

Edith Thompson



Mrs. Edith Thompson remembers more Grand Forks history than most people ever learn. Born in that city in 1882 to pioneer parents, her long career includes teaching, nursing and newspaper work. Mrs. Thompson was editor of the women's section of the Grand Forks Herald for 38 years prior to her retirement in 1963. She was honored during the Grand Forks centennial celebration in 1974 and served as an informal historical consultant to the authors of the city's centennial history book, They Came To Stay. Interviewed on April 13, 1976, Mrs. Thompson told Robert (Bob) Carlson about her nursing experiences during the 1918 flu epidemic and discussed grain barge traffic on the Red River.

BOB: Were you here during the flu epidemic of 1918?⁴⁶

EDITH: Well, I'll tell you, that was something so horrible I hate to think of it now. You see, the Red Cross apparently anticipated this epidemic — the Red Cross had organized that winter before. The Red Cross picked 25 or 30 women early in the summer of 1918 for what they called Home Nursing Training. Well, I thought that was the thing to do and I went into that class. We met three times a week for three months and a Miss [Jennie] Mahoney, who was a Canadian nurse and a cracking good one, was our teacher. She was from Montreal and she was a A-1 teacher. Well, we went through all that instruction and it was quite formal. It wasn't a hit or miss like many of these organized classes are. Then, along in the fall the National Red Cross sent out the examinations. I'm very proud of it. I got 96 on mine. I know that right after we had the examination the family went duck hunting out to Stump Lake. There was a farm out there and that took a few people that they knew right where the hunting was the very best.

The Finchs had come out there from Minneapolis. I remember at supper one night, we were sitting around that long table and Harry Finch made the remark: "Don't you have any flu in Grand Forks?" Dr. [Everett E.] Sherman was out there at the same time, and he said, "Yes, there's some flu in Grand Forks." He hadn't said much more than that when the phone rang and it was someone calling from Grand Forks to tell Dr. Sherman that his wife had come down with the flu. Well, that was the first that I had heard of the flu epidemic and it just went crazy after that.

Of course, all those 30 people that were in that class — if they didn't have the flu — went to work. I went to a family over at East Grand Forks and there were five of them in bed and they'd been in bed for awhile. I could tell you something about it. One of the things that they cautioned was that if you had the flu — even if you weren't very sick with it but had run a temperature enough to go to bed — don't get up because if it came back you were gone. That seemed to be the pattern of the thing. Well, their temperatures were all gone. But one of the children was a bed wetter, and the kitchen was full of wet sheets and it was kind o' cold and rainy and wet and you couldn't get 'em dry. Well, I stayed there 24 hours straight without any sleep. Then somebody came over from Red Cross with some relief for me and put two women in there instead of one. I came home and got my sleep.

Then Harry Finch wanted to know if I would go out and help a registered nurse at the University who was taking

care of the terminal patients for the army unit out there. I think these were mostly newly enlisted men. They were using Budge Hall out there for a hospital and on the third floor they put all their terminal patients. Well, Miss [Ellen] Jacobson was a regular trained nurse and she was on night duty, and we were alone out there with 13 dying men. In the first place, a lot of the women wouldn't come out there; their husbands wouldn't let 'em. I stayed out there 10 nights. I still don't care about talking about it.

BOB: Well, I don't blame you. That must o' been quite an experience.

EDITH: Well, one night when I got up there, I didn't feel very good, would turn around and be dizzy, and I came down with a temperature of 103. My husband was in Chicago and I didn't want him to come home because it was awful in little towns like this. Now I can tell you, one of the doctors here — I don't remember his name — said that he went down for his morning call at the Deaconness Hospital. The doors were open. The place wasn't heated. Now, this was in October. There was nobody in the kitchen. There wasn't a nurse on the floor and in the first room he went into the patient was under the bed and was too weak to get into bed. Well, he called a couple of women and got them down there and got things straightened out. The others had just walked out and left things. They'd see somebody die and away they'd go. They'd leave those bedridden people. There were several dead people there because they got the flu just like everybody else.

