

# Offbeat Oregon: Old-time country doctors led colorful, interesting lives

By Finn J.D. John  
for The Sentinel

One of the most colorful and rewarding occupations in human history was that of a country doctor in the first half of the 20th century. By about 1900, breakthroughs in medical science had put some really powerful healing tools in their hands, and the profession had never been as personally or socially rewarding.

A country doctor, once he or she had settled into a practice, could count on a prominent place in society, the respect and admiration of nearly everyone, and the secure knowledge that he or she was doing real good in the world. Of course, it wasn't an easy gig. Or a safe one, as the fate of Dr. Richard Barber of Gardiner in 1904 demonstrates — Dr. Barber died of hypothermia after swimming his horse across the Siuslaw River while trying to race to the assistance of an injured patient, leaving his wife, Dr. Jean Barber, to carry on their practice alone.

But then, easy jobs tend to be boring jobs — and country-doctoring was anything but a boring job.

Dr. E.R. Huckleberry first came to Tillamook County in 1923. At the time, he was fresh from medical school, newly married, and he and his wife had a new baby.

He started out helping a local physician, Dr. Robert Boals, who'd burned his hands with an X-ray machine. After Boals' hands were better, Huckleberry launched his own practice in the nearby town of Garibaldi.

Huckleberry had little time to get settled in. Tillamook County seemed to be waiting to pounce on him. The day he arrived, it started raining, and by the time it stopped, two weeks and 40 inches later, the whole valley was under water, bridges were washed out, telecom lines were down, and his wife and child, who'd stayed in Portland while he settled in and procured a home for them, were left to wonder if he'd washed out to sea.

A day or two into the deluge, he and Boals got a house call to help a woman deliver a baby. They piled into Boals' Buick and set out, driving through the pouring rain, stopping to pick up the grandmother-to-be on the way.

Just outside town, the road was under a foot or two of water; and Boals had to get out of the car to guide Huckleberry, since he couldn't see where the road was from the driver's seat. As the two of them sloshed along, the old lady in the back seat tapped Huckleberry on the shoulder.

"Young feller, how long you been around these parts?" she asked him.

He told her it was his third day. "Then she looked at Dr. Boals, splashing along ahead of us, and said, 'Of Doc Boals, he's been froggin' around in these here parts for nigh onto 30 year,'" Huckleberry recalled, 45 years later. "I thought 'frogging' was the correct verb!"

Huckleberry would soon learn that the flood with which the county greeted him, although extreme, was not out of character. If there was a theme to the career he was embarking on, it would probably be "getting to patients through knee-deep standing water." It was, at the time, just part of life there. Over the years he got very good at not getting stuck in it.

He also soon got to where he would have made a pretty fair stock-car race driver. Members of the community, he quickly learned, expected their doctors to drive like bats out of hell when on their way to house calls.

"People who would condemn speed in any other driver took pride in how fast a doctor could get over the road, especially if he

was *their* doctor," Huckleberry wrote. "Stories of quick trips were told and retold, never losing anything in the telling."

Needless to say, over the years he wore out quite a few automobiles.

"I soon found out that most cars just wouldn't hang together under the punishment," he wrote. "After trying several makes, I found the old Hudson. Those cars could take it. ... I wore out, or wrecked, seven of them before they went off the market. I could never understand why they weren't more popular."

Another nice thing about the Hudson, he added, was that it

was away; could he help?

"I told him I'd never sewed on a horse, but if he could persuade the animal to hold still I was sure I could do it," Huckleberry recalled. "The wound was a dilly, 18 or 20 inches long and very deep, in the hip. John threw and tied the horse and I sewed up the hole in his muscle and hide. Just as we finished, I got an emergency call to the best hotel on the beach."

Jumping back into his Hudson, Huckleberry raced to the scene and found one of the top executives of the Southern Pacific Railroad — a real V.I.P. — in great agony, stricken with seafood-in-

tions on it. This didn't help much, since they were farm homes, spread over a 20-square-mile area. So, the operator called each of the 12 farms. Eleven of them didn't know what she was talking about; the 12th didn't answer the phone.

