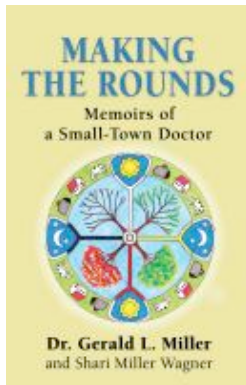


MAKING THE ROUNDS

Memoirs of
a Small-Town Doctor



Dr. Gerald L. Miller
and Shari Miller Wagner



MAKING THE ROUNDS: Memoirs of a Small-Town Doctor shares the stories and insights of a compassionate and creative doctor who practiced family medicine for forty-two years in the small working-class town of Markle, Indiana. This well-crafted account develops the idea that the health of the individual is inextricably linked to the health of the community, and emphasizes the need for doctors to see the vital links between life stories.

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ONE: AN OPEN DOOR



THE SEARCH

For the most part, I appreciated my late night drives to and from house calls or the hospital. The rural roads were mostly empty, and I had time to think over my day or the next day's schedule. Sometimes I just enjoyed the way the cornfields looked in the moonlight and the solitary dignity of Hoosier farmhouses and barns. Sometimes I thought about the small towns I passed—many of them almost ghost towns with names that intrigued me: *Plum Tree*, *Buckeye*, *Browns Corner*, *Banner City*, *Rockford*, *Rock Creek Center*, *Simpson*, and *Mardenis*. Almost in an eye blink, I could drive by these hamlets, but I wondered what they were like in their heyday—before railroad companies pulled up their tracks or gasoline companies abandoned their wells or highways diverted customers to the cities.

Fortunately, some folks remembered. Patients near Mardenis told me the town once had a railroad station and a hotel that attracted gamblers from Chicago. Plum Tree was called Yankeetown until a tree bearing plums grew from a branch a farmer stuck in the mud. The farmer had been using the branch as a switch to drive his stubborn cow. At night, I mused on such towns that slipped past in the darkness, with maybe only a security light or porch light for a marker.

Sometimes, though, as I drove home, I had trouble staying awake. Then I would search for an FM station or whistle the tune of a folksong or hymn. If that didn't work, a certain story would shake me awake: the memory of how my predecessor, Dr. Haldon Woods, vanished one night while driving home from the hospital.

I was an intern when I first heard the story of the doctor's disappearance. It was a day that determined the course of my life. I had finished my morning rounds and was about to enter my pathology class when the instructor, Dr. Griest, put his hand on my shoulder. "Wait, Gerald," he said, stopping me outside the door. He had already pulled aside Lee Kinzer, another intern.

"I'd like you both to go down to the front lounge," the pathologist said. "You'll find two ladies who would like to speak to an intern. One of them is a Mrs. Woods. Don't worry about missing my lecture." Then, without waiting for a response, the doctor turned and entered his classroom.

Lee and I exchanged a quizzical glance. "Do you know what this is about?" I asked as we walked toward the elevator.

"Dr. Griest asked me if we're still thinking about going into practice together," Lee said, "so I figure this has something to do with that."

It was mid-November 1963, and both of us were fulfilling a year of post-grad medical training at Fort Wayne's Lutheran Hospital. Our friendship had developed a few years earlier, during medical school in Indianapolis, when we both attended the local chapter of the Christian Medical Society. Lee sported a flattop like I did, but he was taller—a few inches over six feet—and six years older. He had been drafted straight out of high school as a pitcher by the St. Louis Cardinals but after a year in the minors injured his back sliding into home plate. The doctor prescribed two weeks in bed, a year and a half in a back brace, and no more baseball.

If Lee couldn't play professional sports, he still liked talking about them. As we waited for the elevator, he brought up a recent Steeler-Redskin game. "Did you see Ballman's ninety-two-yard kickoff return?" Lee asked. He was a big Pittsburgh fan, while I rooted for the Bears.

"I heard about it, but I was watching Chicago," I said and left it at that since Lombardi's Packers had pounded my Bears, 27 to 7.

Lee grinned. "That must have been an exciting game." Just then the elevator arrived. On the way down he added, "Next Sunday we'll see how your Willie Galimore stacks up against John Henry Johnson."

The door opened, and we entered the lounge, empty except for two women who stopped speaking to glance over at us.

"We're here to meet a Mrs. Woods," Lee said as we approached.

"That's me," replied the younger of the two, a petite, middle-aged woman, dark-haired, and dressed in a jacket and skirt. "I'm Mary Ellen, and this is Mrs. Etta Heaston." She motioned towards a kind-faced woman with short, curly red hair. "Etta was my husband's receptionist."

