

CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Featuring:

Dr. Annie Ella (Carveth) Higbee

Written by Wanda Zenner – March 2020



Annie, born on October 11, 1864 at Port Hope, Ontario, graduated as a nurse from the Toronto General Hospital in 1888. She went on to study medicine and received her Medical Degree from the University of Toronto in 1893. After Annie contracted pneumonia, she decided to move to California to recover. While convalescing, she applied for and received her license to practice medicine in California in 1895. Shortly thereafter, Annie met and later married Professor Charles E. Higbee, a widower with a daughter, Anna Virginia, who was being raised by Charles' sister and brother-in-law, Mary and Alexander Caskey. The Higbee family was originally from Cleveland, Ohio. Annie & Charles had a son, John (Jack) Carveth who was named after Annie's father. Annie continued to practice medicine in California until 1911 at which time the family decided to relocate to Ontario. Charles' daughter, Anna, had married in 1906 and settled in the Cleveland area.

During the summer of 1911, Annie's brother, Arthur accompanied by his two sons, Rupert and Cecil, ventured to the Peace River District after hearing glowing reports on the agricultural possibilities of the area. Once Arthur had a log home built along with outbuildings, he travelled back to Ontario the following December to pack up his family to move west. To his surprise, he found the Higbee family ready for the trip as well. Annie was so taken with her brother's account of the new region that she wanted to see it for herself.

After the party arrived in Edson by train, oxen were purchased along with a caboose with a canvas top with freight racks for three more sleighs and the 250-mile trip over the infamous Edson Trail commenced on February 20, 1912. Livestock that included two horses, five cows, ducks, geese, chickens and pigs made the trip as well. The Higbee family was second in the convoy line hauling a load of freight.

On March 1, they arrived in Grande Prairie. Charles Higbee immediately filed a homestead application on NE 15-72-5-W6 in April. By June, Annie found a ½ section of land that she could purchase as a SAS (NE 36-71-4-W6 & SE 1-72-4-W6). The family was on the land in August and lived in the caboose that they had arrived in. Word quickly spread that there was a

doctor residing in the area and the Higbee's soon became invaluable members of the Community.

Annie was nearly fifty years of age when she arrived in the Peace Country and had never ridden a horse before. Usually, her pony had to be saddled as the trails were not cut wide enough for a buggy. Being the only doctor in the Glen Leslie/Bezanson area, Dr. Higbee was kept very busy as there were many serious accidents from sharp axes not to mention the time required to deliver the babies being born in the area. She pulled teeth, set broken bones, treated rickets, pneumonia, gangrenous wounds and frostbite. She travelled day or night through mosquito infested trails, blinding snowstorms and extreme cold to reach her destination. Sometimes she would be out all day on a case only to arrive home at nightfall to find someone waiting for her. Dr. Higbee diagnosed and tended to Grace Parker, the wife of Fred Parker who owned a Jewelry Store at the Bezanson Townsite. Unfortunately, Mrs. Parker passed away in 1914 and was the first to be buried at the Glen Leslie Cemetery.

In order to fulfill the requirements of proving up the parcels of land, the family lived on the homestead six months of the year and on the SAS the other six months of the year. The roof on the house on the scrip land was made of sod which proved to be an excellent source of mushrooms, lambs-quarters and

Dr. Annie Higbee

even an odd prairie chicken should it happen to roost on the ridge. However, after a 3-day rain, the sod would become so saturated that it would leak for days after the rain had stopped.

Once the Glen Leslie Church was built and used as the Somme School House, students would carry water from the well on the Higbee property that was located across the trail to the west. Charles and Annie were on hand when the local post office was being named and had their input as to what they considered to be a suitable choice. Charles taught at several rural schools when they lived in the area. As he was very musical and loved to entertain, the Higbee home was often the gathering place for get-togethers.

Dr. Higbee also worked very closely with Agnes Baird, the nurse in the hospital that was situated in a portion of Rev. Alexander Forbes' residence in Grande Prairie. Dr. Higbee, Miss Baird and Mrs. Forbes did the honors of laying the corner-stone for the new Kathryn Prittie Hospital on July 22, 1913. In 1914, Annie decided to open an office on the banks of Bear Creek in "Prairie City" as Grande Prairie was then called.

Once the land requirements were fulfilled and Charles and Annie received the patent on their properties in June 1915 and February 1916 respectively, the family moved into a portion of the Grande Prairie office. When John turned 18, he filed a homestead application on land in the Glen Leslie area after which, the family left for Toronto. However, they returned in May of 1917 at which time Dr. Higbee resumed her practice. The winter of 1918 was spent in Toronto and during that time, John enlisted with the CEF. The family moved to Toronto permanently in 1919 and Dr. Higbee joined the staff of the Toronto Western Hospital as an anesthetist. By 1921, she also assisted her brother in managing his practice when he would be on holidays at his Newcastle cabin for the summer months. She retired from the hospital in 1929 at the age of 65; however, practiced medicine in Newcastle until 1939. She purchased the "Boate House" which was originally a "Massey House" as it was built for the daughter of Daniel Massey (Massey Manufacturing fame that later became Massey

Harris). She later married "Mr. Boate". Charles had passed away in 1934 and was buried in the family plot at the Orono Cemetery.

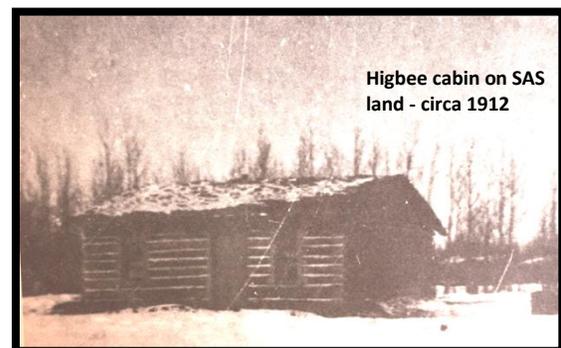
In 1956, Dr. Higbee was honored as the oldest woman graduate doctor in Canada and the oldest living surgeon on the hospital's early staff. She later unveiled a commemorative plaque for her brother, Dr. George Carveth, who was one of the founders of the Toronto Western Hospital. Once retired, she moved to Burlington. Always looking for a new challenge, Annie learned to drive a vehicle at age 70.

Dr. Annie Higbee celebrated her 100th birthday at Halton Centennial Manor in Milton, Ontario on October 11, 1964. She received a very special congratulatory letter from Queen Elizabeth as well as greetings from many others. A true pioneer in the very essence of the word and the first woman doctor in the Grande Prairie area, Dr. Annie Higbee passed away in 1965 and was buried at the Orono Cemetery.

A park in Grande Prairie was named after Dr. Higbee and has an inscription, the last of which reads as follows:

"She will long be remembered by residents of the Peace River country as the woman who would rush by horseback or buggy to the side of a stricken settler, day or night."

The property in Glen Leslie that was Annie Higbee's SAS land is still known to this day as the "Higbee Place".



Reference:

Smoky to Grande Prairie History Book
Glen Leslie Church Centennial Book
Pioneers of the Peace History Book
Familysearch.org
US 1900 Census Records

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