

**Dr. Mrs. Marie Louise (DePew) Crothers** (1833-1920), wife of well-respected physician and druggist Dr. Eli Kirk Crothers, was one of the first successful female physicians in Central Illinois. Louise, “Bloomington’s pioneer woman physician,” earned her M.D. and established her own practice at a time when very few women had achieved that level of mastery within the profession.<sup>1</sup>

Marie Louise DePew was born in Indianapolis, Indiana on July 19, 1833. At the age of seven, Louise made her way to Bloomington with her father Elijah DePew, a successful businessman who made a name for himself in the dry-goods trade.<sup>2</sup> Elijah was a dedicated Whig turned Republican, well acquainted with Judge David Davis and future President Abraham Lincoln. Louise is known to have highly valued her family’s connection with the sixteenth President—which began first with her father’s general correspondence and later continued with her husband’s hiring of Lincoln for his defense in the infamous “Chicken Bone” case of 1855.<sup>3</sup> As stated in her obituary, Louise was “considered as an authority” whenever a question about the President was raised.<sup>4</sup> To solidify the connection further, the land along Jefferson Street on which the residence of the Crothers was built was once owned by Lincoln—though the land had exchanged hands more than once before the Crothers attained ownership.<sup>5</sup>

Little is known about Louise prior to her marriage to fellow physician Dr. E.K. Crothers on May 1, 1851. Louise preceded the arrival of her husband in the area by ten years and, apart from a brief stint on the east coast while completing her medical degree, was a resident of Bloomington until her death in 1920. At the point of her arrival in Bloomington in 1840 the city—like the rest of the nation—was in “financial distress.”<sup>6</sup> Despite this fact the city continued to grow. Between the years 1845 and 1850, the population of Bloomington increased from 800 people to 1,611. The year 1850, notably coinciding with E.K.’s move to Bloomington, signifies the incorporation of the city and “appears to mark the commencement of an era of enterprise” for the community.<sup>7</sup> It was with the start of this new era of commercial and economic prosperity that Louise and E.K. began their married life.

The doctors Crothers had nine children, four of whom lived to adulthood.<sup>8</sup> Those that survived included two sons, Noble E. and E.K. Jr., and two daughters, Louise (Lulu) M. and

---

<sup>1</sup> “Death Comes to Dr. Crothers: Bloomington’s Pioneer Physician Expires Suddenly Yesterday at Age of 89, Mother Rachel Crothers,” *The Pantagraph*, June 1, 1920, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *The Biographical Record*, 471.

It is known that Louise had at least two siblings—a brother, John R. DePew, and a sister, Mrs. Annie Cook. It is not known whether these siblings made the trip from Indiana to Illinois, or whether they were born after the family’s arrival. “Death Comes to Dr. Crothers.”

<sup>3</sup> “Death Comes to Dr. Crothers.”

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> “Site of Crothers Home Once Owned By Lincoln,” *The Pantagraph*, October 30, 1926, p. 9-A col. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *The History of McLean County, Illinois Illustrated* (Chicago: Wm. Le Baron, Jr. & Co., 1879), 336.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 337.

<sup>8</sup> On January 23, 1854, the eldest Crothers child (unnamed) suffered a tragic fate when the dress she was wearing caught fire from the stove. Mr. Dr. Crothers was with a patient and the rest of the family was at church. The wife of Mr. J.L. Green, a neighbor, became aware of the situation and was able to smother the flames with a blanket, but not before the girl was badly burned. Two other local doctors, Drs. Chew and Dunlap, attended to the Crothers’ daughter, but their attempts proved futile. She died the following day. The girl was six years old. “Accident From

Rachel A. Both sons went on to make careers as jewelers, whereas Lulu followed in her parents' footsteps, becoming the first female pharmacist in Bloomington.<sup>9</sup> Rachel, the most famous of the Crothers's children, followed her artistic aspirations to New York where she established herself as a fairly esteemed female playwright during the course of the 1920s. Closer investigation into the work and career of Rachel, as will later be explored, could serve to elucidate somewhat the role of Louise as a wife and mother in the Crothers household.

Louise's marriage to E.K. ultimately served to foster her own interest in the medical profession. At the age of 40, Louise began to educate herself by reading *Gray's Anatomy* and assisting her husband in his practice. One should note here that, Louise began her studies much like any other aspiring male doctor of the time would have. Nineteenth century medical training was received in a variety of ways, most often amounting to a combination of apprenticeships and a few courses taken in medical theory.<sup>10</sup> In 1877-78, Louise enrolled in the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia and went on to continue her studies at the Women's Medical College of Chicago in 1880-81. While in Chicago, Louise also took a specialized course in gynecological studies at Rush Medical College that she was able to secure through the help of Professor W.H. Byford, a professional acquaintance of her husband.<sup>11</sup> In the winter of 1882, Louise returned to Philadelphia to complete her studies and graduated with the class of 1883.<sup>12</sup> On several occasions, E.K. visited his wife at school when his own opportunities for professional development brought him out east.<sup>13</sup>