We all shook hands, and then Mrs. Woods suggested we sit down. "I'm here because my town needs a doctor," she said, earnestly.

"What town is that?" I asked.

"Markle. It's about a half hour south of here."

"I know that town. I've driven through there," Lee said. "I went to college at Taylor, and Markle is about thirty miles north."

I tried to read from Lee's amiable tone and expression his opinion of Markle, but I couldn't tell.

"Haldon, my husband, was the town's only physician for twenty-four years," Mrs. Woods continued. "The only time he left was to serve in WWII, and when he came back, he was busier than ever, driving to several hospitals each day and keeping daytime and evening office hours." She went on to say that when her husband developed insulin-dependent diabetes, these long hours became especially hard on him.

"Late one night, about a year ago, he left home to see a patient at Huntington Hospital and never returned," Mrs. Woods said. "I thought maybe he decided to just spend the night at the hospital, but in the morning when I phoned, the nurse told me he left for home at about 2 a.m., soon after he arrived."

When she learned that her husband's cream-colored sedan was last seen heading north out of Huntington, Mrs. Woods presumed he was driving to Warsaw where he occasionally went to relax at Winona Lake, only about forty miles away. But after several days passed and he still hadn't returned, she notified the Sheriff's Department. Police searched the gravel pits and wooded areas in Huntington County but discovered no clues. Tips started coming in from people who said they saw the doctor in Indianapolis or on a Chicago street, strolling with an unknown woman. One person speculated he was hiding in Ohio because of tax evasion charges.

"We found out the truth three weeks later," Mrs. Woods said.

One of her husband's patients, Charles Scott, woke up from a dream in which he saw the doctor's car miss the curve at the Henrick farm. The next day, Charles told his friend Max Becker about this disturbing dream as they drove to work. On their way home, they decided to check it out. It was hard to see where the car left State Route 224. There weren't any skid marks because of the curve, but they were able to follow tire tracks through the cornfield and into a ravine.

There, crashed against a tree, was the doctor's car.

After missing the curve the sedan apparently cut through the field's edge for a few hundred feet and then plummeted into the gully where it hit the tree head-on. An autopsy revealed that the forty-eight year-old doctor died on impact. He either fell asleep while driving or blacked out because of an insulin reaction.

Mrs. Woods shook her head and gazed at the gray carpet. "Haldon was only two miles from Markle, almost home."

"Dr. Woods was a wonderful doctor," Mrs. Heaston said. "We all miss him so much."

"Now we desperately need another doctor," Mrs. Woods said, looking at us. "For a year I've been getting phone calls, all with the same question, 'Can you direct me to a doctor?' But most of the doctors in the surrounding towns aren't taking new patients. My husband's patients have either gone without a physician or driven far from home to receive help. Finally, the idea came to me—to come here to the hospital and ask for a doctor just starting out. I'd be willing to sell my husband's office for a very reasonable sum.

It has all the furniture and equipment. Everything looks just as it did on his last day."

"But would there be enough work for two doctors?" Lee asked. "Gerald and I are planning to go into practice together."

"I'm sure there would be," Mrs. Woods said. "I wish Haldon had taken a partner to ease his workload. I was surprised when both of you walked in, but I'm certain there would be enough work."

"How many people live in Markle? I asked.

"About eight hundred," Mrs. Heaston replied.

That didn't sound all that small to me since my hometown was less than half that size.

"You would also see many farmers and some patients from surrounding towns," Mrs. Woods added. "It's a good place to raise a family. People look out for each other."

We asked a few more questions, but then it was time for me to give new patients their physicals and Lee to work an emergency room shift. Before excusing ourselves, we assured the two women that we were definitely interested and would be happy to meet with the search committee the townsfolk had formed.

As we waited for elevators to take us in separate directions, I asked Lee what Markle was like.

"The downtown doesn't look like much, but there's a park that caught my attention. It's right before you cross the Wabash, coming from the south. There's a pool made from a quarry and a softball field much nicer than you see in most small towns. It's got lights with a concession stand and bleachers."

I asked if he remembered anything else.

“A scoreboard and an announcer’s booth,” Lee joked. “No, seriously, there isn’t much to see—a few stores, two grain elevators, and some houses.”

We agreed that we were impressed by Mrs. Woods and her determination to find a doctor. We were also curious to learn more about a town where a doctor’s car could swerve into his patient’s dream. Then Lee’s elevator door slid open and so did mine.

