

# THE COUNTRY DOCTOR

## DR. FREDERICK WILLETT



**"HE WAS ONE OF THE GREATEST MEN TO COME TO ROUTT COUNTY."**

A country doctor for 50 years, Frederick Willett had a great influence on Steamboat and the surrounding areas. He and his medical bag covered the territory from the Elk River to South Routt County and Pleasant Valley to Twenty Mile Park. Dr. Willett was greatly dedicated to his work. He showed this by making calls to the people who were sick in the country. This gave him the name, "The Country Doctor."

To find out more about this man we interviewed four people: Natalie Stanko, Bill Allen, and John and Katherine Sandelin. The first interview was with Natalie Stanko who was Dr. Willett's niece. Natalie Stanko was born in the same town and even on the same farm as Dr. Willett. She came out to Steamboat Springs to work for Dr. Willett.

BY

PAT STANKO

AND

PAT SANDERS

NATALIE STANKO

We asked about Mrs. Stanko's childhood, what the town was like and how she came out here. "I lived in the same town, Woodbine, Iowa, and was born on the same farm as Dr. Willett. We weren't born in the same house; there are three houses on the farm, and I was born in a different house than Dr. Willett. My father was born in the same house as Dr. Willett. When I was in Woodbine it had a population of about 1,000. That was 57 years ago.

"I had a cousin who was a professor of Zoology at the University of Indiana. His parents lived in Glenwood Springs. He came through Iowa and stopped to visit his grandmother, who was also my grandmother, in the summer of 1933. I rode out to Colorado with him to get a job. Dr. Willett needed some help in his little hospital on 7th Street. Since I had no job, I stayed and worked with Dr. Willett. I met my husband, and I'm still here."

Next Mrs. Stanko told us about her work with Dr. Willett. "I first helped cook in the kitchen and helped with the cleaning (at the hospital). The cook usually helped with the cleaning also. The nurses at that time were working 12 hour shifts. They worked from six a.m. to six p.m. and six p.m. to six a.m. Since I wasn't a Registered Nurse, I usually helped the night nurses. I helped keep them company. I never was in the operating room, but I helped with the delivery of babies. In fact, I went with Dr. Willett the year I wasn't teaching on several of his house calls. One

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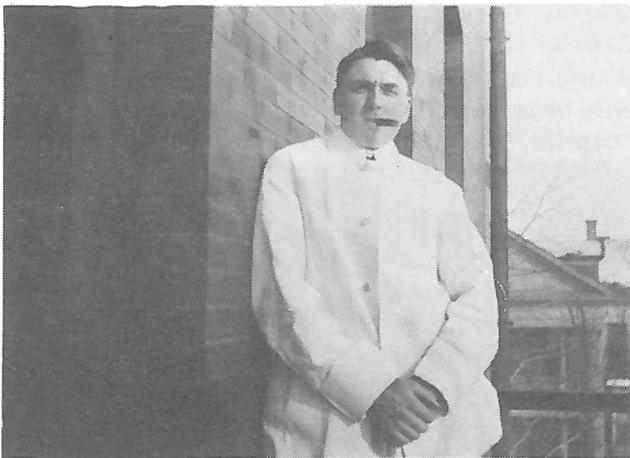
of them was the delivery of my husband's nephew out here on Twenty Mile.

"Dr. Willett taught me to do hypos. I learned how to make beds, the hospital way, and carry bed pans. It was exciting for me. I've always wanted to be a nurse because I had an aunt, Dr. Willett's sister, who was a nurse. I enjoyed work there. There wasn't anything dull about it. I stayed out here because he needed help in the hospital, and it was exciting to me.

"Dr. Willett was very calm, and everybody thought he was easy going, for he never got excited. All of the nurses that worked with him gave him a lot of praise."

After Mrs. Stanko gave her background, we asked her to tell us more about Dr. Willett. The first thing we found out was about his childhood. "Dr. Willett was born in Woodbine, Iowa, April 7, 1883. He spent his childhood there. He came to Colorado Springs in 1901 and attended Cutler Academy. He graduated from Colorado College. He went back to Iowa to go into pre-med school at Iowa City. I'm not sure whether he went to Iowa City or Northwestern first, but anyway, he attended both Northwestern and the University of Iowa in Iowa City.

