

Grandma Reichert used to call her "The rag doctor."

As a very young child, I would often hear Grandma discuss with her cronies the "miracles" wrought by this woman. Because their conversations were in German, I never fully understood what they were all about.

But the term "rag doctor" intrigued me. Was it, I wondered, anything like a rag doll?

One day I asked Mother.

"The rag doctor?" Well, she's a very nice lady — she — er — ah — she's a doctor who makes people feel better. You're too young to understand. When you get older, I'll explain more about her."

A most unsatisfactory answer. I felt Mother was hedging and concluded that "rag doctor" had to be added to my other unanswered questions, such as where do babies come from and is there really a Santa Claus.

Not too many years later I heard Mother tell a friend that she planned to consult "the rag doctor." She hadn't been feeling well and didn't think she was getting too much help from our regular family physician.

After my earlier experience, I didn't dare bring up the subject with Mother again.

Dad Explains

So I decided to ask Dad. One day when he was left baby-sitting with me, I did inquire about the "rag doctor" mother was going to.

Dad didn't seem to have any qualms about telling me her story.

"Her name is Mariana Herbert," he explained. "She's a friend of your Grandma. In fact, she and Grandma were both born in Bavaria, Germany, and I think they knew each other in the old country."

"But why do people call her a 'rag doctor'?" I persisted.

"She seems to have unusual powers to heal sick people," Dad told me. "And she does it in a strange way. She ties a cloth or rag around her patients' bodies. After they have worn the cloth a while, they return it to her and she 'reads' it, telling each individual patient what is wrong. Then she proceeds to treat them with special medicine."

That was all the information Dad had about the "rag doctor." But he did add that Mother appeared to be in better health since she had been consulting Dr. Herbert.

Controversial

It was a couple of decades later before I was able to gather any authentic information about Dr. Mariana Herbert, who maintained an office on Park Street on the North Side of Syracuse.

Basically, she was a controversial figure.

On the one hand, thousands of patients who had consulted her, like my mother, swore she had healed them. Many of them were convinced she possessed supernatural powers.

On the other hand, there were those

who derided her, called her a charlatan and scoffed at the idea that a medical diagnosis could be made from a rag.

Nevertheless, people came from all parts of the world to be treated by Dr. Herbert and many of them truly believed her powers were a gift from God.

Born in Bavaria

Mariana was born in Bavaria in 1845. While still a young girl, she discovered her unusual healing powers. She studied medicine at a German university and after migrating to the United States, she took courses at a college in Ohio.

Dr. Herbert was the mother of eight children. Her husband, several years her senior, used to help care for the family while Mariana consulted with her patients. One of her sons, Leo, inspired no doubt by his mother's example, received a medical education and became a physician, practicing in Syracuse many years before his death.

Mariana's small office on Park Street was always crowded. Old-timers report that people would line the street in front of her office, beginning as early as 5 a.m., so as to be sure to get to see her. Her waiting room, it was said, always was filled with 30 to 40 patients.

Two Medicines

Dr. Herbert is reputed to have used only two medicines in treating her patients. She prepared them herself with herbs she brought with her from Germany.

One legend about the mysterious healer has it that a doubting Syracuse man once tried to trick her. He took a cloth, tied it around the family pet and later brought it to Dr. Herbert for a reading.

The doctor is reported to have looked the gentleman right in the eye and announced sternly: "I do not treat dogs!"

There is no question that "the rag doctor" was a deeply religious woman. I remember as a child hearing she had purchased a new car and given it to the pastor of our church for his use in visiting the sick and other priestly duties.

She gave generously to several churches and religious institutions and a number of clergymen were helped to finance their studies because of her monetary gifts.

She firmly believed her unusual power was a gift from God and used much of the money she earned through His gift to help do God's work on earth.

Dr. Herbert's home contained a chapel, to which she frequently retired to pray and meditate.

Died in 1920

Mariana Herbert died Aug. 8, 1920, at Lake George without disclosing her methods of healing.

Often I think back to the day I first asked Mother about "the rag doctor."

I was dissatisfied with her ambiguous answer but I think now it was the only answer possible for Mother to give.

It has been said that Dr. Herbert herself often admitted she didn't understand why she possessed those seemingly miraculous powers to heal.

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All our yesterdays



Dr. Mariana Herbert in photo which appeared in Herald at time of her death.

'Rag doctor'