Woman doctor
Career spans 65 years

By JOANNE DENNIS

Dr. Irene Dunn wouldn't change a single thing if she lived her life again.

"I had my cake and ate it, too," states the handsome 86-year-old woman doctor, who grew up in Syracuse, and spent her early years of practice here on the city's north side.

"I always wanted to be a doctor, and I was encouraged, not only by parents, but by my fellow students in the class of 1909 of the medical school at Syracuse University," she adds.

"That was long before the days of the women's lib movement. I don't ever remember being discriminated against because I was a woman. If you could do the work, you were respected in the field, man or woman."

Dr. Dunn is visiting her cousin, Mrs. Esther Hafner Horan, in the Skyline Apartments for the next two weeks. She came back to attend her 65th Syracuse University class reunion.

Dr. Dunn was one of two women graduates in a class of 33.

"I lecture at colleges on the west coast, where I now reside," she says. "Many of the women students ask me about discrimination in the early days. I can say from my experience that I never noticed that I was pushed into the background because of my sex. Granted, I didn't ride the ambulance like the male interns, but you must remember that in those days there was only room for a stretcher in the ambulance, and the interns had to hang on the back of the vehicle."

Chief Rival

Dr. Dunn specialized in pediatrics, but "I took anything that came my way," she says. She opened her office on the corner of Pond and Park Streets, and she says that one of her chief rivals was Dr. Marianna Herbert, the famed "rag doctor," who was the subject of an article about her unusual power to diagnose and treat by means of using a cloth. Dr. Herbert is a legend on Syracuse's north side.

Charles Jost, of North Syracuse, grew up on Syracuse's north side, and remembers Dr. Dunn from the early days of her practice.

"I consulted her as a patient," he recalls. Jost is the same age as Dr. Dunn. "I remember that at first I was hesitant because she was a woman doctor but as soon as I went to her, I knew she was very good. She had a fine practice and was respected by everyone."

She also handled many obstetrical cases. She recalls one of her early calls to deliver a baby.

"In those days the mothers didn't often come for pre-natal care," she says. "They would send one of the children to announce that 'Ma's ready,' and I'd grab my bag and walk or take the street car to the home. One day I was summoned to deliver a baby upstairs over a store. I climbed the stairs and found two little children asleep, the mother in labor and the father dead drunk in front of her. I kicked and pulled and tugged but I couldn't move him. So I just straddled him and delivered the mother."

Dr. Dunn adds that hospitals were not equipped to handle a lot of cases then. Mothers didn't mind a woman doctor delivering them, because most of them were used to midwives.

Before her junior year of medical school, Dr. Dunn was asked by a physician if she would like to help out at St. Mary's to avoid a diphtheria epidemic.

"It was probably the best training I had during medical school," she recalls. "I was at the hospital from July until October, and sometimes we were so busy that I slept on the delivery table."

No Surgeons

Dr. Dunn adds that it was expected that women doctors would enter the field of pediatrics, gynecology and obstetrics. There were no women surgeons.

During medical school, she met a young law student, Frank Dunn, and the two were married later and moved to California. The Dunns had three children, and Dr. Dunn became a school physician in Los Angeles. She continued to practice until her retirement about 15 years ago.

Her husband passed away, and also her son, the late Frank Dunn. Her daughters are Mrs. Audrey Levitt, director of the education for the mentally retarded and physically handicapped of Santa Clara, Calif.; and Mrs. Diedre McMahon. Dr. Dunn has 12 grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren. One is Don DeFrancisco, who is finishing his residency in psychiatry.

Hijacked

Dr. Dunn is widely travelled, and has been all over the world. She was once hijacked on a ship between Florida and South America, and kept at sea for 12 days.

"I've had a lot of adventure in my life, and that's why I wouldn't change it," she says. "I advise women students where I lecture to go after what you want and work for it."