"WHO WAS DR. MUNSON"

E.F. Sladek, M.D.
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This is a recording of a meeting of the medical staff, together with many of the nursing and attendent staff, of the Traverse City State Hospital to hear Dr. Edward F. Sladek of Traverse City reminisce about Dr. James Decker Munson. Dr. McKenney, a resident of the State Hospital Medical Staff arranged this meeting on April 12, 1961.

In his introductory remarks he mentioned that during a county medical society meeting he talked about Dr. Munson and found that Dr. Sladek intimately knew Dr. Munson. Amongst the present staff of the State Hospital, there were only a very few people who had known Dr. Munson.

Dr. McKenney felt that it would be appropriate to have a program which would honor Dr. Munson by remembrance as to who he was, his personality, his accomplishments, and his contributions to the welfare and understanding of mentally ill patients. It would bring to the present staff of the Traverse City State Hospital a knowledge of what a great man of medicine Dr. Munson was.

Dr. Edward F. Sladek: Mr. Chairman, Members of the Staff of the Traverse City State Hospital.

You know they say that one of the reasons that there is a deterioration in mental health as one grows older is because you think in the past, you don't think in the future, and maybe now I am a candidate for a little mental deterioration.

James Decker Munson, M.D., was the first superintendent of the Northern Michigan Asylum, now known as the Traverse City State Hospital. He energetically built it from a wilderness until it and the grounds became the most beautiful of any state institution. I never thought of it as such, but there was nothing on the grounds at all except cut over pine land. The Hannah and Lay interests cut off all the trees, and when they went through an area of trees, they didn't leave anything except sawdust and stumps. Dr. Munson made this institution into what was recognized as the most efficient and one of the best managed mental institutions in the country. He made efficient mental patient attendants out of farm boys. He made R.N.'s out of farm girls. He developed the farm, and its dairy herd had a national reputation. For years the butterfat content of the Traverse City dairy herd was a leader of any similar herd anywhere in the country.

Dr. Munson was born on June 8, 1848, in Oakland County on a farm. He was raised on this farm and that probably is the reason why he retained his interest in agriculture. He attended high school in Pontiac, Michigan. He then went to the University of Michigan, graduated in 1873 from the allopathic School of Medicine. At that time, they had two schools--the homoepathic school of medicine and the allopathic school. He was 25 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 he began to be called in for consultations covering a wide area about Detroit. In 1904 he received an honorary degree of M.A. from the University. He stimulated the formation and was a charter member of the Detroit Society of Neurology and Psychiatry in 1908. He also became a demonstrator in anatomy at the Detroit College of Medicine shortly after graduation, and while there he got use 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 and pathological makeup of neurologic tissue. He was also intensely interested in general medicine and wrote many articles and gave many talks on general medical subjects. 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, 1878. I am not quite certain, but I believe that Pontiac was the second state hospital in the state. He was sent for a few months training in preparation for his new job to the first mental institution built by the state at Kalamazoo.

In 1885 he was selected and appointed as the Medical Superintendant of the newly established Northern Michigan Asylum in Traverse City, the third mental institution in Michigan. On arrival, he found a vast area of untilled 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. Don't look down. Look up at those trees. Pretty soon when they just begin to leaf out, just take a tour around there and see the different kinds of trees that are here. All these trees were planted by Dr. Munson. The planting was entirely planned by Dr. Munson. The trees were selected by him, and he even went so far that if you look at the Willows on the Asylum Creek--or Kids 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. You will notice this as the leaves begin to come out; all of it was planned by Dr. Munson, and he has really made these grounds beautiful. Some of you who are camera fiends should go out there and snap a few pictures of the trees

with the background of the towered building here. Really, it is quite exciting.

In his approach to the care of psychiatric patients, I believe that his 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.

He believed that productive work was excellent therapy for the mentally ill. He planned and established the farm activities of the hospital using many patients to work the crops much to their mental and physical improvement.

He started a training school for nurses in 1906, 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 orthopaedics, and I only had the vaguest idea of what orthopaedics was. I could take care of a fractured leg or something like that, but that was all--yet, I taught the nurses orthopaedics. And what else did I teach? There was some other course, I think it was therapeutics. All of us had a lot of fun doing the teaching.

Then in 1920 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, and all of you know what that idea has developed into. He was very civic minded. He mixed in with all activities downtown. I believe everyone in town knew who he was. For instance, in his frequent trips to the barbershop--in those days the barbers used to shave a person, and he would go down and have his beard trimmed, etc. He would visit the barbershop quite frequently,

and it was a common thing when someone would see Dr. Munson go into the barbershop, word would quickly pass around the immediate neighborhood, and people would filter in to listen to the humor of Dr. Munson, while sitting around or being taken care of by the barber. He had an extreme sense of humor--sometimes it backfired on him and he could be very critical. I heard one story. This was in the days of the horse and buggy, and the State Mental Health Commission was coming to town to inspect the institution. They were having a meeting here. And something was wrong--the horses weren't groomed enough or the carriage wasn't as meticulous as it should have been, and evidently Dr. Munson cracked down on the person who was supposed to have taken care of that and mentioned the fact that how awful it was to have a person so careless as to send out a dirty carriage to meet this very important group of people. Everyone in the institution knew that the first thing Dr. Munson was going to do was to take this Commission--this was in the early days when he was first starting his farm--out to the watermelon patch, and he was very, very proud of it, and he was going to show them just what he could do about raising food for the institution. Well, this man got a little bit peeved, and while Dr. Munson drove down to get the Commission--down to the railroad station, which at that time was on Union and 6th Streets--this man went out and cut off all the watermelons--removed them all! When Dr. Munson went to show his beautiful patch of watermelons, there wasn't anything there--much to his chagrin.

