



Buffalo Tales



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Ravenna's Doctor Dickinson: 3,500 Babies and More On the Way By Valerie L. Vierk

On July 5, 1878, Louis Everett Dickinson was born in tiny St. James, Nebraska, in Cedar County, in the northeastern part of the state. His parents were William Louis and Mary (Ziegler) Dickinson. He joined four (possibly more) siblings at home. As a boy he loved hunting and fishing. After graduation from St. James High School, he attended nearby Sioux City, Iowa, Medical College, and graduated in 1904. The young man was now a medical doctor and was also licensed to perform surgery. In 1904 he moved to the small town of Rockville, Nebraska, in Sherman County, and began his practice. He boarded at the residence of Chris Nielson, but also rented a room in the local Wickstrom Hotel where he had his office.

In 1904 Dr. Dickinson purchased his first automobile, a 2-cylinder Brush. These new fangled contraptions were often unreliable, especially in cold Nebraska winters, and if they failed, the doctor would resort to more conventional means of reaching his patients, like horse and buggy. Back then, the doctors often traveled to their patients as opposed to the methods of today where the patients go to the doctors.

Shortly after moving to Rockville, Dr. Dickinson met Venla Lund, who had grown up in Dannebrog. She also had been boarding at the residence of Chris Nielson while she taught school at Souleville, near Rockville. On August 9, 1906, Dr. Dickinson and Miss Lund were married. Two children were eventually born to this marriage—Louis E. Dickinson, Jr. in 1910 and Janet in 1913.



Venla and Dr. Dickinson, circa 1906

In December 1916, the Dickinsons moved to Ravenna, ten miles to the southwest. The reason was that one of Ravenna's physicians, Dr. John H. Penn, had suddenly died of intestinal cancer in November. Dr. Dickinson purchased Dr. Penn's library and medical instruments. In Ravenna, Dr. Dickinson set up his office downtown, in the rooms above the Macomber drug store. He formed a partnership with Dr. George Buol, who had grown up in Randolph, Cedar County, where Dr. Dickinson had also spent some time. Dr. Dickinson was eight years older, and had encouraged Buol to enter medical school.

Dr. Dickinson, affectionately called "Doc Dick" by many of the town residents, immediately became active in the civic affairs of Ravenna. He was elected to the city council in 1917 and in 1918 began his long term as city physician. He was also active in the school board, Congregational church, and many other organizations. He was also an avid hunter and

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Director's Report

Season's Greetings to you!

Fall is right around the corner. The Trails & Rails Museum is so pretty this time of year. The trees are changing color and sprinkling their leaves around our many historic buildings. If you haven't seen it, now is the time!

The day trip to the North Platte area was well attended. Because of the wonderful feedback we received from the participants, we are starting to plan future trips. If you have suggestions, please let us know!

The Kearney Area Community Foundation, along with two of their clients, has awarded us \$1750 to go towards our archival needs. We will soon receive much needed material, including acid-free tissue paper and archival boxes.

Due to UNK's work study program and the Experience Works program, we have four wonderful people helping us this fall. Donna assists with day-to-day operations, tours, and archive inquiries. Al is our handy-man. He has fixed broken railings, the mail box, repainted a few things; and overall has been a huge help to our grounds. Alysia is tackling the inventory binders in-between giving tours. Laura will be joining us very soon. She will be helping with tours, and prepping for our Annual Christmas Tree Walk.

The church has seen four weddings in the last few weeks. It is such a beautiful setting out here for such occasions!!!!

Check out our web site for new pages! We even have a wish list now. You, as a member, know the importance of volunteers and donations to sustain non-profits. You will be hearing from us soon about the upcoming plans for the new property.

Please let me know if you ever have any questions, concerns, or comments. That is what we are here for!

Have a great Fall season.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Murrish,
Executive Director

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fisherman. He also had a large gun collection.

In October 1918, the terrible Spanish influenza "flu" epidemic struck Ravenna. At first people were told it was just another strain of the old ailment, "the grippe." Simple precautions were issued, such as getting enough rest, but when people started dying, it became evident that this was a much more virulent strain of the old scourge. Ravenna was hit hard by the epidemic. For a week in mid-October the local schools were closed to try to contain the epidemic. In the same month, seven people from the community died. There would be many more before spring finally arrived.

On November 11, 1918, the terrible war in Europe ended. It was tragic that the people could not celebrate its end free of the dreaded influenza that was lurking in their little town. They did celebrate, however. In November, young Dr. Buol had been sent to Fort Riley, Kansas, to work in the medical corps, but when the war ended, he returned to Ravenna in mid-December because his services were much needed there too. Then on December 21, 1918, a new tragedy struck the little town. The horrifying news flashed from the local depot that Dr. Buol and his nineteen-year-old driver, Albert Kocherscheidt, had been killed at Sweetwater, four miles west of Ravenna, when their car was hit by pas-

senger train #40 as it headed east. Dr. Buol was only 32.

