. And he was the kindest, gentlest man. But if he put his foot down, she listened because he was right, you know. She was just destroying herself. So really, what she was, two things. She ran the office practice. The other guys had no interest in doing that. She was very efficient, you know, whole hiring of staff and management of staff and supplies and all that kind of stuff.

But also, she had this huge practice of women, I'm sure, and babies, and failure-to-thrive babies. But the failure-to-thrive babies were interesting because they would come from like 100 miles around. And we're talking mud, dirt roads in Saskatchewan at that point. And these women would come on the train and the hotel, apparently, according to my dad, had a special room rate for them. And so you think, well, what's the big deal? Well, nobody took an interest in babies who were failing to thrive, that the moms couldn't just breastfeed them and they took off, you know? Nobody took an interest. There were no lactation consultants at that point or anything like that.

So years later, when I was in med school, I said, Grandma, what did you give them? Like, how did you help them? And she said, Oh, I had all these different formulas depending on the age of the child. And I said, Okay, what was in those formulas? Do you remember? It's like, what kinds of things did you use? And she said, Oh, Marg, I don't remember. Because when she quit doing medicine, she let all of that go. But she did say that they used oatmeal, they used, I mean, if there were other kinds of milk available, like not just cow's milk, I guess she probably used some cow's milk. They used lamb broth. I thought that was interesting. That was a hugely important thing that she did that no one else, no one else had taken on.

Dick DeRyk
Years later, a renowned doctor told a convention of pediatricians that when he was growing up in Nut Mountain, there was a Doctor Warren in Kelvington who had a reputation for being able to diagnose and treat just about anything, except infants who were not doing well. He pointed out that in the day, the only “outside” doctor who treated patients in that region was Sigga Houston in far-away Yorkton. Infants sent to her were put on a formula that included gruel, or porridge, made from Robinson’s Groats – and the babies soon thrived.

Robinson’s Groats, by the way, was whole grain sold in tins that stated the contents are for “nursing mothers, weaned infants and invalids”, and was imported from England. Family legend has it that the groats she used in the formula she gave babies was made with oats.

While seeing patients, Sigga also looked after the office duties. Bills were sent out once a year, after harvest. Their office was only two blocks from their home on Fourth Avenue, and Sigga

walked home each day to see Stuart after school, give him an apple, and send him out to play before returning to the office for a couple more hours. After the Second World War, more doctors came to Yorkton, and Sigga worked only mornings.

Margaret Houston
The phone would ring and at all times of the day, of course, because in those days the four people in the practice or whatever there were, usually about four, each would take their own calls at night. They didn't share call at night, they certainly didn't share call with a big group. And so the phone would ring at night and it would ring at any hour of the night, and they would always ask for the doctor. And the doctor was not my grandmother. And I remember saying to her, Grandma, you're a doctor too. She just blew that off and she said, Oh, they want, they want CJ, they want the doctor. And they did, of course, because he went out and did house call, lots of them.

They had a cottage at York Lake. He loved it. And it was the only place he could get away because there wasn't a phone out there. And so he could go out there and nobody could get at him. And if they couldn't get him, they'd get one of the other partners. And so he loved going out there. So she and she went out to humor him, but she was never a huge fan of it. You know, it was kind of small and hot, and you know, you had to cook on a hot plate in the kitchen, but he loved it.

Dick DeRyk
She continued to look after the business affairs of the office until she and CJ both retired after 50 years of practice, both of them then 75 years of age.

Well, actually, not. CJ was 75, and most of Sigga's official documents said she was 75. But she was 82. You see, back in 1926 when they were married, it was unacceptable for a woman to marry a man seven years younger than she. Only when she turned 90 in 1983 did she admit her true age for the first time, her son Stuart recalled. She even took her pension payments seven years late, pride coming before money, he wrote.

They had served Yorkton patients for half a century, first the two of them, later joined by others, including their son Stuart for almost 10 years, as well as Doctors Harry Crossley and Ivan Daunt.

They moved to a Saskatoon nursing home in 1984, where CJ died in May of 1986, at the age of 86. Sigga vowed she was planning to live to be 100 years old. She did that, and more, dying at the age of 102 in January of 1996. Both are buried in the Yorkton city cemetery.

