

**Interview with Dr. J.P. McDowell**

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**Interviewed by C. Perry Schenk**

**Schenk:** We were just talking here, Dr. McDowell, and you were mentioning something about Dr. Freeslaben. I know a lot of the folks in the community here are so well acquainted with the memory of Dr. Freeslaben and you were just telling me a little bit of where he had graduated and where he had come from. Would you care to go over that again, please?

**McDowell:** He graduated from Western, I believe they called it, the Western Medical School down in Indiana. He came up and bought out the doctors that had been up there for some years and this doctor moved away. Then when Freeslaben went back to some town in Indiana, where he had been going to school, he'd gotten sick, pneumonia or something, and one of the nurses that took care of him took a fancy to him, and he to her and he went back to the old hospital there where he had been in during the time of his illness and he married her. While he was gone for about a month, then Dr. Rand, who was working down in Anoka, so some doctor down there and Rand wanted to get away from there and get an office of his own, and he came up and moved into town and Freeslaben came back, why, he bought this other man out and paid him a sum for his practice, which was common in those days to a certain extent. He was pretty mad at Rand moving in there. They began to fight each other from then on, and neither one of them got much business. But Rand finally decided to build this house and he built this house that I bought from him. He undertook to take dead head logs that had sunk in the river by the old saw mill, just

above where the Sauk Rapids bridge is now, and was going to have those logs sawed up into lumber. But when they came to get them out, after they had spent all summer getting them out and getting them dried they were like so much cork, they weren't good for lumber at all, they weren't even good fire wood. But he was building that house at the same time and he used to sit down there and get the logs out of the river, and try to keep them working, men who owed him money, and so he went broke, that's why he left, he lost his business because he was sitting down at the river too much of the time.

**Schenk:** That was Dr. Rand.

**McDowell:** That was Dr. Rand.

**Schenk:** You were saying he was a big man?

**McDowell:** Yes, Dr. Freeslaben told me and somebody else told me that very few people ever saw Rand on a scale to get weighed. But they knew he weighed over 500 pounds and that somebody saw him get weighed one time and they found out how much he weighed, but it was something over 500 lbs.

**Schenk:** Well when you'd get into a Model-T Ford with him, why you didn't have much room, did you?

**McDowell:** No, when I brought him out we had to go over to Foley to get the abstract title made out and transfer property to me. He suggested a ride over in his horse and buggy. He had a specially made buggy with a special wide seat. I said we'll take my Model-T Ford and it won't take so long to go over and back. That was a mistake on my part—one way because I got him

into the car seat and then I got in and I had one hip up on the seat cushion and the other one up on the arm rest all the way down and back. Oh boy, that was some ride.

**Schenk:** I bet you had a bent back when you got home.

**McDowell:** I'll say so.

**Schenk:** Did you offer again?

**McDowell:** No. Firstus Lonsdale tells stories about how she'd see him getting into his little bob sled he had to drive around with in the wintertime. He always had some boys take care of his horse and hitch the horse up, and bring it out front and tie it to a granite post out there in front of the house. Then when he wanted to go out on a call why, he'd go out, get into his rig and go. Well when the snow came and he had to ride in this little bob sled he'd step his foot on top of the runners with one foot and then he'd step into the box with the other foot, and then some of the time his foot on the runner would get caught and when he would step into the box and put the weight on that foot, why, it would put the box down on his other foot, and he couldn't pull the other foot out, and he'd just stand there; and Firstus Lonsdale used to say that she would hear him standing swearing because he couldn't get his foot out of the box and he'd have to get down off of it. Get out of the box and get the weight off of that foot, so he could get into the sled.

**Schenk:** He had himself trapped.

**McDowell:** He had himself trapped. But he finally made it some way or another and got in there. He wasn't much of a walker because he was so heavy. One time—he was a great baseball fan—he organized the baseball team there. They'd raffled off a car, a little Buick car. And when they drew, somebody drew the numbers out of a hat for the car, and Rand won the car, but he never

could ride in it because he couldn't fit behind the wheel, because he was too fat. So he had to sell it.

**Schenk:** Was the flour mill down there at the time that you were there, Dr. McDowell?

**McDowell:** No, there was no flour mill there, but there was an elevator down there. Fernanda Niles had an elevator down there along the railroad track. I don't think there was any flour mill there at the time.