When Louise returned to central Illinois after completing her medical degree in Philadelphia, her husband was only 10 years from death. As E.K.'s health and energy dwindled, Louise was able to take on the larger part of the responsibilities in the practice, aiding "her husband very materially in his office practice."<sup>14</sup> Louise is considered to be the "first successful female physician in Bloomington," but reportedly "met with a good deal of opposition" in the

Fire," *The Pantagraph*, January 23, 1854, p. 3 col. 2. One should take note that J.L. Green was father to Fred and Harry Green (the Flying LaVans) and was owner of the confectionary store that preceded Beich's Candy Company.

<sup>9</sup> The first schools of pharmacy in the United States were founded as early as the 1820s. However, due to nineteenth century doctors' general practice of dispensing their own drugs, pharmacists and doctors were often at competition with one another throughout the 1800s. Lulu graduated with her degree from the Northwestern College of Pharmacy. She received her license allowing her to "compound and dispense drugs" in February 1897. At the time that she received her license, Lulu was working at the Corn Belt drug store. "Practices Pharmacy: Miss Lulu Crothers the Only Lady Pharmacist in the City of Bloomington," *The Pantagraph*, February 18, 1897, p. 5 col. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Lucinda McCray Beier, *A Matter of Life and Death: Health, Illness and Medicine in McLean County, 1830-1995* (Bloomington, IL: McLean County Historical Society, 1996), 28.

<sup>11</sup> "Death Comes to Dr. Crothers."

This trend toward specialization within the medical profession tended to increase in line with the wider acceptance of germ theory as an explanation for communicable diseases and illness. Popularized by the well recognized Louis Pasteur, and later further developed by Robert Koch, germ theory challenges the previously accepted miasma (or "bad air") theory by stating that [some] diseases can be caused by microorganisms, or pathogens. These pathogens, whether they be bacterium, protists, fungi, etc., are the cause of infectious disease.

<sup>12</sup> *Portrait and Biographical Album of McLean County, IL* (Chicago: Chapman Brothers, 1887), 138.

<sup>13</sup> *The Pantagraph*, February 10, 1883, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Biographical History of the Members of the McLean County Medical Society of Illinois: One Hundredth Anniversary Edition* (Bloomington, IL: McLean County Medical Society, 1954), 33.

<https://archive.org/details/biographicalhist00mcle> Date accessed August 7, 2015.

At the time, Eli's practice and the Crothers' family residence were located at 118 N. Main Street.

pursuit of her professional endeavors.<sup>15</sup> To no great extent did this opposition come from her husband. The record seems to show that Louise was free to conduct her practice out of her office at the Crothers's later residence at 414 East Jefferson Street with E.K.'s blessing.<sup>16</sup> In September 1887 the *Pantagraph* reported that the Doctors Crothers' *together* established a new infirmary and that the news was a "matter of importance to the people."<sup>17</sup> Following her husband's death in 1893 from diabetes, Louise continued to actively practiced medicine until roughly 1905; at which point she took to spending time in the south recuperating from the "strain" of her profession.<sup>18</sup>

Prior to retiring, Louise served for four years as the attending physician at the Girls' Industrial Home in Bloomington.<sup>19</sup> Even before a location for the home—then named the McLean County Woman's Industrial Home—was secured, Louise was "made physician in charge with power to select a consulting staff of five other physicians."<sup>20</sup>

Her service to the home is just one example of the various activities Louise was involved within the community. As stated in the concluding words of her obituary, Louise was "a life-long member of the Christian church and despite her professional career, which occupied so much of her time, she was active in spiritual affairs. She was a woman of strong intellect, was possessed of an indomitable will and was withal a woman of unusual capability. She was devoted to her home and family and her heart and soul were dedicated to the welfare of her children. Her death marks the passing of one of the city's most lovable characters, a woman whose memory will be cherished wherever she was known."<sup>21</sup>

Other records, though not providing an entirely contradictory account, appear to emphasize Louise's more reserved and particular nature. On more than one occasion, Louise is described as preferring the house to be quiet as to not be disturbed in her studies.<sup>22</sup> To Rachel, her mother's study of *Gray's Anatomy* meant one thing: "Keep quiet. Mustn't talk to mother."<sup>23</sup> When Louise first enrolled in classes, Rachel was too young to stay at home and thus accompanied her mother in her travels east. While Louise was enrolled at school, Rachel stayed with an aunt in Wellesley, Massachusetts. It was during these formative years when Rachel was more or less forced to keep herself entertained, that the youngest Crothers developed her love for writing and for the stage. Despite her parents' opinion that the theatre was "an abomination

<sup>15</sup> *The Biographical Record*, 471.