Both Denmark and Iceland took note of the medical work of Dr. Sigga Houston. In 1969 she received the Royal Danish Medal, and then in 1987 she received the Order of the Falcon with Knights Cross from Iceland.

As Margaret mentioned earlier, Stan notes that her Icelandic heritage was not a topic of family conversation.

Stan Houston
We never heard about that from her. I think she lost a lot of her Icelandic language. It was much more my dad that was that was focused on this on this status and this connection. I don't think he went back to any kind of Icelandic reunions. She had an Icelandic housekeeper for many years

who would make vinarterta. But vinarterta isn't even an Icelandic thing, it's a Canadian Icelandic thing, as I also learned later. You know, I kind of think maybe that she left all that behind along with her poor rural roots which she never talked about and never, you know she'd never say we had to get up at five in the morning to milk the cows or, she didn't talk about that stuff at all, she never talked about how she had to serve breakfast before she'd head off to normal school. Everything I've learned about that I've learned from my dad.

Dick DeRyk
Stuart and Mary and their children were close with Sigga and CJ. And the grandparents left them with many memories.

Stan Houston
We saw them quite a bit. We'd go back, spent some a little bit of time at York Lake where they had the cottage, and I painted their house one time, which was probably a bad decision on their part. Stayed with them for a month when I was in grade 12. For many years, we had a family holiday at Waskesiu. We'd be up there for three weeks, and I think usually they would come for two weeks at that time. And we'd golf every day. Grandpa, you know, he was kind of a gadget enthusiast and so he had bought a ski boat. I was the only one in the family who water skied. That was a win-win thing. Yeah, we saw quite a bit of them.

Margaret Houston
My parents were advocates of sending us to visit the grandparents, and we were the only grandchildren. And Stan and I were the oldest, so we spent more time there than the younger two boys did. Yes, so I would, they'd put me on the bus to Yorkton and I would get off at the other end, and I'd spend, you know, Easter with them or a week with them in the summer several times. I mean, I was there a lot.

Stan Houston
She must have had extraordinary determination to get from a dirt poor farm around Wynyard to medical school at a time when there were so few women in medical school. But she certainly had very fixed ideas about all kinds of things. But from the point of view of grandchildren, she was mostly just a sweet doting grandmother and this kind of career determination was just not something that was obvious to us.

Margaret Houston
She loved her family. She only had one child. When he was born she was in her mid to late 30s. At that point, women just didn't do that. You know, the concept was that once he hit 30, you were you were an elderly mother for the first time. And so she had one child and that was it. But she did have breast cancer in her 40s, and I think that probably kind of finished that. Although she did extremely well, obviously, living to 103, or 102 and a half.
She was a worrier. She was a massive worrier. So I think that goes along with all of her organizational talents, probably. And probably now we'd say that she had an anxiety disorder, but she couldn't let you go out of the house without knowing that you had adequate mitts and toques on and jackets and stuff. And I remember my dad once saying when he was young and he wanted to go out, he was going to go out to York Lake and band some birds. And I guess he was driving at that point or biking, maybe even, who knows, wasn't that far. And she was just totally snitting about it. And then she said, Now, don't fall out of a tree, Stuart. Yeah, family was hugely important

to her, kids, grandkids, there were only four grandkids because dad was an only child, of course. And so we were hugely important.

She kept in close touch with her sisters, and they saw each other really quite frequently, all considered. One lived in Winnipeg, one in Vancouver. The food was always impeccable. I mean, I remember going out with her. There was somebody who sold raspberries on the side of York Lake. There was a direct route from closer to town that went by the old hospital. And then there was another way that you could go out that was farther out east, and it was sort of more over by where the park was and stuff. Anyway, there was this woman who sold raspberries and strawberries and whatnot. I remember going out with her and having this huge bucket of raspberries in the back of the car. And she said to Stan and me, Oh, eat as much as you want. And so Stan and I managed to eat about half a bucket of raspberries, and she was shocked.

She loved the cooking and the canning organization of it. And of course, they did have a maid-cook person, and she would have done a lot of that and did a lot of the major meal prep. But my grandmother was right in there too. And they always ate off spode, s-p-o-d-e, china, bone china, English bone china. And silver, and they had a sterling silver tea service right behind my grandmother. And so after dinner, the tea would be in the teapot and it would all be poured and passed around the table. And my grandfather would serve, you know, he'd have the stack of English bone china plates at the end of the table, and he'd serve everybody a little bit of this, a little bit of that, whatever you'd like, and pass it around. It was, you know, linen napkins, linen tablecloths. Oh my god.

