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Etta Lund MD, Willows Pioneer Country Doctor



By Irma West, MD

WHEN DR. ETTA LUND ARRIVED at Willows, California, on September 6, 1906, the thermometer read 114 degrees. She would have preferred to take the train back to her home town, San Francisco, but her husband, Charles Lund, MD, was establishing their practice here and was at the depot to meet her. Thus began 54 years doctoring in and about Willows.

Dr. Etta was born in 1879 in San Francisco as Henrietta Cleophea Barbara Steinegger. Her father, Henry Steinegger, was a skilled lithographer whose works were displayed at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, and the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. At age 14, he had come from Switzerland to Philadelphia, where he trained as a lithographer. Dr. Etta's mother, Henrietta Widmer, an accomplished pianist and linguist, was of also of Swiss descent.

Dr. Etta studied music and language abroad before majoring in Latin, physics and chemistry at San Francisco's Polytechnic High School. She passed the medical school entrance exam and enrolled in Cooper Medical College (soon to be Stanford) in 1899 before finishing high school. After graduating in 1903, she interned at Children's Hospital in San Francisco and married a classmate, Charles Lund, MD, in 1904.

On April 18, 1906, Dr. Etta was shopping in San Francisco and stayed overnight to catch the morning train. She survived the earthquake and joined other doctors, many from an American Medical Association convention, setting up improvised hospitals. She served two weeks in one of them. Her parents and family suffered losses but survived.

At Willows the young couple settled into an apartment with no indoor plumbing and limited electricity. There were no screened windows or doors anywhere. Patients laughed when Dr. Etta tried to convince them that insects carry disease, one of the many public health issues she took on to educate the community.

Transportation was primitive and precarious. The hilly dirt roads were slippery when wet and dusty when dry. At first Dr. Etta traveled by bicycle, then by a horse that loved to gallop, rattling the medicine bottles in her saddlebags, and sometimes breaking them. In 1906, she and Dr. Charles acquired one of the first cars in town, a one cylinder Cadillac for \$600. Gas was 7 cents a gallon. Doors, windshield, and top were absent. Dr. Etta was driving the Cadillac up a hill in the rain when a cow appeared at the top sliding toward her. It righted itself just before hitting her.

Her next car was an electric Studebaker which she charged at a PG&E station every 25 to 30 miles. Then came a Ford sedan with headlights that shone brighter as speed increased. Dr. Etta was returning from delivering a baby about midnight when the Ford's headlights failed.

She had only a box of matches. She lit one and walked ahead, memorizing the road, then returning and driving as she remembered. She repeated the process for miles before reaching a camp where she saw a light in a tent. As she approached a man emerged and said "Thank God you are here, my wife is very ill. We have been trying to reach you".

On a stormy night, while her husband was using their car, Dr. Etta received an urgent call from an outlying ranch. She hired a driver. They became mired in the mud about a quarter mile from their destination. She walked, falling deeper in the mud, as she spotted a tent where five men were living, two of them suffering from respiratory infections. She took care of the sick and visited, laughing about her muddy appearance, until the rancher and his horses extricated the car. Her good humor made a strong impression on one of these men.

Drs. Etta and Charles were appointed County Physicians in 1909. The Glenn County Hospital, built in 1897, was used as a home for indigents. The Lunds acquired a room there to care for accident victims from the farms.

However, their first case was a young man who had placed himself on the railroad tracks before an oncoming train. Surviving but with both legs mangled he was carried to the hospital about 3 a.m. An old dining room table was pressed into service. As the clothing embedded in his legs was peeled off, Dr. Etta gave the anesthetic with one hand and held the instruments with the other, as Dr. Charles amputated both legs. The patient recovered without infection.

All deliveries were made at home. The charge was \$25. Equipment the doctors carried included a sterilizer designed by Dr. Charles. It was a wash boiler with a spigot. Items to be sterilized were placed on a mesh frame above the water line. After adding water and tying the lid, the sterilizer would be heated on a wood stove. Other items carried were chloroform, ether, instruments, gowns and sheets (gloves were not mentioned).

Surgery was most often performed at home on the kitchen table. Once a milk shed was selected, because it was the cleanest place to remove a ruptured appendix and treat a liver abscess in a child. Dr. Purkett, another pioneer women doctor, gave the anesthetic while the Drs. Charles and Etta operated. The child survived. Sometimes family members had to help. A few of them fainted and had to be left on the floor until the surgery was completed.

The Sacramento Valley Irrigation Company came to Willows in 1909, and Drs. Etta and Charles became its contract doctors. For each of several hundred employees they received \$1 a month — for which they provided medical care, medicines and a place for sick patients to stay. They rented a room in a residence for the laborers and took the clerical workers into their home, now a large house with upstairs bedrooms fitted for patients.

A most serious problem, particularly for outdoor workers near northern California rivers, was malaria. Quinine was prescribed, often as an inunction to be rubbed into the skin of the elbow and groin.

Drs. Etta and Charles decided to go their separate ways.

Just before the 1918 influenza epidemic struck, Dr. Etta opened a 12-bed hospital, the Willows Sanitarium. The Red Cross took over and increased its capacity as patients overwhelmed it. Dozens of

beds were set up in hotels and other locations. Dr. Etta stayed without pay, not removing her clothes or going to bed for 14 days.

A young mother came to the hospital in childbirth with influenza pneumonia. As she lay dying, Dr. Etta delivered a 4-pound baby girl. The father begged Dr. Etta to keep the baby. She asked how he had selected her as worthy of adopting his child. He asked her to recall the night she came to a tent, all muddy, to care for sick men. He was one of them and he was very impressed with her ability and kindness.

Thanks to expert medical care by Dr. Etta, the infant survived to become her daughter, Rosalie. She provided the doctor with three grandchildren.

Dr. Etta closed her hospital in 1926 because too many patients failed to pay their bills. She retired from her office in the late 50's but continued for a few years as City Health Officer and Medical Consultant to the Public Assistance Program. She died in 1972 at 93 years.

I wish to thank Robert Steinegger, Dr. Etta Lund's nephew, for providing me with personal information and these articles:

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