**Schenk:** I was wondering because I know that I have heard Oscar Greek make some mention of it.

**McDowell:** Yes, they used to have a flour mill there, but I think that was when I came there. Maybe that cyclone blew that down, possibly, I'm not sure.

**Schenk:** It's entirely possible that it was gone as a result of that. Were there many stone sheds going, or did they come up after you were there?

**McDowell:** They came up mostly after I was there. Speaking about this flour mill that might have been blown away, because the court house was blown away. The court house was what's now a square, I guess they call it. Right across from Freeslaben's new house that he built several years later. Dr. Selick and Dr. Alden have it now and are using it. But right across the street from them I think they have a fire alarm, a fire bell over there of some kind haven't they?

**Schenk:** They put up a fire hall there, and then the school bought that a number of years ago and converted it into an industrial arts and agriculture department, and then it became a storage place, and just this year it's being converted back for classroom purposes, and then there's a tennis court out there in front of that on the side street. That property belongs to the school now.

**McDowell:** Oh, well, anyway, it was just across from Freeslaben's house and when they had a fire they would call Dr. Freeslaben and he would run across the street, not across Grand Avenue, but across the street and ring a bell or turn it on or whatever it was. I think they had a fire bell there. And then the fire fighters would come there and get a little cart out and go up there and fight the fire with that, but they didn't have any fire truck at that time any more than a little hose cart.

**Schenk:** Well Dr. Freeslaben-did he continue his practice there in Sauk Rapids, or did he come over to St. Cloud?

**McDowell:** No, he stayed over in Sauk Rapids until he died.

**Schenk:** He was there a number of years then.

**McDowell:** Oh yes, he was there, oh, I don't remember just how long ago it was that he did die, it wasn't too long, but...

**Schenk:** You know, this kind of makes me wonder, Dr. McDowell, I don't know if you want to answer this question or not, but how many years did you practice medicine?

**McDowell:** I practiced from 1911 until 1966.

**Schenk:** That's...

**McDowell:** That's fifty five years.

**Schenk:** A doctor never does retire, does he?

**McDowell:** If he does retire, he goes into something else. He doesn't quit work, though. I retired when my wife died in '66, yeah, '66.

**Schenk:** But you've been active ever since.

**McDowell:** Yes, I've taken on this coronary work, and I've been active ever since that.

**Schenk:** But all, let's get back to another thing that we talked about a while ago. That was the reason some of the people were a little bit hesitant to go to the hospital, you possibly ran into some of these cases, in some cases they just wouldn't go.

**McDowell:** Yes, to show you what they were like, they had one case that was a child that had what was called summer complaint in those days, it was diarrhea and intestinal infection. It was due to the food, the mother's milk didn't agree with him, if she had any. He was a patient of Dr. Freeslaben at that time and he didn't seem to get anything that would help it, so he gave it up and he told them, "It's no use, the child's going to die, and there's no use in him coming over and taking your money anymore, he's going to die." So she called me to see it, the mother called me over to see the boy. I went over to see it and I said well, you are either going to have a nurse here or take the child to the hospital, I'd rather have it in the hospital. She said if it's going to die I'd rather have it die at home. So I said I'd get a nurse from the hospital so I brought a nurse over and put the baby on a butter milk diet, and in a week's time it was changed from a starving baby into a pretty healthy looking baby. It was taking nourishment and getting along fine. But that was a new treatment for them at that time. It worked out very fine. Then there was a number of others- we had one woman out in the country a couple of miles, and her doctor from St. Cloud had been trying to get her to the hospital and have a gall bladder operation because if she didn't she could die. Well, she would die in on piece, she wouldn't go to the hospital and be operated on. So she stayed home and the doctor quit coming. So she called me out there to see her and she was all green from absorption of bile and I told her there was no use in going to the hospital now,

see, she wanted me to take her to the hospital now and operate on her. I said there's no use she couldn't stand an operation, and she'd die from the operation, and I told her she was going to die in a short while anyway, it'll be only a few hours, and this was in the early part of the afternoon that I saw her and before night she died. And then there were others. She was about a 65 year old woman. There were others who were just as bad about it as she was. If she had been taken care of earlier it would have been alright, but most of the doctors in those days, there were very few doctors that did any surgery, and one of the reasons was that nobody wanted any surgery done.