Dick DeRyk
I take it your life isn't quite like that.

Margaret Houston
No, but I have her spode. I have her spode and it comes out for occasions. My husband goes, Oh, do we need to have that out? And I'm like, Yep, we do. She liked the nice things in life and she looked after them. At Christmas, they'd come with the car full of wrapped presents and full of food that she and their cook, their maid, had made. And it was like the big opening to the Christmas season, the crunchy snow, the bitter cold in Saskatoon, obviously, right before Christmas, and all these wonderful things just coming out of that car into the house. And she would have ridden in the back of the car wearing, she always had beautiful, beautiful clothes, and she would have, but she would have ridden in the car and she didn't want to crumple her lovely suit. So she would have her slip on and then she'd have to quickly put the skirt on before she came in.

So when they came at Christmas and they'd bring boxes, boxes, like you know, people you didn't ever throw away cookie tin in those days, right? And so she had these cookie tins that she would have filled up with special cookies and special chocolate orange cake, and there was always a vinarterta, always a vinarterta. Grandma's favorite, she always made at Christmas time for the bird watchers on the Boxing Day bird count on the 26th of December. She'd be in Saskatoon visiting us for Christmas, and she always made a big pot of Icelandic bean soup with lamb and beef in it. So it was like a Senate bean soup, you know, but it it was basically lamb and beef and onions and beans and broth and very nourishing and hot for the birders coming in out of the cold. In her personal life, the things that she loved, she loved nice things.

They built a house in the 30s. It was the only housing start in Yorkton that year, apparently. And the craftsmanship was beautiful on it. You know, it had leaded glass doors on the interior, and it had it had a little porch where you could take off your coats and hang them, and it even had a little bathroom on the side of the front porch because she was very into cleanliness. And you'd want to wash your hands before you come in. It was a really nice house. We wouldn't think of it as big now, but it was big for its time. And she did interesting things with that house. You know, I mean, all the other houses were sort of four square, but that house has kind of a swoopy arc over the driveway, you know, like a portico over the driveway. And the walkway wasn't just a straight walkway out to the curb, it was a curved walkway. And as kids, we always loved it because it was, it was just fun and different. And she had the cement steps, and she always, and it was wonderful for kids to play in that yard. And then around the back, it was her garden. And she never had vegetables. She had flowers. She'd hire in the summer a kid, a high school kid. She'd have that kid for several years until he went off to do whatever. Called a boy, I guess, now in recollection. And her garden was fabulous. It was just beautiful at all seasons. She didn't enter the gardening competitions in Yorkton anymore because it wouldn't have been fair. But she loved her garden and she loved her pansies. And she had morning glories growing over the back window, the back window of the dining room, the breakfast room, the dining room. And in the summer there were morning glories and birds all the time, of course. And they grilled on the patio. I don't know that very many people had a patio in those days, but they had a brick patio and they would grill on this little sort of hibachi grill thing on the patio. She loved her garden.

She loved her house. And she, once it was decorated, she always pulled all the curtains because she didn't want to fade her wallpaper or furniture, which was carefully chosen. So that furniture was as good the day they left that house as when they moved it in, I'm sure. They had some nice, nice paintings, you know, were really nice quality paintings, and that was the main decoration. And upstairs, there was a guest bedroom, my dad's bedroom, their bedroom, one bathroom, and then a maid's room. And the maid's room had a little porch looking out over the garage so the maid could go out and sit in an evening. And back in the day, the maid did not really have a lot of room.

There was a huge social life going on in Yorkton at that point, and they were all booked in for parties, numerous, numerous events in a week. But I remember people coming to the house and she would serve them cigarettes. She had a beautiful silver, sterling silver cigarette holder. And she would walk around offering them to people. And she would smoke the occasional cigarette, but she certainly wasn't a smoker. She didn't want smoke in her house, really. And she always had, you know, the mints and the candy and the flowers and all that. She did a lovely job.