During the grueling months of ministering to the influenza victims, Dr. Dickinson worked himself to the point of exhaustion. There were three other physicians in town, but there was no shortage of sick people for them to treat. Finally, Dr. Dickinson fell ill himself. The April 4 edition of the *Ravenna News* stated he was ill, but not considered serious. Editor Cass wrote, "For the past six months he has worked almost to the limit of human endurance and it is not surprising that he has finally had to lay up for rest and repairs. Periods of sixty hours on the go without rest other than he could secure riding in his car between patients, has not been an uncommon experience for him, and for the past three weeks he has scarcely averaged two hours rest in bed per day."

Two weeks later the same newspaper reported that the doctor and his wife had gone to Omaha so he could recuperate "and try to regain his own equilibrium." After a few days in Omaha the couple would be journeying to the lake regions of Minnesota.

When "Decoration Day" came to the little community on May 30, there were several new graves to be decorated, almost all children or young adults. Twenty-five people from the community and immediate area had died of the flu, three of them as late as April. Additionally, four had died of pneumonia. About half of the victims were buried in Ravenna's Highland cemetery.

In fall 1919 Dr. Dickinson hired local carpenters, Jim Macek and Tom Suchy to build a new house for his family. It would be one of the finest in town. It was a two-story house with stucco exterior and large rooms. The carpenters also built a matching garage for what would house over a dozen cars the doctor wore out in his 44-year-practice in Ravenna. The doctor and his family moved into their new house in March 1920.

Prior to the 1940s, most babies were born at home, and the doctor would travel to the homes to assist in the births in all kinds of weather. The winter of 1924-25 was a severe one in the Ravenna area. The December 12, 1924 edition of the *Ravenna News* gave an account of the activities of this very cold and snowy week. The sub-title of the article was: "Stork Has No Regard for Storms." Editor Cass began, humorous as often, "Doctors find that the stork has a very unpleasant habit of getting busy during bad storms." A few days previous, Dr. Dickinson had received an urgent call from a couple by the last name of Gilming, who lived seven or eight miles south of town; the doctor's services were badly needed. He started out by motor truck and accompanied by three men armed with shovels to scoop snow if needed. They tried, but the truck soon bogged down. Somebody got to a telephone and called for reinforcements of the four-legged kind. Finally Lee Miner, who lived a mile south of town, volunteered, and drove a big span of horses into town. The article didn't state what kind of conveyances the horses were pulling, but after three to four hours they got the doctor to the Gilming place, "beating the stork by a safe margin and everything turned out lovely." The doctor had barely gotten back to town when he was called again, more stork business, this time to the George Johnson home.

Three days later Dr. Dickinson was called to Boelus as the stork seemingly had invested in a pair of long johns. This time the doctor took the train from Ravenna to St. Michael, eight miles to the east, then a team of horses took him the rest of the way north to Boelus. This final leg of the trip took about two hours.

On the 26th of same month, at 7:00 a.m., Mrs. Margaret Pruner of Poole called the doctor as her daughter-in-law, Goldie, (Mrs. Clayton Pruner) was going into labor. Fortunately, three other women were in attendance, and by the time the doctor arrived by sled it was 2:30 p.m., and little Bruce had already made his appearance. The senior Mrs. Pruner met the doctor at the door with the statement, "You might as well go back because we don't need you now." Mrs. Pruner sometimes accompanied the doctor as a mid-wife; thus she evidently felt comfortable showing her annoyance at his tardiness. History doesn't record the doctor's reply, but he was always a gentleman and most likely just smiled and said the snow was deep. Already that month, the Ravenna area had recorded 22 inches of

snow and temperatures of -18 and -24 degrees.

The Dickinson children graduated from Ravenna High School in 1928 and 1931. Louis Jr. entered the University of Nebraska Medical school and became a physician. He served as a flight physician in World War II, and achieved the rank of Lt. Colonel. For five or six years after the war, he practiced with his father in Ravenna, then moved to McCook where he practiced for many years. His son, Louis E. III, also became a physician.

Winona (Duncan) Snell, remembers Dr. Dickinson treating her when she sustained third degree burns in the summer of 1934 or 1935. While carrying a heavy boiler of water to do the washing, some of the hot water splashed on Winona's lower legs. Her parents were working in the fields, not aware of her accident, and after several hours of suffering,



Railroad retirement party at Ravenna (February 1961). Dr. Dickinson is seated at far left with black tie

a teenage friend took Winona to Dr. Dickinson. He advised her to go home, make a big pot of tea, then tear up an old bed sheet into two inch strips, soak them in the tea, and keep these strips on her burns. Winona did as he instructed, and the tea was soothing and healing. She was very thankful to her young beau and to Dr. Dickinson!