**Schenk:** Well, how were the surgical facilities at that time, Dr. McDowell?

**McDowell:** Well, the operating room in the hospital of St. Rachel's was a very small affair. You couldn't run a cart into it. You couldn't wheel your patient into the operating room because the doors were too narrow for the cart, and so Sister Elizabeth used to, when she brought any patients up from her floor, would pick them up off the cart by herself and carry them in and put them on the table. And when they were through with the operation, why she would carry them out and put them on the cart in the hallway and then they would take them down in the elevator to their room wherever it was. Surgical floor was the third floor of the hospital and it was also the obstetrician floor. But they kept the surgical patients and the medical patients down on the first and second floors.

**Schenk:** It was certainly a big improvement then when they built a new hospital.

**McDowell:** Oh yes, that was certainly a big improvement to get the new hospital there.

**Schenk:** Did you have some other cases there that you wanted to mention in connection with going to the hospital Dr. McDowell?

**McDowell:** There was some others here if I could...

**Schenk:** But generally speaking this was a pretty common attitude these people did have throughout, their hesitancy to go to the hospital.

**McDowell:** Oh yes. Vannetten was another one. He was a captain in the army, I guess that's why they called him Captain Vannetten. But anyway, that was during the civil war and then he came up there and he was practicing law. He got some rheumatic pains or arthritis or one thing or another. He was in such agony with these pains that he told the man in the office with him that he was going home and starve that disease right out of him, if it killed him. He went home and for sixteen days he didn't eat anything, and he went ahead and died. Called me just an hour before he died and I told him it was too late, there was nothing we could do for him because he waited so long. He wanted me to give him a laxative of some kind and I said it's too late now, a laxative wouldn't do you any good and a doctor wouldn't do you any good. There's no way of getting any action on you. And all it would mean would be torture if I give you anything. You ain't gonna' last more than a couple of hours anyhow, so there's no use in torturing yourself at this time. An in about an hour's time he was dead.

**Schenk:** Well, actually there has been quite a lot of advance as far as the different medicines are concerned, there's more medicines to use nowadays as compared to when you first started.

**McDowell:** Well, they're using a lot of different medicines nowadays. But there was one case that I had in particular that always stood out above most of the rest of them. I was called to see a little boy that was about nine years old that his doctor had given up any chance of his living and told his folks there was no use in coming back any more. They didn't want to give up and they called me over to see him. I went down and saw him, he was all molted then, looked like he was



going to die, as far as that went. But I told them, "If you'll take him over to the hospital I might have a chance of saving him." Well, no, they wouldn't take him to the hospital. They figured if he's going to die, we want him to die at home. I wanted to get a nurse for him if I was going to do anything. Because I won't start in a hospital without a nurse or else take him to the hospital. They let me bring a nurse over. So I took my car and went over to the hospital and picked up a nurse, a young girl from Cold Spring, a Miss Sauer. I told her, I hope you'll be able to bring this child through because I've never lost a straight out pneumonia case so far. If that's the kind of case it is, I wish you'd have called somebody else, because I've never lost one either. So I said alright, we'll both have to work on it and try and save him, and we did. The child came out of it and lived through. For all I know he's still living. But that was a good many years ago of old age by this time.

**Schenk:** Alright, Dr. McDowell, just kind of offhand, what would you say was probably one of the toughest cases you ever ran into? Now I know that you have had a lot of difficult ones, but possibly in addition to this particular one, some other one may stand out in your mind.

**McDowell:** Well, I don't know, every case seemed to me was important at the time of it, any severe cases like these I've mentioned. There's one thing that I've done here, as I mentioned before I ever went to Vienna in 1925, and took some special work in surgery in a brand new college of obstetrics. I put in a year's time there, then before that I had developed a method of taking out a gall bladder without the danger that all surgeons were confronted with in those days. That was cutting off the blood vessel that went to the gall bladder, and because it was such a hard vessel to find, if you accidentally cut it off while you were loosening up the gall bladder it was hard to find the stump and stop the hemorrhaging and they'd bleed to death pretty quickly. So I decide I would just peel off the outside of the gall bladder and take the lining out whole and in

that way I wouldn't come in contact with this large blood vessel at all. And I did it for 20-25 years before anybody else did it as far as I knew, and the Mayo's came out with a report in one of the medical journals about doing it down in Rochester. And I'd been doing that with my gall bladder cases for a long time. Not because I thought I was such a good surgeon but because I was afraid to do it the way the rest of them were doing the operation.