"There he developed tuberculosis. He came to Phipps Sanitarium in Colorado and was there for 18 months. After he recovered completely, he continued his medical education at the University of Colorado, from which he graduated in 1911. He interned in Saint Luke's Hospital in 1911-1912. He completed his internship and went to Laramie, Wyoming. While in Laramie, he heard of a vacancy, of a need for a doctor in Steamboat Springs. He came here in September of 1912 and intended to stay for five years. He built up his reputation and was here for over 50 years.



**"HE INTERNED AT ST. LUKE'S IN 1911-1912."**

"He said that the first September was one of the driest that he had ever seen. He went out to Twenty Mile to a cousin who lived in the Twenty Mile area on Thanksgiving Day. He drove a team and buggy, and the roads were dusty."



**MRS. NATALIE STANKO, PAT STANKO AND PAT SANDERS.**

Next we found out about his attitude toward his work. We wanted to know if he loved to work or if he was lazy. Well, Mrs. Stanko straightened it out for us. She told us, "His office was downstairs, and a good many nights he slept in his chair in his office (at the hospital on 7th Street). If he had a very sick patient, he never left him in the care of a nurse. He slept in the chair where he could be called. He suffered right along with his patients.

"He made house calls until he quit practicing. He traveled all over this particular area, in the winter time by team and sleigh, and in the summer by horse and buggy. He even skied, used snowshoes, and rode horseback. During the flu epidemic, when it was at its worst, he had a driver and for weeks didn't even see his bed. He slept between house calls. One of his drivers was Slim Yount. Most of the time he drove by himself. Most of the babies were delivered at home, so he made house calls for that.

"Dr. Willett didn't have working hours; he always went to the hospital every morning, unless he was already there from the night before. He had no definite hours; he was on call constantly."

Dr. Willett was not the first doctor in Steamboat, so he took over the old hospital. Mrs. Stanko told us about the hospitals. "Dr. Willett took over what was the Sanitarium in what is now the Cameo building (which is now the Old Town Pub). It was about to go under when he took it over as a private hospital in 1915. He operated it until 1921 when he bought the rooming house on 7th Street (It is now the 7th Street Playhouse.). He turned that rooming house into a private hospital, operated it on his own expense until the new hospital was built in 1950."

Dr. Willett was not the only doctor in this small town. It was not like in the movies where there was only one doctor. Mrs. Stanko told us about the other doctor that helped Dr. Willett. "When he came here there was a doctor by the name of



**DR. WILLETT TURNED THE ROOMING HOUSE INTO A PRIVATE HOSPITAL AND OPERATED IT AT HIS OWN EXPENSE.**

Dr. Blackmer. They worked together. Dr. Turner was here when I came here; he died very suddenly. Then Dr. Crawford came in, Marvin Crawford's father, and there's been several doctors since, of course."

Today you have to check the pocketbook to see if you can go see the doctor. When you went to see Dr. Willett you didn't worry about your finances. This is what Mrs. Stanko had to say about the billing system. "Dr. Willett never sent a bill; that was one thing he never did. I remember a fellow came in and asked Dr. Willett how much he owed him. Dr. Willett picked up a book and was thumbing through the pages. The fellow looked over his back and said, 'Doctor, there's nothing written on those pages.' Dr. Willett never kept any records; the nurses kept records of patients. I wouldn't have any idea what his prices were. I know when my children were born the delivery fee was \$85.

"People did barter. They gave him food because he did serve meals at the hospital. One of the rifles that Jim Stanko (Natalie's son) has was given to Dr. Willett in payment of a bill. A lot of things were given to him."

Dr. Willett not only helped with his medical bag, he did other jobs. "He was also Mayor of Steamboat for two terms. When he was mayor the water system was built; it must have been the Fish Creek water system. Also, he was on the draft board."

