HEALING IN KANSAS

By Jerry W. Knudson

Editor's Note: The author earned a Ph.D in history at the University of Virginia and taught journalism 32 years, mainly at Temple University. His most recent book is In the News. American Journalists View Their Craft.

Colby in the late 1930s was slowly recovering from the Great Depression but the great, billowing dust clouds still rolled periodically down the great plains in all their fury. As a child in Rexford, I remember tri-cycling down to the end of the block, wet handkerchief over my nose and mouth, and hurrying home before it really got bad.

In this bittersweet setting, there is one person I remember more than other. He was Dr. Jensen, family doctor to the community whose modest office was above the 5 and 1 O-cent store on north Franklin. I do not know what his first name was--he was always simply Dr. Jensen. He charged two dollars a visit (remember it was the tail end of the Depression) and he did everything from delivering babies to straightening out ingrown toenails. In emergencies he would make house calls, but usually patients were glad to come to his office, which displayed a small reproduction of the famous Norman Rockwell painting which showed a family doctor examining with his stethoscope the "heart of a rag doll brought to him by a distressed little girl who thought something was wrong. He put her fears to rest, surely the goal of all medicine.

That was the essence of Dr. Jensen himself, who if push came to shove would brook no nonsense. I remember when my mother, Mabelle Edith Cousins Knudson, was having a difficult time with menopause. I was in the back of the office, but heard her yell at Dr. Jensen, "I would just as soon slit your throat as look at you!" He simply said in his calm, judicious voice, "Now, now let's not get carried away," and listened to her--an increasingly lost art in all walks of life. My mother went home feeling better, having unburdened herself.

I myself owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Jensen. While I was a student at the Gem High School (1946-1950) and we were playing Levant, a basketball shattered my left eyeglass and I went crashing to the floor. To indicate the community concern so prevalent in the Gem community and throughout much of the Midwest, someone got me to Dr, Jensen's office where he met us, and someone else called my brother Jack in Colby (he now lives in Atwood). Amid all the fuss, Dr. Jensen, who probably had never done such a thing before in his practice, calmly and meticulously picked out with tweezers every bit of glass embedded in that eye and may have saved its vision.

Perhaps one can romanticize what some would call the country doctor, but I know from this and other testimonials that Dr. Jensen was a beloved member of the community. Perhaps after his death the highest tribute to him came from my mother who, suffering from incorrectly diagnosed gall bladder trouble, blurted out, "I will never forgive Dr. Jensen for dying!"

So where does all this fit into the scheme of things? First of all, Kansas in the field of medicine and otherwise deserves a better reputation. We are not exactly a tourist mecca, not having a Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls. Let's face it. We are flat. A Philadelphia friend driving on a cross-country trip tells me he closes his eyes from mid-Kansas to Denver! I try to convince him that for someone who grew r up there, flat is beautiful. You can actually see the horizon rather than across the street.

Secondly, when I meet someone new after coming to Temple University to teach

journalism in 1972, I let them know right off that I am from Kansas. "Oh," they respond, "How is Dorothy and Toto?" I am afraid we are stuck with that for all time. I want to tell them there is more to Kansas than tornadoes and The Wizard of Oz, but we bring part of that on ourselves with license plates which advertise Kansas as "The Land of Ah's."

Thirdly, I want to tell these snobs that in the late 19th century Kansas, usually remembered later only for Alf Landon's avalanche defeat, was on the cutting edge of social reform in the nation with such Populist leaders as Mary Elizabeth Lease, who exhorted crowds of farmers "to raise less corn and more hell!" because the railroads were gouging them in getting their produce to market. And there will always be a place in history for Sockless Jerry Simpson, the Populist firebrand and Representative from Kansas, who wore no socks even while on the floor of Congress, to demonstrate his solidarity with the poor. Bizarre? Yes, but many of the Populist reforms, regarded as wild-eyed in their time, later became law. Eccentrics frequently make history. As a matter of fact (and I am rather proud of this) there are more Kansans in Gerald W. Johnson's The Lunatic Fringe than persons from any other state.

Now to the medical advances made in Kansas, building on the foundations of the selfless work of Dr, Jensen and many others like him. Kansans should be proud of the Menninger brothers and their world-famous clinic in Topeka which revolutionized care for the mentally ill. Their creed was TLC (Tender Loving Care) rather than ECT (Electric Convulsive Therapy). They also helped shape perhaps the finest system of state mental hospitals in the country.

Finally, the legacy of Dr. Jensen cropped up most recently in the program devised by Dr. Franklin D. Murphy, dean of the University of Kansas Medical Center and later Chancellor of KU itself. When I was a student and instructor at KU in the 1950s, he noticed that many small towns in Kansas had no physician at all, as many medical graduates preferred to settle in cities. In an age of increasing specialization, the small-town family doctor seemed to be a dying breed. Dr. Murphy set out to remedy this. He built into the curriculum of medical students at KU a stint in the hinterlands where they would be mentored by physicians there and perhaps experience the satisfactions of practicing in the world beyond cities. It worked. Many such students liked small-town life so well they located in those that had no doctor. The Murphy Plan was so successful, in fact, that it has been adopted in other states.

Dedicated young people in small towns made quite an impression. My father, Jay Curtis Byron Knudson, for example, who suffered two heart attacks in mid-life, afterwards did not relate well to physicians. But after being examined and talking with a young KU medical student being mentored by Dr. John Neuenschwander in Hoxie, himself a fine family doctor and now retired, my father came out beaming. "I like that little guy," he said. What the Murphy Plan is doing, perhaps, in addition to providing doctors to small communities which previously had none, is reviving the institution of the family doctor--one who knows his patients and treats the whole person.