

Avis Elida Smith

Physician
1851-1941

by Susan Jezak Ford

Avis E. Smith was the first qualified female physician to practice medicine in Jackson County and one of the early organizers of what is now Children's Mercy Hospital. Had it not been for the difficult birth of a member of the Jesse James family, however, Smith might have ended up elsewhere.

Avis Smith was born in 1851 in Rockford, Illinois. She worked as a teacher for several years before entering Illinois State University. After graduating in 1877, she resumed teaching before entering the Woman's Medical College in Chicago. She then pursued further study in Boston's New England Hospital for Women and Children before coming to Kansas City.

Shortly after graduating from her Boston internship in 1883, Dr. Smith came to Kansas City to visit friends, who hoped she would stay to set up practice. Smith despised the lawlessness of the town, but was approached by a family who knew of her expertise in obstetrics. The patient was a member of the Jesse James family, and Smith stayed with the woman through a difficult pregnancy and delivery. She never revealed which James baby she delivered, but she stayed here as the James family physician and as a doctor who benefited all of Kansas City.

Dr. Smith specialized in obstetrics and gynecology, sharing an office in the early 1880s with three other female physicians. In 1897 the group opened the Women's and Children's Hospital. Under Dr. Smith's leadership as president of the board of directors, money allotted for free beds grew rapidly. With the dedication of Dr. Alice Graham and Dr. Katherine B. Richardson, the hospital eventually became Children's Mercy Hospital.

Smith lived a frugal life, always walking or riding her bicycle to church, appointments, and engagements. Despite her thrifty lifestyle, Smith made frequent gifts or loans to the needy. She continued to practice medicine until she retired on her 80th birthday, having just delivered a set of twins. At the end of her

career, 21 children had been named after her. Dr. Smith lived in her home until she died in 1941.

Sources

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