Finally, it came time for Dr. Willett to retire. As most people, he loved his retirement. "He

always said that he wished that he had retired earlier because it was hard for him to see. He loved to travel, but he was considered the best surgeon on the Western Slope for a good many years, so he did not retire."

Dr. Willett was very devoted to his work. He did not have any hobbies nor was he married. His hobby was to help people. "He was always willing to help people. There are several people that he loaned money to to get through college. I was going over a letter the other day from a Martha Grosser, a former nurse of his. Mrs. Grosser said, 'I will never forget that there was a young couple who came through town, and the wife became critically ill. She was brought to the hospital, and they had no money. It was ap-



**DR. WILLETT TOOK OVER WHAT WAS THE SANITARIUM IN 1914; IT'S NOW THE OLD TOWN PUB.**

pendicitis. At that time they had no antibiotics. The lady passed away, and the young fellow didn't have enough money to send the body home. Dr. Willett paid all the expenses to send the body to Missouri. I believe he was very generous to everybody.' "

Dr. Willett lived to the ripe old age of 87. He died in December, 1970. Mrs. Stanko said this about his death: "He had poor circulation in his legs, and he had a bronchial cough. It was real bad, but he told the nurses and Dr. Richards that if he got to the point that he needed anything intravenous and oxygen and so on and so forth, to give him a pain pill and shut the door. He didn't want to be kept alive, but he was very cheerful. I went to see him Sunday morning after church, and he was having a little more trouble breathing. I said, 'I'll see you this evening.' He said, 'No, don't come back this evening.' Monday morning Dr. Richards called and said, 'He is critical; do you want to come in?' I said, 'I'll be right in,' and before I got out of the house, Dr. Richards called and said he was gone."

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**"HE WAS PROBABLY THE KINDEST MAN I KNEW."**

## **BILL ALLEN**

Our next interview was with Bill Allen, who was a great friend of Dr. Willett. We asked Bill when he was born. "I was born in Hayden and came to Steamboat when I was about a year old, about 1923. I was born in 1922; I lived here in town."

We wondered when and how Bill met Dr. Willett. "Well, the way I met Dr. Willett was when I was about a year old, he took out my appendix. That was my first encounter with Dr. Willett. I always admired him. He was our family doctor. As a kid I'd see him when the hospital was next to the school, and I would see him frequently. After I got out of the service (Bill served as a Navy Corpsman in World War II), I made it a point to see him more frequently. I used to take him around to different patients after he quit driving. I watched him do surgery in the hospital a couple of times. Then I made it a point to go up and see him in the evenings."

Mr. Allen did not do all this work for the sake of volunteering. He just wanted to see Dr. Willett. "He was probably the kindest man I have ever known. I took x-rays and did lab work at the new hospital after I came back out of the service. From the years 1946 until he died, I kept track of him. He was quite a bit older than I was, but I liked to be with him."

Since Mr. Allen was one of Dr. Willett's great friends, Dr. Willett told Mr. Allen stories. One that we wanted to know about was the "Flu Epidemic." "He used to tell me some neat

stories about when he was here after World War I. The flu epidemic came to this country, and he kept his horse and sleigh down at the local stables. He would go down there, put a heavy wool blanket over his legs, and head out, up the Elk River to help somebody that was sick. He told me one time, the snow was so deep he had to unhook the horse from the sleigh and get on the horse and ride all the way. This was to take care of someone who had the flu in the winter."

Dr. Willett was not the only doctor in the county. But he was the only one here for the flu epidemic, according to Mr. Allen. "Dr. Willett was the only doctor here at the time of the flu epidemic; later than that there was Dr. Blackmer. There was another doctor here before Blackmer. I suppose most of the time there were two doctors here. There were times when both left and went to the country. They worked together and not in competition as they do today."

