

Dr. James Munson was medical pioneer

By E. F. SLADEK, M.D.
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James Barber Munson, M.D., was the first superintendent of the Northern Michigan Asylum, now known as the Traverse City Regional Psychiatric Hospital. He completely built it from a wilderness and the grounds became the most beautiful of any other institution, before he arrived there, was looking on the grounds as all sacred outdoor playground. The Hamish & Lay interests set off all the trees and they didn't leave anything except sawdust and stumps.

Dr. Munson made the state hospital into what was recognized as the most efficient and one of the best-managed mental institutions in the country. He made efficient mental patients attendants out of farm boys. He made 15% income out of farm girls. He developed the Hospital's farm and its dairy herd had a national reputation. For years, the hospital's position as the Traverse City dairy herd was a leader of any similar herd anywhere in the country.

Dr. Munson was born on June 8, 1845, in Oakland County on a farm — that is probably the reason why he retained his interest in agriculture. He attended high school in Pontiac and then went to the University of Michigan, graduating in 1873 from the Michigan School of Medicine. He was 28 years old at the time of graduation.

He started practice in Detroit and, because he was an exceptional student in medical school, he soon developed a reputation for knowledge in medicine and was called to for consultations covering a wide area about Detroit.

He stimulated the formation of the Detroit Society of Neurology and Psychiatry in 1898. He also became a demonstrator in anatomy at the Detroit College of Medicine and, while there, he got use of the microscope and became intensely interested in the microscopic structure of neurological tissues. That probably was the start of his interest in psychiatry. In fact, he became quite an authority on the histological — pathological making of neurological tissue.

Because of his interest in neurology and possibly because of his reputation in the microscopic findings, he was appointed as the Chief Medical Assistant of the newly-built Eastern Michigan Asylum in Pontiac in 1878.

In 1885, he was selected as the Medical Superintendent of the newly established Northern Michigan Asylum in Traverse City. The 1887 mental institution in Michigan. On arrival he found a vast area of unshaded stumps-covered land. With his farm upbringing and business knowledge, he cleared the land and planned its landscaping and beautification.

I wonder if you people walk around the grounds and look at those trees out there. Some evening just walk around the grounds and look up.



James Barber Munson, M.D.
1845 - 1923

Don't look down. Look up at those trees. All those trees were planted by Dr. Munson. All the trees were selected by him, and he even went so far that if you look at the willows on the Asylum Creek — or God's Creek, as it is called now, the willows on one side of that creek are just a little different variety from the willows on the other side of the creek. All of it was planted by Dr. Munson, and he has really made these grounds beautiful.

In his approach to the care of psychiatric patients, I believe that he was one of the first ones in eliminating the straight jacket, and he tried to treat the patients. In the early days this was an asylum — it was not a hospital. It was an asylum — a place to put people and keep them confined, and as I said, he had an idea that these people should be treated and they should get compassionate care.

Dr. Munson was singularly gracious of manner, winning the confidence of patients entrusted to him, and always

using many patients to work the crops on his farm to their mental and physical improvement.

He started a training school for nurses in 1890, and I believe the requirements then, were only two years of high school and that they should be in good health. That was about the only requirements in entering the nursing school. He went downtown and got the doctors to be the teachers. I used to teach orthopedics, and I only had the surgical idea of what orthopedics was. I could take care of a fractured leg or something like that, but that was all — yet, I think the nurses anthropoid. All of us had a lot of fun doing the nursing.

Then in 1902, it was Dr. Munson's idea that there was a need for social service near workers in the treatment of mental disease in an institution.

Dr. Munson was married twice. His only child, James, graduated from the medical school of the University of Michigan, specialized in pathology. He obtained service in World War I, but fell a victim of influenza and died in 1920. The loss of his son was quite a blow to Dr. Munson.

It was in 1924 in July he resigned from the Traverse City State Hospital. At that time he was 79 years old, and I can assure you that he was at least 10 years younger in physical and mental springs. He was a great old man. I recall many times after he retired, when I was taking care of him with his dead bones — I recall many times his remarking "How long and ill — remember, don't put off things until you get too old. I never went on an extended vacation while I was at the hospital," and I doubt that he ever went on a vacation — until he retired.

Three years after he retired, his wife died — she had a brain tumor — and he was left really alone. I think that he was very, very discouraged in

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Western Michigan Asylum, is known as the Traverse City Regional Psychiatric Hospital. He conspicuously built it from a wilderness until it and the grounds became the most beautiful of any state institution. Before he arrived there was nothing on the grounds of all except cut-over pine land. The Hansah & Lay interests cut off all the trees and they didn't leave anything except needles and stumps.

