

Doc Susie

A U-M Medical School graduate cares for a Colorado gold rush town.

BY JAMES TOBIN

ONE DAY IN 1909, A 38-YEAR-OLD woman, who thought she was on her last chance, climbed off the train in the little mountain town of Fraser, Colorado. Susan Anderson had a medical degree from Michigan, but she was yet to find a place where a woman doctor was wanted. Anderson had tuberculosis, and she thought the Rocky Mountain air might help her get better. But she also thought she might be about to die.

Growing up in Indiana, she had not wanted to become a doctor. But her father, a divorced veterinarian and farmer who had raised Susan and her brother by himself, decided his bright daughter ought to go to medical school. He sent her to Ann Arbor, which was producing a small but steady stream of women M.D.s.

She found herself enjoying the study of medicine, though, as she recalled later, “the beginning of dissection almost made me change my mind.” She worked hardest in pathology, to be sure she could survive classroom inquisitions by the formidable chairman, Aldred Warthin. When she made arsine gas in chemistry, “my tiny flame delighted me.”

Her years at Michigan were good ones, mostly. “Without my instruction at U of M it would have been impossible for me to do my bit in serving my fellow beings,” she wrote later. “The

uplifting and broadening influence [was] greater than would be possible in other schools for women.”

Late in her time at Michigan, she contracted TB, a blow that turned her life down a strange new path. Her father and her beloved brother, John, had chased the news of gold strikes to Cripple Creek, Colorado. Susan joined them, pursuing not gold but mountain air for her lungs.

With 55 male doctors already treating a boom-town population of 10,000 in Cripple Creek, she had trouble attracting patients. But she made a name for herself when a boy came to her with grave injuries from a dynamite blast. She cleaned the wounds and urged patience, though a surgeon wanted to amputate. She insisted on watchful waiting, and the boy recovered with all limbs intact.

Then came two more blows.

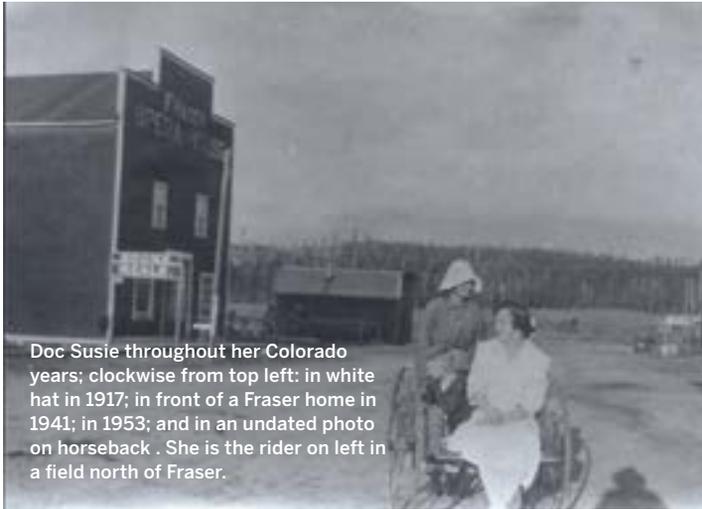
She had become engaged, but her

father — in an exchange Susan never learned much about and never forgave — somehow turned her fiancé against her, and the engagement was broken. Then, her brother died of pneumonia. “Life seems so useless and in vain,” she wrote. “No one now cares much whether I live or die. John was my best friend on earth & now my best friend is in heaven.”

She fled to the farm town of Greeley, in northeast Colorado, where she was only able to find work as a nurse. Doctors and nurses alike resented her fine training and extensive knowledge. After six years, with her TB worsening, she left for Denver, and then traveled over the Continental Divide to Fraser, where she had friends. There, she figured, she would either die or, through rest and exercise, regain her strength.

Now in her late 30s, she began to improve, though only slowly. At first,

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Doc Susie throughout her Colorado years; clockwise from top left: in white hat in 1917; in front of a Fraser home in 1941; in 1953; and in an undated photo on horseback . She is the rider on left in a field north of Fraser.



she worked in a general store. She lived in a wood shack, where, after a while, she hung a red cross on the door.

At first only women knocked, some with their children. Then, more slowly, their husbands came, most of them Swedes who worked in the nearby lumber camps and mills. They began to call her “Doc Susie.”

The environment shaped her practice. In and around Fraser, the people were poor and many couldn’t pay. So she often took her compensation in firewood or by dropping in at patients’ homes when they were sitting down to supper. No one had a telephone, so she didn’t, either; if people needed her, they would find her. Back in Greeley, she had seen narcotics stolen by addicts, so she refused to stock morphine for anesthesia. She administered only ether during surgery.

Anderson treated every sort of malady in every sort of patient. She treated children with infected mos-

quito bites. She turned breech babies. She cared for lumberjacks with bodies broken by “widowmakers”— the giant limbs that break free while a tree is being cut down.

When a case was too serious for her to handle alone, she packed her patient and headed over the mountain to the hospital in Denver, where she gained a reputation as a good physician. If occasionally she pulled the wrong tooth from a patient’s jaw, she could hardly be blamed, since the patient could seldom tell her exactly which tooth felt like it was on fire, and she had no X-ray machine.

Though Doc Susie’s professional life was busy, her personal life remained largely solitary. She never married. She read the Bible but never went to church.

In 1926 she became the part-time coroner of Grand County. Her fee of a few dollars per corpse substantially supplemented her income, especially when the railroad dug the famous

Moffat Tunnel six miles through the neighboring mountain. The project gave Denver direct rail access to points west, but it killed 19 workers in four years, with Doc Susie on hand in her post-mortem role as coroner.

During World War II, the great actress Ethel Barrymore heard about the mountain doctor and offered to buy the rights to play Anderson’s life story on the screen. Anderson said no, she wasn’t interested.

She practiced well into the postwar era. Once the principal of Fraser’s school asked her how she had handled patients before antibiotics. She said: “I’ll tell you what, Professor — they died.”

When Anderson died at the age of 90, she was carried back to Cripple Creek and buried near her brother. The gravestone bears a simple inscription:

SUSAN ANDERSON M.D.
JAN. 31, 1870 - APR. 16, 1960
DOCTOR OF GRAND COUNTY
1909-1956

Sources include Virginia Cornell, Doc Susie: The True Story of a Country Physician in the Colorado Rockies (1992) and the papers of the University of Michigan Alumni Association, Bentley Historical Library.