Mr. Allen told us about the two different hospitals and how Dr. Willett had to go to the country to help the people. "Well, the first hospital was above the Cameo (That's where the Old Town Pub is located today.); he moved down by the school (where the Seventh Street Playhouse is now located). That was a two story building before your time. They took the top off of it and made it the band room. Steamboat was a pretty small town, about 1200 people, when he practiced in the early days. He went out in the country to take care of the people, and like I was saying before, he made house calls. I mainly remember when I was a kid, I had tonsillitis. He



**DR. WILLETT ON A HOUSE CALL.**

would come over to the house to take care of me."

Mr. Allen also told us how Doctor Willett helped Steamboat by being the mayor and how he influenced the county. "He was Mayor of Steamboat way back in the early days. I can't tell you the year, but probably 1928 or '29, something like that. He was a big factor in getting water mains put into Steamboat. In an informal way, he was a bigger influence on the county. Everybody knew him and liked him. From that standpoint, he was a bigger influence in the informal sense."

Finally, Mr. Allen told us how everybody mourned Dr. Willett at his death. He told us that it was a big funeral, that everybody was there. It was a big loss, but Dr. Willett did so much in 50 years' time.



## MR. AND MRS. JOHN SANDELIN

Our next interview was with John and Katherine Sandelin. Mr. Sandelin worked with Dr. Willett for two years. Mrs. Sandelin worked part-time with Dr. Willett from 1931-1933. We first talked with Mrs. Sandelin. She worked in the hospital, and we found out what it was like.

"The doctor would come over and ask if I wanted to help him. He was a little bit rushed for help. He had a head nurse that helped him all the time, but he needed extra help when he was doing an operation. It was during World War II, and a lot of the nurses were gone to the service, so he did need help a lot of the time. I was really glad to have that experience.

"I didn't help with the operations. I generally took care of the patients while the special nurse helped with the operation. I helped the patient get ready for the operation. I also did what they called circulation. That was getting things into the operating room. I got to see a lot of the operations, for Dr. Willett let me watch throughout the duration."

Mrs. Sandelin told us what kind of operations Dr. Willett did. "Let me emphasize, he was a

great surgeon in that he successfully performed a variety of difficult operations such as mastoid, stomach ulcer, appendectomy, tonsillectomy, amputation, ectopic pregnancy, and tumor, which is only to name a few. One of the most difficult operations that he did while I was there was on Mrs. Neill. It was the removal of a large tumor. It was a very large one, and he had a very difficult time with that. She recovered from that and lived for some time.

"The medicine was quite a bit different back then. They hadn't the drugs they do today. They hadn't come up with penicillin and things of that type. Dr. Willett would have saved a few more patients if he had had those drugs."

Since Mrs. Sandelin worked in the 7th Street hospital, she told us what it was like. "There were six rooms upstairs and six rooms downstairs. He had his office downstairs and a waiting room. He had two bedrooms and a kitchen-dining room. He always had a cook for the whole hospital. The operating room and a little kitchen were upstairs. The kitchen was not really a kitchen, but it had a stove, so we called it a kitchen. There were four rooms for the patients upstairs too. Later on they built a nursery on the back, where there had been a porch."

"Dr. Willett had a great personal interest in each patient and a remarkable memory. Ten years after he treated a person, he could tell you the details of the case.

"He didn't say much, but anyone knowing him closely could tell he felt very deeply upon losing a patient, although there were very few that he ever lost. Of course, we must remember that Dr. Willett did not have the present medications that we have today, such as sulpha and penicillin, which are highly effective in appendicitis cases."

Next Mrs. Sandelin told us about Dr. Willett's personality. "He was a fantastic person. I never saw Dr. Willett lose his temper; he lost his patience once in a while. We had a little girl one time; she had come in for an operation. Her parents were there and she would not go into the operating room. She would not let anybody touch her and take her into the operating room. Dr. Willett sent several nurses to get her while he was scrubbing up. Finally he took off his things, walked in there, picked her up, and put her on the operating table. That was the time I saw Dr. Willett lose his patience, but he never lost his temper."