Dick DeRyk
That seems kind of counter-everything these days for a doctor to be handing out cigarettes.
Margaret Houston
Oh gosh. Cigarettes. Well, you know, doctors used to be in advertisements for cigarettes. So that wasn't a surprise. My dad became very anti-smoking when he started realizing what was going on. And certainly by that point they weren't handing out cigarettes. But you know, in the 40s, oh yeah, you bet.

Stan Houston

Along with her single-mindedness, she was able to believe if she wanted something to be true, as far as she was concerned, it was true. She could often manage that in the face of the facts. She was kind of a worrier for sure. Day-to-day things, she would always kind of imagine the worst. In a way, there was just a sort of humour to everybody. Everyone would kid her about this and she would accept that. But that was a very recurrent theme.

She had pretty old-fashioned ideas, ironically, about the role of women. Old-fashioned ideas about dating. I can remember her saying how a girl should always have some money in her shoe when they went out on a date because you never knew what could happen. And you know, that kind of almost Victorian attitude. And certainly she might have differences of opinion with my grandpa about lots of things, but he was absolutely, in the end, he was the boss. I believe in the early years, they quickly realized they couldn't operate together. Apparently, they were incompatible in the operating room.

Dick DeRyk
Nancy Morrison, too, was subject to Sigga's traditional values and attitudes that Stan described.

Nancy Morrison
Well, it was the same as my mom too, you know, when you're growing up. You know, your mom's the one doing all the slugging stuff, you know, the washing the dishes and cooking and all of that. And dad was much more I mean, I wanted dad to sign my report cards. Because his signature was wonderful.

And as soon as I got to university, I began to realize really how wonderful my mom was. And how wonderful Sigga was. And people were talking, role models was sort of a new phrase at that time. Boy I've had two role models. I wrote a letter from Vancouver to Sigga. I said there's this term called role models, and I really want you to know what a role model you are for me, you and my mother. As soon as she got the letter, she phoned mother and read it to her. And it was true. I mean she could do everything. My own parents, they always said there's nothing you can't do. And there was exhibit A.

She was very disappointed in me years later when I was giving my women's lib speeches. And the reporters picked up on them sometimes. I guess mother showed her one of the reports where I was counseling women that marriage wasn't necessarily a beneficial move for women at that point in time, given the law. It didn't automatically give women the assets and what have you. And Sigga was appalled. Oh she said, oh tell Nancy, oh, I hope she doesn't really believe that. I mean, there was no question here she had the most loving, generous mate. I was dealing with a whole bunch of mates in my practice that weren't CJ Houston. And the law took quite a while to catch up. She kept up to date on everything.

Dick DeRyk
Was she an influence on your dad and you and your siblings to get into medicine? Because the two of them, your dad and three of the four of your siblings, are all in medicine.

Margaret Houston
Yep. And two out of three of my kids are doctors as well, and those are the only ones.

Dick DeRyk
Just a minute now.

Stan Houston
Margaret's, her two kids, one went into radiology and one went into family medicine. Our kids didn't do that, but they didn't stray. Our daughter's a vet, and our son is a lawyer. But oddly enough, if you look for it, you'll find him cited fairly often in the Globe and Mail, for example. He's the policy and advocacy advisor for Doctors Without Borders Canada.

Margaret Houston
Staying with them, we were always very aware of the phone calls and the interactions. My grandfather would take us to the hospital. We'd go to the office. I went to the office, you know, I went and I don't know, cleaned out files for her and stuff like that. So I felt like we were living it along with them. I think it was kind of like the family business. We were all exposed to all of that stuff all that time. And certainly she is a woman encouraging another woman, young woman, was obviously a strong influence. Yeah. And when I had my medical school interview, this was back in the days when they could ask you anything, right? So there I'm in my interview, which is critical to get into University of Saskatchewan at that point, probably still now. And they said, Well, how do you think you could manage a family and be a doctor at the same time? And I said, My grandmother did. Done. That just that was it.

Dick DeRyk
Was she overt about her influence or subtle, or was it just kind of...

Margaret Houston
Oh, she was never subtle. if she thought you should do something, she'd tell you you should do it. But she never said, kids, you need to go into medicine or anything like that. I mean, you know, we chose what we wanted to, but she was very happy when we did. And when we moved to the Mayo Clinic, she was really happy. She thought that was just, you know, the best place to be. They'd been there for conferences and whatnot.