**Schenk:** In other words, it was meaning that much more safety for the patient.

**McDowell:** Yes, it was a chance to do a little work without endangering the patient's life so much. But they had one man that was run over by a railroad train, part of a freight train. He was up on top of the boxcar, he was a brakeman, and he was running along on top of the boxcars, there was sleet on the roof, and he slipped and fell down between a couple of cars. It crushed his leg right below the knees, about one inch to one and a half inches below the knee joint down about four or five inches, it was crushed between the wheels and the rails. They rushed him over to the hospital and called me over there because the railroad doctors, neither one of them would go over and take care of him until they found out who he was and how bad he was hurt, and the other one said he was just getting out of bed in the morning, and he was too old to go over and do that, anyway. So they called me. They had reported that a railroad man had been run over to an undertaker that had an office over on the east side on St. Germain St. there and told him that they wanted him to bring a hearse over there and take the patient to the hospital. So they called me and told me to go over to the house and see the patient right away. So when I got over there the man's wife, the undertaker's wife was standing outside the door waiting for me. She told me to go right over to the hospital—that they'd taken him over there. I went right over to the hospital and they were just carrying him upstairs then, and I said take him right in and put him on the operating table, which they did. And then we cut his clothes off him and off his legs and I got

some one, one of the nuns was giving an anesthetic, or, no we had somebody else was giving the anesthetic, I don't remember, some doctor gave it in those days. And so Sister Solomny was assistant surgeon in that room. So she and I finished amputating and sewed up the flesh over them and hoped that it would unite and grow together, and cover up the wound. But he had lost so much blood that it didn't grow together so they had to send him to Minneapolis to somebody down there who knew something about grafting. And they had him in the hospital for some time afterwards. But I had him in the hospital here for about three weeks before he was able to travel. So the next time I saw him was one day there was a fellow who drove up by my house, over there at the Rapids, there was two men in the car, and the man that wasn't doing the driving came in and said there's a man out in the car that wants to see you. So I went out to see what it was and here it was this man who had had his legs amputated and he was driving a car and he had a Ford Model T. Had it fixed up some way that he could manage to drive it anyway and some way he could handle the brakes too, I think they had a lever to use for brakes, a hand lever instead of the feet if you wanted. But anyway, he was living up at Park Rapids at that time selling Real Estate and the money he got out of the Railway Company was enough to buy 80 acres of cheap land up there. I saw him once after that. I drove up through Park Rapids to spend the weekend at Itasca Park. So as I was coming home I saw a man alongside the road with a scythe, and He'd swing the scythe a couple of times and he was leaning on crutches when he was swinging the scythe and he's swing it a couple of times and he'd move the crutches ahead so he could take another couple of swings, and I was riding with Dr. Dean Lasbean from the Dental School in Minneapolis. He and his wife came up and picked us up and the four of us went up there and stayed overnight. I told Dr. Lasbean to stop I wanted to see that man, I think I know

him. Sure enough, there was the man whose legs I amputated for him. And he was just barely making a living up there selling Real Estate. But he seemed to be very happy to be alive.

**Schenk:** I'm very happy that you managed to catch him in time to take care of things. Well, Dr. McDowell, you've certainly had a lot of wonderful experiences and I know a lot of moments of great anxiety. We've certainly appreciated our having spent your time this evening talking with us and trying to get some of this on record as to the experiences of a doctor in some of the earlier days of medicine, a little bit of the history and flavor of medicine as it has come about in our Sauk Rapids area.

**McDowell:** Yes, that's very interesting to me but there was one thing that I learned while I was driving up to Sauk Rapids from Sartell. Across the river there from Sauk Rapids they didn't have a bridge in Sartell at the time. And when I got up past Abe Smittens place there was a meadow, some of the time used for a pasture, between the road and the river, but that had two trenches coming up the river. There were about as far apart as the wheels of a wagon, and these trenches were about four or six inches deep and about four to six inches wide. Maybe eight inches wide. I wondered for some time what they were, why these trenches were there, it looked like an old wagon road of some kind. On day when Mrs. McDowell was riding by there, I don't know of any wheels that would make tracks like that, but she said maybe that's from an old ox cart that used to board the river here. I said, "We'll just stop up to Sartel and find out, because Bill Sartel should know about it, if there was an old ox cart road coming down." So we stopped and asked him about it and he said yes that's where the old ox carts used to come down from up around Devil's Lake and up in the Red River Valley there and bring down the furs that the trappers got up in there and they'd bring them down there and then they'd ford the river right back of Abe Smitten's place. Abe Smitten's place is where Mr. Shoe the county attorney lived for a number

