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“Old Doc” – After delivering his 5,000th baby (among them two sets of triplets) Dr. James Bisgard decided to stop counting. When he retired in 1944 after 50 years of practicing medicine in Harlan, Iowa, the first child he ever delivered – the daughter of the town’s Baptist minister – joined the state and community in celebrating his life and work.

Born near Aalborg on April 5, 1867, Jens Bisgaard began his medical studies in that city prior to emigrating in 1889. As James Bisgard he received his medical degree from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, interned at Methodist Hospital in Omaha in 1893, and the following year moved with his Danish-American bride Mary Mortensen to Harlan, where he hung out his shingle as a medical practitioner.

Being a general physician a hundred years ago meant frequent house calls to rural farmsteads. For the first decade of his practice Dr. Bisgard’s transportation was by horse and buggy. Although physicians’ attire of the day commonly included Prince Albert coats and top hats, severe winter weather and bad roads often made traveling more of a hardship than an elegant excursion. When faced with swollen streams to ford, he either had to climb onto his horses or sit on the back of the buggy seat with his equipment strapped to the roof to keep it dry. Heated soap stones and later a welcome charcoal burner provided some warmth for his feet. Once when the snow was deep and fog so thick he could see no further than his horse’s tail, he got lost en route to delivering a baby. “When I got there the baby was almost old enough to go to school,” he wryly recalled at the time of his retirement. Dr. Bisgard also administered the first diphtheria anti-toxin in Shelby County, his ‘guinea pig’ being a fellow Danish immigrant, Peter Brodersen. In 1902 the physician made local newspaper mention when he purchased the first automobile in Shelby County, a chain-driven Oldsmobile that made rural house calls easier, but not without incident, since the vehicle sometimes had difficulty climbing the western Iowa hills.

Although not the only physician in town, there were no joint practices, so for much of his career Dr. Bisgard’s only vacations were when he attended medical conventions or the Iowa State Fair. Later, he found time to relax with his hobby of raising purebred Black Angus cattle on a farm south of Harlan.

Dr. Bisgard was known as “Old Doc” not due to his age, but to differentiate him from his two sons who, to his great satisfaction, followed in his footsteps. Dr. J. Dewey Bisgard practiced medicine in Omaha, while Dr. Carl V. Bisgard took over his father’s practice in Harlan. The elder Dr. Bisgard was opposed to socialized medicine, which he felt just led to bureaucratic red tape and higher costs, and at the time of his retirement held a dim view of the youth of the day, whom he felt were more disrespectful and less intelligent than earlier generations. He attributed “work, hard work, and more hard work” to his successful career.

Following his official retirement Dr. Bisgard continued to practice when called upon by former patients. Just short of his 80th birthday, he passed away in Harlan after a brief illness, leaving a legacy of service to the Harlan community.