Huckleberry raced to the address of the 12th home and found two cars badly wrecked, right in front of it.

There was another incident that, if Huckleberry had written it up for a medical journal, might have brought him some fame — if the journal editors believed him. It started on a day when a local named John Jorgenson came into the office and sat down.

"Doc, I'm sick," Jorgenson announced.

"How are you sick?" Huckleberry asked.

"I dunno, I'm just sick."

"Where do you hurt?"

"Don't hurt nowhere, I'm just sick."

Huckleberry asked some more specific questions, and got basically the same answer to all of them: Jorgenson didn't know how or where he was sick or why, but he just knew he was sick. Finally, Huckleberry asked him why he thought he was sick.

"My eatin' tobakker don't taste good," said Jorgenson. "I been a-chawin' Star for more'n 50 year, ever since I was 12-year-old, an' this is the first time it don't taste good. I gotta be sick."

Huckleberry doesn't say what his response to this was. Chances are, he was probably a little ashamed of whatever it was a day or two later, when Jorgenson went down with pneumonia. It almost killed him, but he pulled through.

"I never saw anywhere in the books that a change in the taste of Star tobacco is one of the points in the differential diagnosis of broncho-pneumonia, but it is," Huckleberry added. "At least it was."

Dr. Huckleberry's memoir, published in 1970 by the

Oregon Historical Society, is crammed with anecdotes like this, and is a really fantastic way to spend a rainy Saturday afternoon. Be warned, though; by the time you reach the last page, you may be feeling a bit wistful. Huckleberry himself sums up the sentiment nicely in the last paragraph of the article he wrote in 1970 for *Oregon Historical Quarterly*:

"Things are different now. Changes in industrial techniques, changes in agricultural techniques, roads, automobiles, improved communications ... all have had their effect, for good or ill. Many of the good things of that period have been lost. The old way of life is gone forever, but I hope this little record will help to preserve its memory."

(Sources: *The Adventures of Dr. Huckleberry*, a book published in 1970 by OHS Press, and "In Those Days: Tillamook County," an article published in the June 1970 issue of *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, both by E.R. Huckleberry; *Portland Morning Oregonian*, 6-12 Dec 1904)

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would make it through surprisingly deep water.

"In the Hudsons, I have gone through water so deep I would be wet halfway to the knees as I sat with my feet on the pedals," he said.

He had the Hudsons modified so that they were, essentially, ambulances: the passenger seat would lay down flat, and he kept a folding stretcher in the trunk that he rigged to fit on top of the flattened seat; so if a patient needed to be transported, he could get it done. This was important, because Tillamook County had no ambulance service until years later.

"The only ambulance service we had was the Tillamook undertaker with his hearse," he wrote, "and sometimes it took him a long time to arrive. ... Besides, for some reason, some people just didn't want to ride in a hearse."

Some of the jobs that fell to a country doctor could make it somewhat hard to put on airs. On one occasion, Huckleberry recalls a local man coming in to ask him for help with a veterinary problem. His horse had gotten cut during the night, and the local vet

duced food poisoning.

"We soon had him reasonably comfortable," Huckleberry continued, "and only then did I realize I had not taken time to wash, and saw my hands, arms, and clothing were smeared with horse blood. If he had noticed, he didn't say anything. I think he was too sick to care."

Country-doctoring sometimes called for some MacGyver-class problem solving. Huckleberry recalls one incident in the mid-1920s when his phone rang.

"Doc, there has been a terrible accident out in front of my house," shouted the voice on the other end of the line. "Come out as quick as you can!"

Click. Of course, if this happened today, the 911 dispatcher would pull up the caller info, identify the house, and dispatch the ambulance. But this was the old days — before dial telephones.

Huckleberry called the operator. Could she help him? Yes — she remembered how agitated the caller had been, and remembered the party line it had come in from. But, there were 12 sta-

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