

## CHAPTER 16

### Accidents and More Accidents

Occasionally accident cases were brought to us. Once, a little girl who had been struck by a car on the highway was brought in. She had a severe head injury, internal injuries, and a broken leg. We did what we could for her but she died. Another tragedy was a ten-year-old boy who was plowing with a horse-drawn plow. He tied the reins around his waist and lighted a firecracker. The horse ran away, dragging him over many rocks, and all the father could do was to run and try to catch the horse. I was asked to serve as undertaker in that case. It was hard to hold back the tears as I stitched up the many lacerations, trying to make him presentable for viewing in his casket. Another accident case turned out to be a State Representative and Foreman of the State Highway Commission. We gave him first-aid. He was soon surrounded by officials and whisked off to Santa Fe.

One cold January morning, a State Policeman came to the hospital. There had been a death at Rogers' Tourist Camp, and he needed one of us to serve as Examining Medical Officer. I was on duty that morning, so I went. It was my first and last experience as a Medical Examiner. The dead man had come up from Santa Fe the day before and gotten a plumber's job at the new hospital. He planned to bring his wife to Dixon and had rented one of the Rogers' cabins. Having arranged for Mrs. Rogers to prepare his

breakfast, he left the office about 10 p.m. in high spirits. When Mr. Rogers went to call the man for breakfast, he was dead. The gas heater was still burning, so Mr. Rogers turned it off, then phoned the police.

Mr. Rogers was terribly upset and very nervous. An all male coroner's jury had been rounded up at random—some Spanish, some Anglo. They were nervous and not quite sure of what they were supposed to do. They each wore a hang-dog expression, looked at the ground, and shuffled their feet. The policeman and I entered the cabin, and I immediately noticed that one of the jets on the gas plate was slightly open. I pointed this out, but the policeman said the jury had to see it before it could be turned off. At my suggestion, he applied a match to the burner. Gas was still escaping. I examined the body, now cold and stiff, and found no sign of injury or struggle. A brick wrapped in a towel was at the feet. I surmised that the dead man had heated the brick on the gas plate and turned off the burner, but then as he used the towel to pick up the brick, it had caught the valve handle and opened the jet. My verdict—"death by accidental asphyxiation."

While we were in the cabin, the policeman kept moving around taking pictures, and I kept dodging because I did not want to be photographed. He was flustered, mislaid his notebook, couldn't find his pen, and discovered he had taken several double exposures. The Justice of the Peace was supposed to come to swear in the jury, look over the evidence, and give his judgment, but he had not appeared. It had been almost an hour since the Justice of the Peace

had been called. The policeman said that in the interest of my time, he would swear in the jury and I could make my statement and leave. He swore them in, first in Spanish and then in English. They reluctantly shuffled in, viewed the body and the gas jet, and I made my statement. The policeman translated it into Spanish. Just as I was about to leave, the Justice of the Peace arrived in a big rush with a cloud of dust and a splattering of gravel. He took his office very seriously, and was both pompous and dignified. He spoke only to the policeman. The swearing-in had to be repeated. He did the Spanish and the policeman did the English. The viewing of the body and my statement had to be repeated. Finally I was allowed to leave. The policeman notified the widow and arrangements were made about the body.

The victim of another accident was Father Kupper's housekeeper. One of the teachers who lived at his house backed her car into the housekeeper and knocked her down. In great agitation, the teacher came for a doctor. I was on duty so I was the one to go. The housekeeper's injury was slight—a twisted knee with no apparent fracture. I taped the knee and went back to Father Kupper's each day for the next several days to check on progress. Father Kupper was writing a book about the Penitentes. He was an interesting conversationalist, and on these visits I usually stayed a little while to talk. His house was set back about one quarter mile east of the highway. It was made of stone, one story high, and quite long. I would have liked to see the interior, but all I ever saw was the low-ceilinged, dark living room and the two steps which opened into a small private chapel.

Father Kupper had a Great Dane, "Tiny," about the size of a calf. At that time, I also had a dog, named "Skin 'n' Bones." He was a nervous, frightened stray when I adopted him. Dr. Bowen was not pleased. She was sure that he had fleas, needed a bath, and undoubtedly had worms. Miss Cole helped me bathe him in a tub in the backyard at the hospital. Much to our surprise, he liked it. I bought deworming medicine which was supposed to be followed with a dose of castor oil. Skin 'n' Bones obediently swallowed the capsules but would have nothing to do with the oil. According to the label, if he didn't get the oil, the capsules could poison him. I tried every way I could think of to get him to take it. Finally, in frustration, I threw myself down on the bed and cried, whereupon he went over to the spoon and licked up all of the oil.



*Skin n' bones*

Skin 'n' Bones was a real companion and followed me to and from the hospital. The first time he did that at night, I was frightened. I could hear heavy breathing and thought I was being followed. It was a great relief to find Skin 'n' Bones a short way behind me. While I was on a trip to Iowa, Skin 'n' Bones got sick. Dr. Bowen suspected rabies and had him shot. I was angry and sad. I shed many tears and knew I would miss my pal a great deal. Of course, there was nothing I could do.