

DR. W. W. FENNEL AND THE FENNEL INFIRMARY

- Rock Hill doctors and clinics enjoyed a splendid reputation across the Carolinas during the first three decades of this century. A significant share of the praise should be for Dr. William Wallace Fennell and his hospital staff.

Fennell's Infirmary, organized in 1908, was a 50-bed private sanitarium. Fennell was the chief surgeon. The building still stands on Charlotte Avenue in Rock Hill and is now the central building of The Oratory.

Fennell was born in Richburg, Chester County in 1869. There was a medical tradition in his family. His grandfather, John B. Fennell, had been a highly successful doctor. His father, John Fennell, was a student at South Carolina Medical College when the Civil War broke out. John Fennell quit to enlist with the Confederacy and was never able to complete his studies.

Fennell's mother, Althea Beckham Fennell, died when he was a child and then his father died before William Wallace was grown. As the eldest son, the teen-ager felt responsible for the family of younger children. He went to work and combined study with the work. Recognizing the youngster to be very bright, a friend offered him the money to enter the University of Kentucky commercial college.

Fennell got the commercial degree in 1887. He was only 18 when he came back and opened a store at Edgemoor in Chester County. He made enough money to send himself to medical school and graduated from the South Carolina Medical College in 1895 with an excellent record.

Dr. Gill Wylie, a native of Chester and head of the staff of the prestigious New York Polyclinic Hospital, liked to recruit bright young doctors from his home area. Training there opened many doors for Fennell. He later studied in Heidelberg, Germany and at Mayo Clinic in Surgery, Rochester, Minnesota.

Fennell moved to Rock Hill in 1898. Some accounts give Fennell credit for opening the first York County hospital around the year 1900. Others say that honor should be given to Dr. T. J. Strait and Dr. Thomas A. Crawford who used a small house on Hampton Street to perform operations during the late 1890s. In any case, Fennell joined Drs. Strait and Crawford's practice for a while and also practiced with his brother-in-law, Dr. David Lyle.

Along with the infirmary, Fennell operated a training school for nurses. The first trainer was an English nurse sent to Fennell by Dr. Gill Wylie. Her name is lost but she was said to have been trained by Florence Nightingale.

The Fennell Infirmary reputation was firmly based on the highly skilled surgical hands of Dr. Fennell. Medical emergency cases from all over the Piedmont were likely to be loaded on the first train headed for Rock Hill.

Dr. Fennell was the surgeon for the Seaboard Airline Railway and the general surgeon for the Southern Railroad. Besides serving in many offices with various medical associations, Fennell for many years was chairman of the board of trustees of the South Carolina Medical College.

Dr. Fennell was a regular member of a group of set-back players known as Poor Richard's Club which was made up of a Mr. O'Neil, Mr. Schwarar, Oran Poe, Sr., and Ira, Walter, and Herbert Dunlap.

Besides all that, Fennell had a good-sized farm and was intensely interested in stock raising.

On October 9, 1926, Fennell contracted pneumonia which was then often a killer disease. Two days later he died. Rock Hill and the state lamented the loss of one of its best surgeons.

By Louise Pettus