Well, I came home and I had nobody. I could get around. I knew I shouldn't because people got up and then bang [claps hands together]. Every time. Well, I had a man working around here taking care of the fire and things who had just come from Norway, and he spoke practically no English. Well, my in-laws lived across the street and they were taking care of my daughter and she'd had the flu and they'd come down with it over there, but they had plenty of help so I stayed here alone. After the first day I only had about a 101 temperature. Dr. [George M.] Williamson came to see me and he said, "Now, you stay in bed."

⁴⁶ Grand Forks and Grand Forks County history books include: Grand Forks County Heritage Book Committee, *Grand Forks County Heritage Book: A History of Rural Grand Forks County, North Dakota* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1976); Eldon Bladow, executive editor, *They Came To Stay: Grand Forks, North Dakota, Centennial, 1874-1974* (Grand Forks: Grand Forks Centennial Corporation, 1974); Harry J. Romberg, *Early History Along the Forest River in Grand Forks County* (Grand Forks: privately printed, 1976); Orville Bakken, editor, *Northwood, North Dakota, Diamond Jubilee, 1884-1959* (Oklahoma City: Semco Color Press, 1959).

Well, I stayed here a week; I had no more temperature and I could get up. Mrs. Cooley brought me some food one day and that was all I had. Do you know what that fruit pudding is that Norwegian women make?

BOB: Ya. Sweet soup or something like that?

EDITH: Well, she brought me some of that and that milk was all I had that week. "Well," Dr. Williamson said, "things are in an awful mess over there [the Deaconess Hospital] and they have a trained nurse — a German woman — and if she calls herself a nurse, and she claims she's a trained nurse, she should be shot." Well, I went over. We got along alright. Nobody died over there after that. But that was the most awful thing. It's simply indescribable. I've just touched along the top.

BOB: I've been told that there were no public gatherings of any kind during that epidemic. Even funerals weren't attended.

EDITH: No. There weren't. Not until after the first of the year. I don't remember whether we even had church or not. If we did have, I wasn't there.

BOB: Do you remember steamboats here on the Red River when you were here as a child?⁴⁷

EDITH: I never rode on 'em excepting for picnics. We used

to go up the river for a ways to a very popular picnic spot that to my mind was wetter than the boat, but I remember the boats. I remember one that they kept here as a treasure until it sank.

One of the things I will never forgive myself for is that I lost a picture of an activity that no one here seems to remember anything about. Way back when I was a little girl we were living in East Grand Forks. Among the other things that father did for the Minneapolis and Northern [levator company] was supervise what they called the transfer elevator. Now, that was a Minneapolis and Northern elevator about one-third or one-fourth of the size that they build out on the railroad track and it was built on the east side of the river between the Demers Avenue bridge and the NP Railroad bridge. It was right smack on the edge of the water. The steamboats would come down the river dragging barges behind them. Some of them would bring a couple of barges. They couldn't bring too many of 'em because there were some pretty sharp turns. They would hitch up at that transfer elevator. The Great Northern had built a spur track that ran down to the riverbank along and under the bridges to that elevator and all that grain was pumped out of those barges into cars. They had three or four bins in that elevator to use when they couldn't get a car. They would store the wheat in there. That was quite a business until the railroad was built to towns like Drayton, Pembina, and Joliette, and there were two or three other towns in there that had elevators. Oh, the Great Northern certainly was lucky. That spring there was a flood and it washed that elevator off its base, but when it dried out after the flood the thing caught fire and burned up. But they didn't need it anymore anyway because by that time they had a railroad going north along the river.

47. Red River steamboating is covered in Fred A. Bill, "Steamboating on the Red River of the North," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, II-2 (January, 1928), 100-119; "Steamboating on the Red River," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, II-3 (April, 1928), 201-216; "Early Steamboating on the Red River," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, IX-2 (January, 1942), 69-85; Harold E. Briggs, "Pioneer River Transportation in Dakota," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, III-3 (April, 1929), 159-181. See also: Frank E. Vyzralek, "Riverboat Wrecks on North Dakota Waters," *Plains Talk*, 1-1, New Series (Winter, 1970), 4-9.