For the rest of the day, between patients, my thoughts kept returning to Markle. I wondered if this might be the opportunity Lee and I had been hoping for. Dr. Gentile, a doctor we both liked, had recently asked us to join his established practice, but we hadn’t given him an answer yet. Neither of us wanted to live in Fort Wayne. Lee’s wife, Dawn, and my wife, Mary, weren’t keen on living there, either—or, for that matter, in any large city. Lee grew up in Pittsburgh and wanted to experience life in a small town. Mary and I had lived on farms near Shipshewana, Indiana and hoped a door to some similar community would swing open.

Maybe this was that door.

SHIPSHEWANA

Shipshewana was named for a Potawatomi chief whose name meant “Vision of a Cougar.” He also had an English name—Peter the Great—given to him by the French priest who baptized him. Although the Potawatomi converted to Christianity, that didn’t deter white farmers from wanting their fertile land. More than eight hundred and fifty Potawatomi, including Chief Shipshewana, were pushed at gun and bayonet point from Northern Indiana to Osawatomie, Kansas in the autumn of 1838. The six-hundred-and-sixty-mile journey took sixty-one days and has been called “The Potawatomi Trail of Death.” Along the way, forty people, mostly children, died of typhoid fever and the stress of a forced march through thick dust and unseasonable heat.

Soon after Chief Shipshewana reached the Kansas reservation, he slipped back to Indiana, traveling by night. There, after finding the burnt remains of his village on the shore of what is now Shipshewana Lake, he lived in the marshes. Two years later, he was buried in an unmarked grave. I have sometimes wondered why the chief didn’t stay in Kansas with his people. Most likely, he considered his community as encompassing more than just people—it included the land and its creatures, the graves of his ancestors, and the stories that connected him in a tangible way to the past and the present.

I was born almost a hundred years after the Potawatomi Removal. As I was growing up, my hometown had only about three hundred residents, but it was the center of an expansive Mennonite and Amish agricultural community.

The town's tallest structure was a grain elevator, and its business district also included a stockyard, lumberyard, two grocery stores, a dry goods store, a bank, pharmacy, and three diners. Entertainment venues were scarce, no movie theatres or bowling alleys or dance halls, but there was a summer activities program at the school, swimming at Shipshewana Lake, and many social activities sponsored by my church—Forks Mennonite.

During my boyhood summers, I worked half days in the fragrant mint fields, thinning and transplanting plants. Later, when the peppermint was harvested, it would be boiled down in a vat and made into peppermint oil to flavor gum and candies. My family sometimes used a few drops of peppermint oil in the nose as a decongestant; my wife's family sprinkled drops on their handkerchiefs to unplug a nose and soothe the soreness from blowing. I remember Mary's grandfather, George Dintaman, used it so liberally on his arthritic joints that he always smelled slightly of mint.

Once I reached high school age, I painted houses and barns with my father, Perry, a history teacher and the principal of Shipshewana School. Each summer my dad hired a painting crew of teachers, as well as high school and college students. He had a penchant for singing "Nearer My God to Thee" as he balanced on the highest rungs of a ladder, painting the peak of a barn. We had to watch out for curious livestock that might bump against our propped ladders. Sometimes for additional height we perched ladders on top of farm wagons and then used rocks to hold the wheels in place. But no matter how tightly we wedged the stones, a hog could still jiggle a tilted ladder while it used the adjacent wheel as a scratching post.

One of the things I liked best about living on a farm was that I could work with animals. At the age of nine I joined 4-H and cared for a Guernsey heifer calf as my project. Each year I bought another calf and showed her in local and state competitions. By my senior year I owned a small dairy herd that I sold to buy a car and help pay for my college expenses. I also enjoyed helping my father with his cows and would sometimes tend a farmer's orphaned lamb or raise a dozen chicks from the local hatchery. Besides feeding my chickens, I had to keep a look-out for the turkey buzzards that would glide over the farmyard searching for pullets.

One August evening, just after my eleventh birthday, I was milking Betsy, our oldest cow, when I heard a tremendous thunder crack and saw a simultaneous flash. Betsy staggered. The lights went out. The motor on the Globe milking machine sputtered to a stop and started smoking. My first thought was that now I'd be milking all four cows by hand. When I ran to the atrium of the barn, I could see smoke puffing from a light bulb socket and the hay mow. I started up the ladder with a bucket of water and near the top spotted the flames.