Mr. Sandelin had worked with Dr. Willett for two years. That experience landed him in the medical corp of the Navy. Mr. Sandelin first told us about his job with Dr. Willett. "We went on emergency calls in the country. It was no easy job, I tell you; the roads were terrible. We kept warm with sheep skin; we also put a warm brick in the sleigh if we needed it. The doctor said that the cold didn't bother him. I drove for him for



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**"IF HE HAD A VERY SICK PATIENT HE NEVER LEFT HIM IN THE CARE OF A NURSE."**

two years.

"I'll never forget his first car. I think it was a Dodge or a Chrysler. The door swung out on one side. He could pick up a patient and put him or her in there on a stretcher; it would swing right in, and he would go on the other side and get in. It was just like an ambulance. Then later he got a Chrysler."

Mr. Sandelin was not the only driver for him. Mr. Sandelin told us about how Dr. Willett got around before he had a car. He got a team from the livery stable. "Dr. Willett would call up the livery stable; he would say that he had to go to the country, would they deliver him a team. In those days the livery stable had a man on hand to take a team out of the barn, hook them up, go to the hospital to get the doctor and his things, and drive him out to the country."

Mr. Sandelin thought that Dr. Willett was one of the greatest men that ever came to this country. One reason was how he served the people and collected his pay. "Dr. Willett served the people and wasn't worried about the income. Take a man and wife who were down and out, the doctor was there just as fast as for the rich. He was not in it for the money."

"I've seen Dr. Willett on the street when he would see somebody that owed him a bill. He could remember them all. He would go over and say to the fellow, 'Do you think you could bring me a load of coal; I'm getting low.' The fellow would say, 'I'll get you a load of coal somehow.' The fellow would usually deliver the load of coal. Dr. Willett depended on the old medical proverb: those who could pay should pay, and those who couldn't pay wouldn't pay. He also never asked for a donation to help run the hospital; he ran the hospital all by himself."

Since Dr. Willett only got money from people that could pay; you would think he would look for other sources of money. Well, there were many

offers from the drug manufacturers. "A lot of drug manufacturers would ask Dr. Willett to recommend their drug. There were monetary considerations. Dr. Willett turned down manufacturer after manufacturer. It takes a great man to do that."

Dr. Willett fought one of the worst flu epidemics that the world has ever known. This is what Mr. Sandelin said about the flu. "A person would be living on Tuesday and he would be dead by Friday. A mother that just had a child wouldn't have a chance. Dr. Willett went through the flu epidemic from 1918-1921; he never let up one time. He didn't have the drugs as they do today; it was an impossible task. There were over twenty-one million people that died worldwide between 1918 and 1919 alone in that flu epidemic."

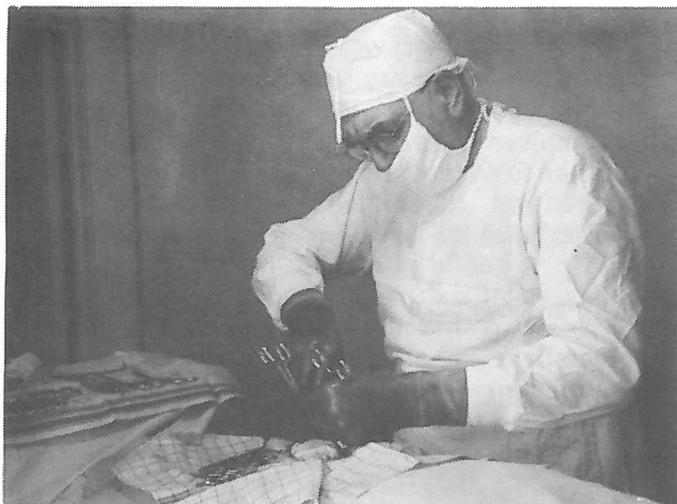
Dr. Willett was an exceptional doctor according to Mr. Sandelin. "Dr. Willett would come to our home, eight miles from Steamboat, in the dead of winter, in three feet of snow. He would get there about 1:30 a.m. when my father was sick. He would doctor my father for a while; then he would lie down for a couple of hours, then head back to town with his team and sleigh.

