

**Dr. Mary Perkins, M.D.**  
**Presented by Lenore Rogers**

*The following are excerpts from a conversation between Dr. Mary Perkins, M.D., and an aspiring young woman physician. They visited on the porch of Dr. Mary's home on the grounds of Western State Hospital in the late 1920s.*

“I was born in the great state of Kentucky, just a few years before the start of the Civil War—1859 to be exact. We moved to Missouri, where I became a nurse and worked at Community Hospital in St. Louis. I then became a supervisor of Nurses at a private hospital, also in St. Louis.

Becoming a doctor had been a long-time desire, which was fulfilled when I attended medical school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. There I met my husband, Luther Perkins, who was a professor at the University of Michigan medical school and a physician. We returned to Missouri where we had three children: two boys and one girl.

Dr. Luther corresponded with a former student who lived in Steilacoom, Washington, and spoke of a desperate need for doctors in the area. We made the move, arriving in March 1902 and renting a house in Steilacoom. My husband also served as a ship's physician for a company that traded with the Orient.

My early years of medical practice were rather interesting and unusual ones. Upon our arrival I was unable to practice immediately since the state board of licensing examinations were given only once each year, and had taken place earlier that year. I was able to treat patients, however, but I was unable to write prescriptions. Fortunately, a physician from nearby Tacoma, rewrote them for me, and they were filled at Bair Drug in Steilacoom.

Some of my more memorable cases included the treatment of Santa Claus, for burns he received when he reached across a candle-lit tree while distributing gifts as an annual town-wide gathering. I was often called out to go to nearby Anderson Island, which involved locating someone to row me there and back. I also was fortunate to work with my sister-in-law, Alice Fletcher. She was a nurse who operated a birthing center for women in Steilacoom.

After my husband's company closed its Pacific Branch, we moved to Tacoma and operated our offices at 11<sup>th</sup> & K streets. We continued to maintain summer homes in Steilacoom, which presented a challenge to movers who, had to move our large piano from Tacoma to Steilacoom and back again each year.

Our children, having two parents as busy physicians no doubt experienced challenges. Both my husband and I would be called out at night to care for the sick. We were fortunate to live across the street from a family who ran a neighborhood grocery store. On nights when the second one of us was called out, we would let our neighbors know that both of us were gone. If there was any problem, our children were told to raise the shade in the dining room as a signal for the neighbor to call the police.

On one occasion after both of us had been out all night treating patients, we were informed by the principal that our children had been late for school. They had eaten no breakfast, so they stopped at the store and bought donuts, which they ate along the way to school. A note was required for their tardiness to be excused. My husband quickly dashed off a note saying, “My wife and I were out all night and weren't home to get the children off to school.”

Well! The principal was horrified, and that required yet another note from home. In this one, my husband informed the principal that both parents were physicians, and it was then signed Dr. Luther Perkins, M. D. and Dr. Mary Perkins, M. D. At this the principal excused our children's late arrival at school.

My husband's health began to fail, and he finally died in 1911. That left me, at age 52, to continue raising our three children, supporting them and maintaining a career. After daughter Ida was old

enough to drive I engaged her to take me around on my various calls. As those sometimes turned into rather lengthy visits, we always maintained a supply of books in the car for her to pass the time. She was very well read, and later became a teacher in the Tacoma schools.

In 1914 I became a physician for the Tacoma Public Schools where I worked until 1918 when I accepted a position as the first woman physician caring for women patients at Western State hospital. Happily both sons returned from WW I around this time. Here I am able to live in a home on the lovely grounds of the hospital. Daughter Ida was married here. I am happy to be here, but will someday retire and return to Steilacoom where I have so many fond memories and dear friends.

**Epilogue:** Dr. Mary Perkins was a true pioneer in her chosen field. She joined with other career women that met informally at the Tacoma Hotel. There were at least six women who formed the local Business and Professional Women's Club.

Mary did indeed retire from working at Western State Hospital, but not until 1939, at the age of 79. She had a home built in Steilacoom on Rainier Street, with a large weeping willow tree in the front yard, and a view of nearby Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains. Her home was built by a man named Milgard, which is now well known and associated with windows. Mary died in 1941 at the age of 82.

In 1972, she was honored when her son, Melville, donated land: the site of the family's summer home, to the Town of Steilacoom, to be used as a park. A brick marker on the corner of Union Avenue and Martin Street introduces visitors and newcomers alike to Dr. Mary Perkins.

Mary was noted for her sense of humor as well as her medical skill and dignified demeanor. She maintained her soft Kentucky accent and youthful appearance, even in her later years. She was easily recognized by the black velvet ribbon she wore around her neck. She also was remembered for baking apple dumplings and square biscuits.