Three or four years later, after Winona had graduated from high school, and was teaching school, she went to Dr. Dickinson to have him remove her tonsils as she frequently suffered from sinus trouble and colds. The doctor agreed and removed her tonsils while she sat in the chair! In August 2007, Winona also stated that she liked Dr. Dickinson and he had a pleasant manner with his patients.

In March 1948, a couple from north of Ravenna came to see Dr. Dickinson for a prenatal check. The baby was not due for a few days, but while in the doctor's office, the baby decided it was time to enter the world. The little girl was born in the office, and two hours later she and her parents returned to their home to join two other sisters. One can imagine the surprise of the baby sitters when the parents returned so quickly with a new baby!

The doctor also served as company physician for the local Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroad for many years. In this capacity he was required to administer physicals to the newly hired men or every two years for the ones already in the employ of the railroad.

Herbert Nolda, who began employment with the railroad in December 1945, as a brakeman, received his initial physical from a doctor in Alliance, but he wryly remembers the railroaders speaking of "the hunting and fishing physical" they would receive from Dr. Dickinson. (Later, Herbert would receive his 2-year physicals from Dr. Dickinson or his son.) In those days medicine was much more primitive, and the railroad men joked that if you had a pulse you were accepted as healthy. The doctor would check blood pressure, listen to your heart and lungs, look at your throat and ears, and most importantly, check

your eyes. The railroad was very concerned that the men could see well, and especially that they weren't color blind as they would have to read the colored signal panels. After the physical came the best part: the doctor would pour a little shot of bourbon for you and himself, and you would sit and talk about hunting and fishing for a while.

In the September 11, 1952, edition of the *Ravenna News*, editor Lyman P. Cass, printed an article on the "publicity shy" Dr. Dickinson. The title of the article read: "Dr. Dick" Has 15 Five-Generation Families As Patients; Baby Crop Passed 3500 Mark." The doctor was also pictured. Cass stated that now with his long practice in Ravenna, the doctor had arrived at the total of treating five generations of 15 families, and a larger number of four generation families. As for the three generation group, he doesn't even try to keep track. Cass further stated that the doctor would celebrate 50 years of practice in the Rockville/Ravenna area in two years. While Dr. Dickinson was proud of that record, he was more proud of his "baby crop" of 3,500, which would most likely reach 4,000 before he "hangs up his medicine case and retires." Cass stated that the doctor would be 75 the next year, but still carried the full load of his regular daily practice.

The editor continued with the statement that the doctor could tell stories of kitchen table operations, murders, epidemics and accidents that "would shame a dime store novel." The article also mentioned the doctor's trinkets in a jar, which were removed from his patients throughout the years. These were splinters, pencils, metal fragments, hooks and barbs, glass, shot bullets and various other objects.

In early 1953 Dr. Dickinson was named Nebraska's "Doctor of the Year." In this capacity he would represent Nebraska, by appointment of the governor, at the International Medical Congress in Richmond, Virginia, in April. To honor their well respected doctor, Ravenna hosted a large "testimonial dinner" and send-off at the local city auditorium in April. The Lions Club sponsored the event, and a crowd of 331 guests partook of a three-course meal, served by the local Rebekah ladies. Guests from several towns, large and small, were invited. Reverend Engel of the McCook Congregational church, a family friend, paid tribute to Dr. Dickinson for his lifetime of service to the Rockville and Ravenna communities.

In May 1954 Dr. Dickinson and his wife journeyed to Lincoln to receive his 50 year service button from the Nebraska Medical Association. Eight other physicians in Nebraska were also to receive their buttons, but only five would be attending. Of the eight, only Dr. Dickinson and another were still in active practice.

On August 27, 1955, Mrs. Dickinson died at the age of 69 in a hospital in Rochester, Minnesota, from complication from asthma. She was buried in Ravenna's Highland cemetery. Dr. Dickinson continued his practice until 1960 when he was 82. (Most likely he was partially retired before then, as there were two other physicians in town at that time.) He suffered a stroke in 1960 and his daughter, Janet, came to live with him. His health was poor after the stroke, but the cause of his death a year later on July 10, 1961, was listed as gastric hemorrhage. He had just passed his 83rd birthday.

He was "laid out" in a little alcove on the east side of his living room. Just before the funeral, his pall bearers carried him across the street to the Congregational church for the services. Local pastor, Reverend Ernest Maedche officiated. He was buried beside his wife.

Besides ministering to the people of Ravenna for years, often without pay, Dr. Dickinson also found time to give generously of his time to many worthy town organizations. He was responsible for approaching a dying man, W.H. Bohning, to ask if he would bequeath his estate for the building of the city auditorium. He agreed, and the auditorium was completed in 1934. It is still in use today. Dr. Dickinson was a wise leader of our little town for 45 years. In 2007, there are still many people in Ravenna who remember the good doctor, including some Baby Boomers who were quite small when he died.

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Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor

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We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

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