

Belle Cooper Rinehart

The Rinehart Family Tree Filled with Physicians from the Early Years On ...

As an 18-month-old toddling along with a wagon train from Missouri to Oregon, Emily Belle Cooper's life story began with adventure that continued throughout her 82 years. Known as "Belle", she was the eldest of 15 children in the Cooper family that settled in northeastern Oregon. In her late teens, about 1881, Belle was married to Dr. Willard E. Rinehart of Summerville, Oregon. As a young physician, Dr. Rinehart received degrees from Bellevue Medical College of New York and Philadelphia Medical College, and then he came West and located in an area of Oregon that at the time was only reached by stage coach and freight teams.

In her first year of married life and pregnant with her first child, Belle was involved in a serious stage coach accident, suffering several broken leg bones and hip injuries. Five months after the accident, she gave birth to Willard Sayre Rinehart; two years later twin sons were born – Jackson Carle and Harvey Earl, and another son Phillip in 1888. All of these experiences gave Belle much knowledge in certain branches of medicine, and she became interested in medicine through assisting her husband in his general practice.



In 1894, the sudden death of Willard Rinehart prompted Belle to take up the study of medicine. With the assistance of her mother, caring for her four young sons, she was one of the first women physicians in Oregon, graduating from the University of Oregon Medical School (precursor to OHSU) in 1897. She returned to The Dalles to reopen her husband's office.

According to her memoirs, "I returned to begin the practice of medicine and, with inward fear, for there were four or five old established men MDs already entrenched – myself just fresh from medical college and a woman – but my name was on my office door and I must 'carry on.'" She traveled to New York for post-graduate study and later married Dr. E. E. Ferguson, a college classmate. Belle and Dr. Ferguson opened the first and very successful hospital in The Dalles, which included a training school for nurses. Belle was in charge of the obstetrical work, women's diseases and anesthetics at the hospital.



Graduates of The Dalles Nursing School - 1903. Standing at far right is Dr. Belle Cooper Rinehart; the first person in the second row is Ella Hankinson, who married Dr. Harvey E. Rinehart, the mother of Robert E. Rinehart.

In 1907, Belle and her husband traveled to Vienna to study obstetrics and regional anatomy. Returning to The Dalles, they continued their work for several years. Upon Dr. Ferguson's death, Belle again travelled to Vienna, and then established her medical practice in Portland, specializing in diseases of women and obstetrics with an office and hospital practice. Belle was finally forced into retirement by family obligations and severe arthritis which had developed in her injured hip. "After a period of strenuous work, ministering the best I might to the ills of humanity, I have retired to this ideal ocean resort (Seaside) on the northwest coast of Oregon, where tired nerves and the ravages of disease may be forgotten and one may live revigorated and tranquilly. And, in conclusion, may I not add the ripened observation that only a woman, trained to know, can fully understand and sympathize and help with all the problems of womankind," according to Belle Cooper Rinehart (Ferguson) in 1927.



Circa 1917 or 1918 ... (from left) Daniel Cooper (father of Belle Cooper Rinehart), Robert Rinehart (1 or 2 years of age - Dr. Harry Rinehart's father) and Belle Cooper Rinehart on the beach in Seaside.

She was a member of the AMA, the Vienna Medical Association, the Oregon State Medical Society, and a member of the city and county medical societies. Her twin sons – J. Carle and Harvey E., followed in their parents' footsteps, becoming doctors. And, it was his mother's suffering with arthritis that led Dr. Harvey Rinehart to specialize in the development of treatments for this painful disease. Continuing the Rinehart family tradition of physicians, Belle's grandson, Robert E. and great-grandson Harry H. Rinehart also became doctors, caring for patients here in Wheeler.

Belle passed away in 1944 leaving an extraordinary legacy from her first footsteps across the Plains as a toddler to her training of nurses in the Columbia Gorge and study overseas. She gives credit and thanks to her mother, "...whose encouragement, intelligence and ability imparted strength and determination."