"Once he went up to get Mr. Wells. Mr. Wells had a ruptured appendix. He had to drive up to Clark and tie up his team. Then he took a toboggan and headed to the place. It was only a quarter mile, but he brought out Mr. Wells on that toboggan. Then he loaded him up and took him to Steamboat and tried to save him. Dr. Willett did several feats like that.

"Bill Stender broke his leg. I think he broke his leg with a jack out in the Twenty-Mile area. It was on the 7N Ranch. They called up the doctor. Dr. Willett and I went right out there; I administered the anesthetic and Dr. Willett set his leg. I don't believe that Mr. Stender ever came to town for any more medical treatment. Maybe he went in to get the cast off. He didn't set the cast right there; I think Dr. Willett went out later to set the cast. Anyway, we set his leg there and bandaged it good enough for Mr. Stender to get around. We did this all in the country."

We found an interesting story down in the Routt County Archives. It was a letter from Guthery W. Drake, who was operated on by Dr. Willett in 1929. Mr. Drake was 12-years-old and was up at Hahn's Peak doing some fishing. He was cutting some wood up at Red Park and had the axe glance off into the side of his right ankle. It was a pretty bad cut; it cut the cords of his ankle. His family called the hospital in Steamboat Springs and brought him in.

"Doctor Willett and staff operated on my ankle, bringing the cords together, pressing the bones together and sewing it all up. I guess it looked pretty bad. I had taken a hefty swing, and everyone thought I would have a stiff ankle for



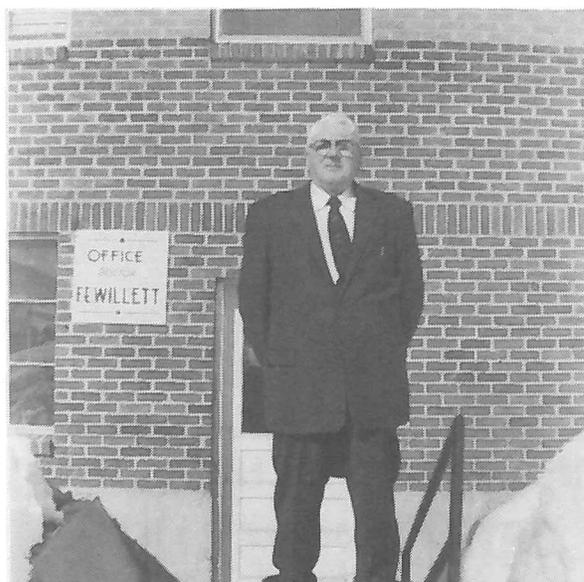
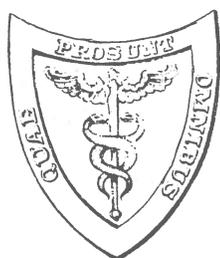
**"HE WAS CONSIDERED THE BEST SURGEON ON THE WESTERN SLOPE."**

life. But we sure got our \$22 worth as I was playing all sports by the next spring. Really a miracle and credit to Doctor Willett's great skill."

Dr. Fredrick E. Willett was a great man. He helped everyone that he could with his medical bag and his friendship. He and his medical bag went from house to house for fifty years. During World War I, he was the Chief Examiner for Routt, Moffat, Rio Blanco, Jackson and Grand counties. Dr. Willett helped promote the building of Routt Memorial Hospital. He also was the Mayor of Steamboat Springs from 1920-1926. He helped put in the new Fish Creek water system, and the first fire truck was secured while he was mayor.

With all this work that he did, it's no wonder that he has a lot of things named after him. There is Willett Heights, a subdivision in Steamboat Springs, and Willett Hall, at Colorado Mountain College Alpine Campus. His antique medical equipment is on display at the Tread of Pioneers Museum.

We were proud to do a story on Dr. Willett. Mr. Sandelin said it best when he said, "I don't think a greater man has come to this country. Dr. Willett was a man of quality that we don't have anymore. He was just out here helping the people."



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**DR. WILLETT DONATED HIS ENTIRE ESTATE TO THE  
NEW ROUTT MEMORIAL HOSPITAL**