My parents were at a district church meeting, so I was home alone with my two sisters, thirteen-year-old Jewel and three-year-old Sally Jo. I unfastened Betsy and the other cows from their stanchions, shooed them from the barn, and led the penned calves outside. By then, thick smoke was everywhere. I ran to the house door to tell Jewel to call the fire department, but she soon yelled back that the phone line was dead. She sped on her bike to the neighbors west of us, while I pedaled as hard as I could toward our neighbors to the east. On my way back, I heard the Shishewana fire

alarm sounding and saw flames shooting from the barn roof. When I reached home, Sally Jo stood in the yard, crying.

Within a day news had spread that the Miller family had lost their barn and everything in it but the cows. Farmers arrived with their trucks and tractors to clean up the charred site. A neighbor offered us the use of an empty barn where we could shelter and milk our cows. A number of farmers, including the Amish, gave us free hay, straw, and feed. One farmer donated trees from his woods that a portable sawmill cut into lumber for the frame and beams of our new barn. I saw firsthand how a community came together when a neighbor was in need. Later, I missed that sense of community in Indianapolis and Fort Wayne. People along King Street in Indy kept moving, often to the suburbs, and though Mary and I lived there four years, we only knew two of our neighbors. In Fort Wayne our only friends were other interns and their families.

That new barn was better than the old one; it had a cement floor, a separate attached milk house, and a modern milking parlor that enabled us to sell grade-A milk and use a new Surge milking machine. It also boasted a hip roof with a top floor that was smooth and solid. From what would ordinarily be just a hay mow, my dad designed a full basketball court with a hoop at each end and good lighting. My friends and I spent many nights up there shooting and dribbling—perfecting our basketball skills. After all, this was Indiana in the 40s and 50s, when high school teams generated more excitement than IU and Purdue. I played guard for the Shipshe Indians and learned the importance of teamwork in the era of Bobby Plump, Oscar and Bailey Robertson, and Jimmy Rayl.

Making the Rounds

After the meeting with Mrs. Woods, Mary and I wondered how much Markle was like Shipshe. We knew it wouldn't be a Mennonite and Amish community. Even from a road map, the town looked more "worldly." Shipshewana had only one line passing through it, the straight, thin line of Road 5, while Markle had lots of intersecting lines: the wavy blue one of the river, a dotted county line, and the routes of three highways.

THE INTERVIEW

Sometimes, in retrospect, you see a pattern in unrelated events—a synchronicity you never noticed earlier. During the course of one November week, I thought about two men I had never known personally, both in their forties when they died. They served in WW II, worked hard, sacrificed their time for others, and, when they died, left behind wives who persevered with dignity. One was mourned by his small-town community. Another, by his nation.

I was driving my '55 Chevy with the radio on when I learned that President John F. Kennedy had been shot. Mary was ironing in the living room and watching *As the World Turns*. The moment the news broke seems suspended now. The Singing Nun is cut-off in the midst of "Dominique." Mary's soap opera is interrupted and her ironing, forgotten. Of course, after the shock time moved on. It always does. In the Midwest, the last leaves of one November drift into the yard of the next.

After a Thanksgiving I spent on call at the hospital, arrangements were made for a late afternoon interview in Markle. When the day arrived, Lee drove since he was familiar with the route. We talked about questions the search committee might ask as we passed the town of Zanesville and then empty cornfields and scattered farm houses with barns. Eventually, the houses started appearing closer together and in the distance I noticed the tall storage bins of a grain elevator.

"We're a bit early," Lee said as we drove by the elevator and over a double set of train tracks. "Let's turn at the

intersection and see what's along 224. I haven't driven along that stretch."

Going east, we passed by the front of the Agrarian Grain elevator, a Veterans of Foreign Wars building, several houses, and then the Slumber Inn—a modest Mom-and-Pop motel. Heading west, we saw a few blocks of small wooden houses, the town cemetery, and the limestone edifice of Markle Church of the Brethren. I was pleased to see a Church of the Brethren, a denomination with tenets similar to Mennonites: belief in adult baptism, nonviolence, and service to others.

"It gets better," Lee said as we turned around in the cemetery and headed back past houses set much too close to the highway. I hoped that by spring this part of the town would appear more cheerful. Now, nothing, not even a light dusting of early December snow, softened the stark tree branches and houses, and a gray sky compounded the melancholy.

When we turned back onto Road 3 (Clark Street), I was relieved to see that the town did become more attractive. Freed from the highway, the yards were more spacious and the houses, older and larger, had side yards and porches. This street sloped downhill toward the Wabash River and the business district. We passed a grocery, two barber shops, a garage, and an A&W drive-in before turning left onto Morse, the town's main street. After driving by a block of brick storefronts, we parked near a tall, wooden thermometer staked in the bank's front yard. Silver paint indicated that the town had almost reached its goal of four thousand dollars for the doctor's fund. Later, we learned it

raised more than six thousand dollars, all of it earmarked to help purchase Dr. Woods' office building and equipment.

