

Dr. Elva Wright

By Guest Authors Heritage Heirloom Books

Founded by Dr. Elva Wright over 100 years ago, the Woman's Club of Lake Forest has continually provided a way for its members to give back to their community. The Club recently asked Heritage Heirloom Books of Lake Forest to help them fully grasp and better define Dr. Wright's legacy. Understanding how a woman in the late 1800's found the opportunity to attend college and continue on to medical school was central to that legacy.

Elva Wright was born in 1868 in the rural coal mining region of Western Pennsylvania, not into a world of privilege, culture, and comfort. Her family had settled in Pennsylvania many generations before as part of the earliest wave of German immigrants fleeing the war-ravaged Palatinate region west of Bavaria.

The Wrights lived off of the land as subsistence farmers on small plots hewed out of Pennsylvania's mountainous terrain. Her parents were illiterate yet she was able to attend a one room schoolhouse that only went up to the 5th grade. The single teacher was spread thin across all grades yet she was able to instill a lifelong love of reading and learning in Elva.

The next step in Elva's education was provided by a man with the pioneering vision for a no-frills, affordable higher education made available to both men and women alike. Henry Baker Brown rallied an entire community to support that dream. The City Council and County of Valparaiso, Indiana donated money for the building of Valparaiso University. Enrollment quickly swelled making the school the largest of its kind in the nation, often called the "Poor Man's Harvard." More importantly, they offered the preparatory courses that exceptional students, coming with little prior formal education, would have needed to succeed. Elva graduated in 1894.

A pioneer in medical education for women was instrumental in providing the next opportunity for Elva. At that time, traditional medical colleges restricted their enrollment to males. Moreover, there was widespread prejudice against women physicians; neither of Chicago's two hospitals permitted women to serve on their staffs and one of them wouldn't even admit female patients. Mary Thompson founded the Chicago Hospital for Women and Children in 1865 to provide medical care to indigent women and children. She also established an affiliated medical school for women. Once again a pioneer with a dream was supported by the community. Thompson recruited women from wealthy Chicago families to raise funds and manage administrative duties at the hospital and college.

Elva was an intern, resident and eventually a practicing physician at the Chicago Hospital for Women before moving her practice to Lake Forest at the corner of Deerpath and Western. For the next ten years she was a practicing obstetrician/gynecologist and became a leader in our community. She rallied other women and soon formed the Lake Forest Woman's Club to support

improvements in education and health care for the area. Today they continue Dr. Elva Wright's legacy by having established a new memorial scholarship to assist young women seeking an education in the field of science.

Heritage Heirloom Books, www.heritageheirloombooks.com, creates presentation-grade coffee table books that reveal how your family's tree intertwines with history.

For more information about the history of the Lake Forest Woman's Club, contact club historian Suzanne Laundry at mlaun1008@aol.com or see the book *Lake Forest Day: 100 Years of Celebration* which is available for sale at the Historical Society.