<sup>16</sup> "Notice," *The Pantagraph* Sept. 17, 1887, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> "The Crothers' Infirmary," *The Pantagraph*, September 5, 1887, p. 3. col. 5.

<sup>18</sup> "Death Comes to Dr. Crothers."

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *The Pantagraph*, February 5, 1889, p. 3, col. 4.

The Girls' Industrial Home was founded on March 12, 1889 as a "place to take care of girls who were left temporarily without parental care." The Home first occupied a building at the corner of Grove and State Streets in Bloomington. Mrs. Dr. Crothers was a member of the committee assigned to secure a location for the home. "Rotary Club Aids In Building Campaign For Girls' Industrial Home," *The Pantagraph*, February 25, 1916, p. 6 col. 4-5; *The Pantagraph*, April 11, 1889, p. 4 col. 6.

<sup>21</sup> The church referred to here is First Christian Church. "Death Comes to Dr. Crothers."

<sup>22</sup> "Crothers" (1939), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Henry James Forman, "The Story of Rachel Crothers," Kessler vol. 3, 23.

aimed to entice young feet in the ways of sin,” and a “remote and somewhat wicked thing,”<sup>24</sup> Rachel’s writing—and more broadly, her view on the role of women in the early twentieth century—was quite obviously influenced by Louise’s efforts to be both mother and physician, “an unusual and distinctive achievement for a woman in the 1800s.”<sup>25</sup>

A biography of Rachel included in *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide From Colonial Times to the Present* states that, “[d]espite concern with fair play in sexual conduct, most of C.’s plays show women happy in the traditional wife-mother role, frequently eschewing a career and independence in favor of resting comfortably in the arms of a strong man who will take care of them.”<sup>26</sup> This finite estimation is complicated, however, by Rachel’s 1911 production *He and She*—the play believed to be inspired by the marriage of her parents, the doctors Crothers.<sup>27</sup> As described by the playwright herself, in *He and She* the female protagonist, Ann Hereford, “wins a commission for her sculpture; one of the losers in the competition is her husband. When Ann suddenly realizes that she has been ignoring her daughter, she turns her prize winning designs over to her husband.” That being said, the play is also rife with peripheral characters whose perspectives on the relationship between men and women range from that of a wife who continues to pursue a career in journalism rather than placate her husband, to that of a self-sufficient woman who wants nothing more than to abandon her career in exchange for the life of a wife and mother, to that of a daughter who has arguably received too little attention from her equally active professional parents.<sup>28</sup> One must not be too tempted to speculate as to what extent Rachel’s writings are autobiographical in nature, but to add to the layered nuances of the production, and to the real life character of Louise Crothers, one should note that Rachel returned to the stage in the revival run of the show in New York in 1920, casting herself in the leading role of Ann Hereford (the character the playwright presumably based on her mother).<sup>29</sup> No research suggests whether or not Louise ever saw the show.

Louise Crothers died unexpectedly on May 31, 1920. Though she had been ill for two years prior, had suffered a broken hip following a fall, and had contracted a cold weeks before her death, Louise had appeared to be making progress, and thus her passing was seemingly a surprise.<sup>30</sup> Louise was survived by her two daughters, Lulu and Rachel, and one son, Noble.<sup>31</sup> Louise is buried beside her husband at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 24; *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1942), 333.

<sup>25</sup> John MacNicolas ed., *Twentieth-Century American Dramatists Part I: A-J* (Gale Research Co., 1981), 135.

<sup>26</sup> *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Ungar, 1979), 429.

<sup>27</sup> “Rachel Crothers: Bloomington-Normal’s Native Daughter in the Broadway Theatre,” *Bloomington Normal Magazine* (March 1979), 9.

<sup>28</sup> David Sterritt, “A strikingly modern look at feminism -- in a 1910 drama; *He and She* A play by Rachel Crothers. Presented by BAM Theater Company at the Brooklyn Academy of Music” (June 5, 1980), <http://www.csmonitor.com/1980/0605/060503.html>. Date accessed July 3, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> “In HE AND SHE Ann Hereford wins a commission for her sculpture; one of the losers in the competition is her husband. When Ann suddenly realizes that she has been ignoring her daughter, she turns her prize winning designs over to her husband.” “Rachel Crothers,” *Bloomington Normal Magazine* (March 1979), 9. For another synopsis of the show, consult MacNicolas, “*Twentieth-Century American Dramatists*,” 137.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

By: Hannah Johnson, 2015

---

<sup>31</sup> E.K. Jr. preceded his mother in death by four years when he “died suddenly” on February 19, 1916. “The Last of Earth: Funeral Services of E.K. Crothers Held at Masonic Temple—Knights Templar Attend,” *The Pantagraph*, February 23, 1916, p. 10 col. 3-4.