

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF DR. ULRIC R. PLANTE

for recipients of

THE DR. U. R. PLANTE MEDICAL FELLOWSHIP

Dr. Ulric Plante was born into a poor family of French-Canadian descent on January 7, 1891, in Mooers Forks, New York, a hamlet of perhaps one hundred families, a few miles from the Canadian border. Like most French-Canadian families of that era, there were many children; in this case he was one of sixteen. He had twelve brothers and sisters, and in addition two half-brothers and a half-sister from his father's first marriage.

Since his father, who sometimes worked for the D & L Railroad and sometimes made shoes for the physically deformed, needed all the help he could get, young Ulric – nicknamed Flea because of his stature – learned the meaning of work while he was still very young. He loved to tell about being taken by his older sisters up to the “big rock” to pick blueberries, which he later sold for five cents a quart. He worked in Goodrow's General Store and milked the one or two cows kept for the family milk supply. It was he who was sent after the village cows that spent the day in the communal pasture. His eyes sparkled when he told how he could milk his cows faster than the older men could milk theirs. He helped in the garden which provided the winter supply of vegetables. No, they were never hungry, but there were certainly no luxuries. At Christmas time, they received a few oranges as gifts.

By the time he was old enough to remember, his oldest brother, Ozias, five or six years his senior, was already living with his grandparents; so it was Ulric, as the oldest boy at home, who had the “outdoor” responsibilities. It was not long before it was his turn to leave the family. At about fifteen, he was invited by Father Charbonneau, a priest from France who had been stationed in Mooers Forks, to move with him to Tupper Lake, a village in the Adirondacks composed mostly of French-Canadian lumbermen and their families.

And so in 1906, Ulric became the “bedeau” of St. Alphonsus parish, where, in the winter, he was up by four in the morning to stoke all the furnaces: that of the Convent of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost (newly arrived from France), the furnace of Holy Ghost Academy, that of the rectory and finally that of St. Alphonsus Church, where he served the first Mass each morning. Among his other jobs, he had to keep the rectory supplied with groceries; he had to see that all the sidewalks of the school, convent, rectory and church were kept clear of the mounds of snow that accumulate in the Adirondacks, quite a responsibility for a youngster of fifteen who was going to school at the same time. Although he enjoyed playing basketball and was considered a good player, there was little time for leisure.

High school finished, he tried teaching in a country school, but did not find this to his liking. Being good-looking and only a year or two older than his students, he found discipline a problem.

In September 1910, Ulric entered the College of Medicine of the University of Vermont – no undergraduate work being required at that time. Although he worked hard at UVM, he often spoke about medical school as a happy time of his life. However, he had financial problems: not enough funds to pay his tuition, board and room and books. He had to borrow money from his older sister Alida, a grade-school teacher with little to spare, in order to stay in school since his father, who still had nine children at home, was in no position to help.

As a medical student, it is interesting that he received his highest grades in surgery and diagnosis; yet it was to general practice and obstetrics that he later devoted himself. Upon graduation from UVM in 1915, he interned for a year in Hartford, Connecticut and then for a few months in 1916 was ship's surgeon making several trips on a United Fruit Line ship plying between New York City and Curaçao, a memory which he enjoyed and for many years wanted to retrace. But it was not until 1968, over fifty years later, that he felt able to take the time from his practice for a ten-day cruise to Curaçao, the only "extended" vacation that he ever took.

In 1916 he set up practice in Massena, New York on the St. Lawrence River, for a few months before being commissioned a second lieutenant in the Medical Corps. The following year as Captain Plante, he led an ambulance company through France and into Germany, often moving at night on unfamiliar roads with no lights. Being able to speak French, he had an advantage over most of the men in his company. When not performing his duties as medical officer, he enjoyed serving as interpreter, especially for the soldiers who wanted to make dates with French girls. While in France he was billeted with two old French ladies who looked upon him as a son, cooking for him as many special dishes as their meager larder allowed; he reciprocated by bringing them whatever food he was able to get from the American supplies.

Back in the States in 1919, he married Priscilla Martin of Tupper Lake and returned to his practice in Massena, where he chose to locate in the Pine Grove area, where all the new immigrants had settled close to their work in the potrooms of the new Aluminum Company of America plant. It was among these working people, from more than twenty countries, that he wanted to practice. Sometimes he found an interpreter to help him, whether among Armenians, Hungarians or Poles; sometimes he used sign language. Whichever he used, he had great empathy and concern for his patients, especially for the children for whom he always had a few words wherever he saw them. He practiced in his office, which until 1939 was located in two rooms behind Hess's drugstore, and in the homes of his patients. There was no hospital in Massena until after the second World War.

His patients tell many stories about those old days and the Doctor's kindness. Many are the times when he went out into a snowstorm in the middle of the night. At first he rented a horse and sleigh; later he had a Chevrolet coupe with a rumble seat (to please his children). One of his French-Canadian patients, an illiterate old lady told about the night he came to see her youngest son who was desperately ill. As the Doctor was about to leave, she said to him, "Doctor, what shall we do? We are afraid." He replied, "Give me a blanket," and he spent the rest of the night on their sofa.

Among the new Americans and the French-Canadians, many babies were born in the 1920's, 30's, 40's, and 50's and Doctor Plante delivered most of these. Although no formal count was ever taken, it is estimated that the Doctor delivered close to 9,000 babies during his over fifty years of practice. This may seem like an exaggerated number, but it was not unusual for him to have two, once in a while three obstetrical cases a night, each in the patient's own home. His daughter, whose bedroom was just over the driveway, remembers hearing him go out and return in the middle of the night, not every night, but very often.

Had it been left to him, he never would have sent out a bill. He hated paperwork, and he never had office help. It was his wife who took care of the books. When she asked him about his illegible records, he often replied, especially during the Depression, "He can't afford to pay—he's not working and he has a family." It was not unusual during the 1930's for his remuneration for professional services to arrive in the form of homemade pickles or fish or baskets of berries. There were days during this period when his young daughter asked him for pennies for penny candy and he had to refuse because he had not taken in any money that day.

In later years, as he reminisced, he would often say that if he had to do it all over again, he would choose to be a family physician – and the part he liked best was bringing new babies into the world. He was considered the best obstetrician in Massena, perhaps in the area. Often younger doctors called on him to help with difficult cases. Or they asked him to take their cases when they went on vacation because they knew that he was always there.

A moment typical of Dr. Plante's life occurred when he was about eighty in the midst of a terrible snowstorm. Only snowmobiles and emergency vehicles were operating on the village streets. But he insisted on driving to see his patients in the hospital. As he put it, he had seen worse storms. He was the first doctor to arrive at the hospital that morning, before some fifteen or so younger men.

Dr. Plante practiced through his 82nd year. Even in the last few years when he was becoming tired, he made house calls. His daughter recalls one night not long before he retired about ten o'clock when the phone rang and a

patient needed him. Knowing that he did not feel well, she tried to persuade him not to go; however he insisted. She drove him to the home, but carried his bag into the patient's house because this small but hitherto very strong man was too weak to carry it himself.

Dr. Plante died on June 1, 1976, in his 86th year. Just four days before he died, when asked about his best memories, he mentioned UVM. When it was suggested that a memorial might be established in his name at UVM, he smiled – the same smile that he had for thousands of patients whom he knew in both good times and bad.

Dr. Plante had a good heart. May the students who benefit from the Dr. U. R. Plante Medical Fellowship have the same compassion and concern for their patients that Dr. Plante had for his.