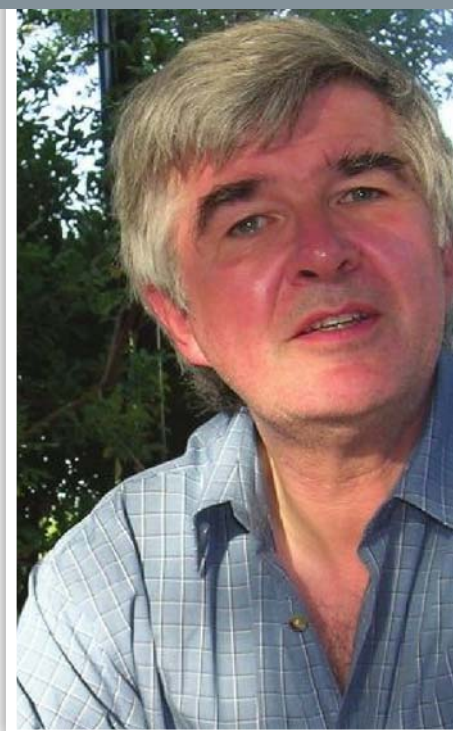


# A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE

Richard Barr



**S**he came from the middle of the USA – literally. She was born in 1914, the year that the first world war broke out, in the state of Nebraska (the state that is in the centre of the USA and which is so flat that it has been compared to the Fens on the border of Norfolk and Cambridgeshire).

By the time my mother was born, Nebraska had been an American state for just 60 years. It was so new that much of it was uninhabited, and the American government encouraged the settlement of land by a process known as homesteading. Early settlers (including my grandparents) were allocated land in sections of a quarter of a square mile at a time, if they could prove that they occupied and cultivated it for a year.

It wasn't easy but my grandparents did succeed in keeping their allocated land and became farmers on the western side of the state.

They settled down and had five children, of whom my mother was the third. Then came the years of the Great Depression. What we are going through now is nothing compared to what ordinary people had to endure then. The entire financial system collapsed. Banks were not bailed out by governments: they simply went under. Then their creditors called in the loans and millions of individuals faced financial ruin – including my grandfather Lee.

He developed severe depression and was admitted to a nursing home in Denver, Colorado. This was run by a charlatan doctor who – when faced with the possibility that my grandfather would not be able to pay for his treatment – appears to have devised a convenient solution: he left a cut-throat razor in my grandfather's room.

The cause of death (which had been kept a

family secret for half a century) starkly stated that my grandfather had cut his throat with a razor. And that little piece of history directly explains why I am writing this article.

So outraged was my teenage mother that she resolved there and then to become a doctor and to show the world how medicine should be practised. Through a series of connections and coincidences she met my father in Germany at the end of the second world war and they settled in a home on the dividing line between Cambridgeshire and Norfolk where she became a village doctor and had two children – my brother and me.

She was well established by the time I arrived on the scene, so much so that one of the first words I learned was 'patient'. She worked from a surgery at home, and throughout our childhood and adolescence our family lived with our in-house doctor.

Combining a standard of care that these days you can only dream of, with some gentle eccentricity, she became one of the best known figures in the village of Elm, tirelessly looking after the well-being of her flock.

When she was in practice, she drove a succession of convertible Morris Minors to her house visits. Yes, every day she held a surgery at home and then she would go out in the Morris Minor of the moment and visit those of her patients who could not get in to see her.

Often during school holidays she would take my brother and me – and a fluffy dog called Banger. We would fight each other (and Banger) while she was seeing the patients (whom we sometimes called 'impatiens') and if we felt she had been too long on any visit we would lean on the horn until she came out and smacked us for rudeness (that, too, was normal – if we did something wrong we were smacked and we

didn't do it again till the next time).

When it snowed and cars could not move she simply saddled up her horse, slung her bag behind her and rode off to make her house calls. My mother claimed she was born on a horse, and there was always a horse in the family.

With horses came horse events, one of which involved raising money to repair the church roof. My mother worked herself to the bone on a very hot day. Then she noted that the beer drinking contest had begun. Gasping in the heat she downed a yard of beer in record time, beating all the local veteran ale imbibers and earning herself the title of beer drinking champion.

On another occasion an eccentric German lady managed to get very drunk at a party and fell against a mantelpiece causing a gash in her forehead. As she was already well anaesthetised my mother sewed her back together with ordinary thread and a sterile sewing needle. The German lady recovered without even a scar.

For us as children there were mixed blessings in having a doctor in the house. My mother was never off duty and when her patients had babies she delivered them at home (usually at night) and still did a day's work afterwards.

On the other hand she was always on hand to deal with our bumps, grazes and bruises. One of her most effective treatments was to draw faces on our wounds with gentian violet which was always a miracle cure.

As she was her own boss on hot days she would often load us, a pile of beach toys and Banger into the Morris Minor (with the top down) and drive us, the wind in our hair and Banger, with her nose out of the window, to Hunstanton beach where we would play until we were exhausted and she drove us back under the stars. ■