of years and now Myra Sartel Camel lives there in that place now. Not in the same house but right on the property there. When Mr. Smitten died and Mrs. Smitten died why, the place was sold and Myra kept part of it for herself. And that was quite an event. Then Bill Sartel told me about the one time the Winnebago came across there and chased the Sioux Indians across the river there because the Winnebago were supposed to have the territory east of the Mississippi River, and the Sioux were supposed to stay on the west side of the river south of there. But they came over, some of the Sioux came into Benton County and they desecrated the grave of some Indian Prince and so these Indians got out in mass and chased the Sioux back across the river and followed them clear down to the hill down this side where they have to ski slide down and the Sioux went on top of this hill and thought they were safe up there so the other Indians just surrounded the hill and they finally shot a lot of the Sioux and the rest of them made a break and got away and they didn't bother them anymore. That was the last of the Sioux that infested that part of the county. Those Winnebago came back and they went into a salon on the streets of Sauk Rapids and they had a whole sack of Indian heads were they had not only killed the Sioux but had cut the heads off and put them in a gunny sack and brought them along with them and they set a big tall pole in the middle of main street in Sauk Rapids and put one of those heads on top of it. When they came into this building, I think they said it was a saloon but I'm not sure about that, but anyway it was a store building. They took hold of the bottom of those gunny sacks and shook the heads all over the floor there on the store floor. They said it was somewhat of a gruesome sight.

**Schenk:** Yes, I can imagine.

**McDowell:** But it stopped the Sioux from going into their territory. The Sioux were horsemen and hunters and they stayed out on the prairie land more and hunted buffalo. Then the other

Indians stayed on the east side of the area. It was more of a wooded area and they hunted deer and they were foot Indians they weren't so much horsemen, they weren't so much warriors as the Sioux were.

Schenk: They were more of the woodland?

**McDowell:** Yes.

**Schenk:** And so even right here this particular area has been the dividing point all the way through hasn't it?

**McDowell:** Oh yes, Mr. Fletcher he used to be a county official there in the courthouse before it blew down at the time they had the cyclone here. He tells about how they used to go out at the edge of Sauk Rapids there, just beyond Sauk Rapids a little ways he'd walk out there and hunt deer out in the woods out there. And it's all cleared off now, you wouldn't think that there had been woods there. One thing that was kind of a laugh to us when we came here, they told us about this courthouse blowing down or burning down. I think the courthouse burned down.

**Schenk:** I think that's right.

**McDowell:** Yes, after the thing was all burned down some woman's family there didn't have much of anything in the first place, was crying around there and they said that we lost all of our history of our ancestors in that fire. So that was a terrible calamity. Then they told about how Mrs. Fletcher had such an expensive set of silverware that was burned, they kept it in the safe there in the courthouse and that was all ruined-melted down.

**Schenk:** Why, he held quite a little bit of property, didn't he?

**McDowell:** He held quite a little property. He was, uh, either he or his father was the one who built the Heims Mill and they did a lot of building there. I think his main business, if I remember right, had been wagons. But I'm not so sure about that, I was so busy with practicing medicine to remember too much of this. Mrs. McDowell used to know all the history of the whole territory around here and the pedigree of most of the people. But that wasn't interesting to me as much as it was trying to keep them alive.

**Schenk:** She was interested in the pedigree and you were interested in keeping them alive so that they would continue to be a pedigree.

**McDowell:** Yes, she was interested in the pedigree and I was interested in the progeny.

**Schenk:** Well, I see our tape is just about gone Dr. McDowell and thanks a lot for taking the time and talking with us.

**McDowell:** Well, I enjoyed it. It's kind of reviving old interesting things in my mind and probably doesn't do anybody much good now, but it is sometimes interesting to hear about.

**Schenk:** It's always interesting to find something out about the area in which we live and many of the younger ones and I'm among some of those who haven't been raised in the area, but I do find that I can find out a lot of the history through the eyes of folks like you and we appreciate your passing it on to us.

**McDowell:** Well, Mrs. McDowell's the historian of the family, if she was alive she could tell you a lot more about it than I can, because she remembered all that stuff and she was always on the lookout for something of that kind of the old histories.