Lee and I expected to be interviewed by members of the search committee, but the bank's conference room was packed with business leaders, farmers, young parents, and retirees, each prepared to let us know the town needed a doctor.

I was particularly touched by the words of one elderly man, Freeman Truby, who stood up to speak with a voice wavering from age and emotion: "My wife, Alice, and I have been praying every night for a doctor to come to Markle, and now my prayers are being answered."

Several people said they knew we would be busy right away since most of Dr. Woods' patients hadn't seen a doctor since his death. Only a few expressed concern as to whether there would be enough business for two doctors.

At the end of the meeting, the search committee escorted us across the street to see Dr. Woods' office, a building with *Woods* stenciled on the window in white lettering. To the east stood Reed's Television, and to the west, the storeroom for a furniture store. The doctor's office was narrow and squat compared to most of the buildings on Morse Street, but when the florescent lights flickered on, we discovered it was unusually long. Behind the front waiting area where worn chairs lined the walls and end tables displayed past issues of magazines, we found two small examining rooms, their white enamel cabinets stocked with hemostats, surgical scissors, and speculums. Glass jars contained cotton balls or stood empty, their alcohol gone dry.

Across the hallway, shelves in a narrow drug dispensary stored gallon jugs of cough medicine and dusty bottles of

antacids, aspirin, and other pills, some with dates that still had not expired. Though it was obvious that Dr. Woods dispensed much of the medicine he prescribed, I asked if there was a pharmacy in town. The nearest, I was told, was about ten miles away in Huntington.

Beyond the pharmacy and a small restroom was a workroom with a door to the alley and gravel parking area. This workroom, with its Bunsen burner, test tubes, and centrifuge for spinning down urine samples, was equipped for simple lab tests. Crossing the hall, we entered a smaller room where the nurse had kept track of patient care on 4 x 6 index cards that documented the date of each office visit and gave a brief description of treatment, usually just a line.

This building was small for one doctor and could never accommodate two. Most buildings along Morse Street sported a second story and, some, even a third, but this structure had only the ground floor and a small unfinished basement, dim and damp. A closet beneath the staircase harbored a real human skeleton, and a shelf with glass jars of formaldehyde held fetuses in advancing stages of development. Lined up on more shelves, a dozen or more two-gallon bottles labeled "Dr. Woods' Elixir of Rhubarb" stockpiled enough laxative for a whole county, I estimated—sufficient to last two years, if so needed.

When I asked about the possibility of more office space, a committee member told us that the three elderly sisters who owned the furniture storeroom had indicated they might be willing to sell.

Before we left that night we also asked about the schools. Lee and Dawn had four young children—Mark, Mike, Leah, and Matt—and Mary and I had five-year-old

Shari and two-year-old Marlis. We learned that until 1956 Markle had its own school with twelve grades, but now, because the town was split by four townships, students attended four different township schools. Prevailing thought was that soon, with consolidation efforts underway, each county would have only one or two high schools.

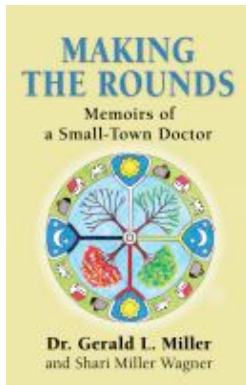
Markle did have its own half-day kindergarten run by the local Psi Iota Xi sorority and held in the former Veterans of Foreign Wars building. A young banker who was with us—Don Hoopingarner—said that if we moved to town Shari would finish her year of kindergarten with his own daughter, Pam.

Markle encompassed five churches and a community park with a softball diamond, playground, swimming pool, and a scout cabin half-hidden in the woods. It possessed a steep hill children could coast bikes down and a river—the Wabash—that meandered past the bottom of that hill, behind Morse Street. The Old Thomas Mill still ground flour at the Markle Dam, and the Erie Lackawana rail line still stretched across the north side of town and retained a working station.

Driving back, Lee and I compared notes. We had both been deeply moved by the words of Mr. Truby and also impressed by those of Bill Randol, the local barber, who said he not only wanted good health care for his wife and three children, but also for his extended family, which included the Duncans, Suttons, Allreds, and Highlands. Farmers had attended the meeting, too, an indication that those living outside of town were searching for a doctor. We naturally appreciated the warm and generous spirit that was raising the mercury in the bank yard thermometer. All in all, it

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seemed a rare and wonderful thing to find a community so willing to help new doctors set up a practice.



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