Dr. Munson made the state hospital into what was recognized as the most efficient and one of the best-managed mental institutions in the country. He made efficient mental patients attendants out of farm boys. He made B.M.s coming out of farm girls. He developed the hospital's farm and its dairy herd had a national reputation. For years, the individual cows of the Traverse City dairy herd was a feature of any clinical herd anywhere in the country.

Dr. Munson was born on June 8, 1884, in Oakland County on a farm — that is probably the reason why he retained his interest in agriculture. He attended high school in Pontiac and then went to the University of Michigan, graduating in 1913 from the allopathic School of Medicine. He was 28 years old at the time of graduation.

He stimulated the formation of the Detroit Society of Neurology and Psychiatry in 1918. He also became a demonstrator in anatomy at the University College of Medicine and, while there, he got out of the microscope and became intensely interested in the microscopic structure of neurological tissue. That probably was the start of his interest in psychiatry. In fact, he became quite an authority on the histological, pathological makeup of neurological tissue.

Because of his interest in neurology and possibly because of his reputation in the microscopic findings, he was appointed as the Chief Medical Assistant of the newly-built Eastern Michigan Asylum in Pontiac in 1919.

In 1925, he was selected as the Medical Superintendent of the newly established Northern Michigan Asylum in Traverse City. On their third mental institution in Michigan. On arrival he found a vast area of unutilized stump-covered land. With his farm upbringing and boyhood knowledge, he cleared the land and planned its landscaping and beautification.

I wonder if you people walk around the grounds and look at those trees out there. Some evening just walk around the grounds and look up.



James Chester Munson, M.D.
1884-1953

Don't look down. Look up at those trees. All those trees were planted by Dr. Munson. All the trees were selected by him, and he even went so far that if you look at the willows on the Asylum Creek — or Kuli's Creek, as it is called now, the willows on any side of that creek are just a little different variety from the willows on the other side of the creek. All of it was planned by Dr. Munson, and he has really made these grounds beautiful.

In his approach to the care of psychiatric patients, I believe that he was one of the first ideas in eliminating the straight jacket, and he tried to treat the patients. In the early days this was an asylum — it was not a hospital. It was an asylum — a place to put people and keep them confined, and as I said, he had an idea that these people should be treated and they should get considerable care.

Dr. Munson was singularly gracious of manner, winning the confidence of patients entrusted to him, and always possessed of an understanding of their needs. He never lost sight of the beneficial value of the personal relationship. Psychiatry was with him only a phase of medical science and early in his administration he introduced drug therapy in the care of his patients and he insisted on minimal restraint of patients.

He believed that productive work was excellent therapy for the mentally ill. He planned and established the farm activities of the hospital

and he was in good health. That was about the only requirement in entering the nursing school. He went overnight and got the doctors to be the teachers. I used to teach anthropometry, and I only had the vaguest idea of what anthropometry was. I could take care of a fractured leg or something like that, but that was all — yet, I taught the nurses anthropometry. All of us had a lot of fun doing the teaching.

There in 1930, it was Dr. Munson's idea that there was a need for social service case workers in the treatment of mental disease in an institution.

Dr. Munson was married twice. His only child, James, graduated from the medical school of the University of Michigan, specialized in pathology. He entered service in World War I, but fell a victim of influenza and died in 1918. The loss of his son was quite a blow to Dr. Munson.

It was in 1934 in July he resigned from the Traverse City State Hospital. At that time he was 50 years old, and I can assure you that he was at least 10 years younger in physical and mental activity. He was a great old man. I recall many times after he retired, when I was taking care of him with his final illness — I recall many times his remarking "Now Ben and Ed — remember, don't put off things until you get the old. I never went on an extended vacation while I was at the hospital," and I doubt that he ever went on a vacation ... until he retired.

Three years after he retired, his wife died — she had a brain tumor — and he was left really alone. I think that he was very, very discouraged in those last few years of his life because he was so alone. He lived alone in the house near Bowser's Harbor and the caretaker of the farm and his wife would come in and cook the meals and do the housework, but he stayed in the place all alone, which, of course, is not good for anyone. He died on June 26, 1953, of a hepatic carcinoma, and is buried in Pontiac, Michigan.

Edward F. Shaker was a close friend and personal physician to Dr. Munson and his family.

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