My Mother, the M.D.

By Betty Grafwallner

My mother was quite a unique woman. No, I guess the right words to describe her would be "knowledgeable" and "wise," even though her education extended only through eight grades of a typical one-room country schoolhouse in Brown Deer, Wis.

As my sister, Ruth Jean, and I were growing up in Milwaukee, in the late 1930s, we were often subjected to the typical childhood illnesses. Mother used a commonsense approach with medications.

For instance, when we both came down with the croup, she would prepare an elixir of warm milk with a little butter melting on top. Any other time we would have objected to that unpleasant drink, but it did the trick and loosened congested little chests.

When either of us complained of a queasy stomach, Mother would open the large bathroom medicine chest. (Although it also held cosmetics and sundries, it was referred to as "the medicine cabinet.") There on the shelf was our bottle of Gieseke's Green Drops, a bright green liquid with a strong flavor of mint—and an alcoholic content of about 20 percent. Mr. Gieseke sold his bright green concoction door-to-door. Every mother on our block had his green drops on her shelf.

My mother would put a few drops of Gieseke's in a glass of warm water along with a bit of sugar. We would sip this slowly because it did not taste all that great, but it soon relieved our symptoms.

During our recuperation from the stomach upset, she would prepare milk toast for a little nourishment—a slice of white bread toasted nicely brown, with warm milk poured on and sprinkled with sugar.

To coax our lagging appetites, she made oatmeal cooked in milk. After she had strained it through a sieve to remove every last lump, she topped it with brown sugar and a pat of butter. To this day, I love oatmeal with brown sugar—but I'm not ambitious enough to strain it, as I don't mind a few lumps. Actually, it was my sister who refused to eat oatmeal unless it was completely lump-free.

Me and my sister, Ruth Jean.

My sister, who is two years older than I am, had an aversion to drinking milk. Mother would place a chocolate malted-milk ball or two at the bottom of the glass of ice-cold milk, tempting her to drink it down. Nowadays they print warning labels on many items, but back then, no one worried that she might choke on a malted-milk ball. I didn't mind drinking milk, but I demanded the treat, too.

During our puberty years, my mother fretted about our complexions. In those days chocolate in any form was thought to be the culprit that led to facial blemishes. She bought little cakes of Red Star yeast and cut them in half with a piece of strong white thread. My sister and I each ate half a cake of yeast, just like that. At first I merely tolerated it, but in time I came to enjoy its smooth texture. Looking back, I believe it contained B vitamins, which was supposedly the miracle cure for skin blemishes.

Just to be certain, though, when we had a box of rich chocolates during the holidays, my mother cautioned us to scrape off a little of the chocolate and remove a bit of the sweet centers, thereby rationalizing that it wouldn't do us any harm.

Back then, as now, there were countless ways to combat sore throats and stuffy noses due to head colds. Mother folded soft flannel cloths into several layers of strips three inches wide. She would then take Vicks VapoRub from its dark blue jar and apply it generously to our throat and upper chest. Next, she wrapped the flannel around our throat and secured it with a safety pin.

We had to wear the flannels to school, but it wasn't embarrassing in the least because during the

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winter months, many of the other kids wore flannel neck wraps, too. And yes, the schoolrooms reeked of Vicks.

Stuffy noses cleared, too, when we inhaled from Mother's improvised vaporizer—an old enamel kettle simmering on the stove, with a bit of Vicks melted in it. We then were made to hold a towel over our heads and cautiously bring our noses close to the steaming kettle while we took deep breaths. (No one worried that we might be badly burned.) And you know, it did work, and we felt better.

I really don't know why we ever got colds anyway, considering a rule my mother had. We weren't allowed to change from our long cotton stockings to shorter socks in the springtime until the thermometer registered 50 degrees.

All in all, I think it was my mother's love and concern for us that really did the trick. But those home remedies helped a bit, too. And even though Mother had no shingle hanging over our front door, nor a framed license to practice medicine on our kitchen wall, considering that I am now 80 years old and in reasonably good health, I think she did a great job! ❖

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