I first met him when I came to town, as I said. He was very much interested in medical work, and he would attend our Medical Society Meetings. Of course I was a new doctor in town, so they made me secretary of the County Medical Society, a job which I held for quite a while, and I quickly

became acquainted with Dr. Munson, and was tremendously impressed with him--so much so that within about 6 months I rented an office in his office building. I don't believe that was the reason that we became so friendly, and that I became the family physician. Anyhow, the description in 1878 absolutely fitted him in 1920, and there is only one physician that even begins to compare in courteousness and impressiveness and manners, and that is our Louis Hirschman. They could stand up together and neither one would be superior to the other, except Dr. Munson wore gloves when he went downtown--Oh! Dr. Hirschman does too.

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.

Dr. Munson was married twice. His only child, James Fred Munson, 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. His widow, Mrs. Helen Munson, is still alive and lives in New York City. The loss of his son was quite a blow to Dr. Munson.

Fred Munson was a high school classmate of our Dr. E.L. Thirlby. As a student, he was somewhat shy and retiring, always was immaculately dressed, even to wearing gloves on many occasions. Possibly, because opposites attract he and Ted Thirlby became fast friends. They were together constantly and Ted spent much of his time visiting the Munson apartment at the hospital. In the many high school escapades, many conceived by the little devil that

Ted was, it was always Fred who took the brunt of responsibility. He was blamed, Ted was clear.

In the last year of high school, Fred Munson was already being groomed for medicine by his father. During Ted's many visits to the Munson apartment, Dr. Munson kept talking about the great opportunities in medicine and finally convinced Ted that this should be his career. Were it not for Dr. Munson, Traverse City would not have had our Dr. Ted Thirlby.

It was in 1924 in July he resigned from the Traverse City State Hospital. At that time he was 76 years old, and I can assure you that he was at least 10 years younger in physical activity and mental activity. He was a grand 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--my wife would often go out to the farm that he retired to, and we would make the call together, and he would remark--He would say "Now Bess and Ed--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. His wife's son lived in California in San Francisco, and so he started to go to California and visit them. In 1928 we had a meeting at my cottage of the County Medical Society in which we had a number of guest speakers, and Dr. Munson had just gotten back, and so he got up and told us about the wonderful instrument he saw being used out in California, which was the cystoscope. Now, some of us had seen the cystoscope--some of the younger fellows like Dr. Schwartz and myself and probably Dr. Thirlby because he kept going back to Ann Arbor frequently and had seen it used. But the description that Dr. Munson gave us of this cystoscope was quite fascinating to him, and we all appreciated

his description and his idea of this wonderful instrument. Of course, now it is a common diagnostic instrument. Everyone knows about it, although they all don't use it. On one of his trips--he was 76 years old when he resigned as I said--on one of his trips back from California--it was early in 1929, March, I believe, and he was at the Pantlind Hotel, and his chauffer--by that time we had cars, of course. Anyhow, his chauffer came down to pick him up and Dr. Munson, in getting out of his bed, caught a toe in the bed clothes and slipped and had a fractured neck of the femur. I believe he was seen by the Hotel physician, but he was a stubborn fellow and he absolutely refused to do into the hospital or have anything constructive done to him. He wanted to go home, and so his chauffer drove him out to the farm--out here near Bowers Harbor, and he went to bed there, and I went out to see him. He refused an X-ray. He refused to have any extension put on, and so the only thing I could do was practically daily go out there and put on massive elastic bandages to try to give him a little support. 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 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 24, 1929, of a hypostatic pneumonia, and is buried in Pontiac, Michigan.

There is another story I forgot. I just heard this one today. He was, as you can suppose, a very meticulous individual, and the employees chipped in and bought him a beautiful shotgun with a specially constructed stock--black walnut--with his initials engraved and inlaid in silver on this stock. In some way he thought he had laid the gun up against a tree, but if he did, it fell down on the ground and his automobile was there,

and he got in and backed up and backed over the gun and broke the stock. He broke the stock of this beautiful gun. He took the gun with the broken stock down to Stan Ray, who was in town here, and asked Stan whether he could replace this stock in such a way that no one could ever tell that it was repaired. Stan sent the broken walnut to the gun factory and had them replace the piece of walnut with the identical grain in it that the old stock had, and then Stan very meticulously carved it out and put the initials in exactly the same spot, and Dr. Munson got out a ruler to measure the thing to see that it was exactly in the same spot that it was before being broken. As I said, that is my recollection of Dr. Munson, and it was a real pleasure to kind of review this and go over it and recall some of the things--Oh! Wait! Wait just a minute! Munson Hospital! I completely forgot about Munson Hospital.

In 1915 the Smith Sanitarium--this is a speech that I gave to the two Rotary Clubs, one Lions Club and one Optimists Club. The Smith Sanitarium in Greilickville--just over the line where Garthe's little shop is, which was the hospital for the community, burned down. It burned to the ground. Dr. Munson, because of his interest in the community and the medical profession, immediately fixed up the cottage on 11th Street and Elmwood Avenue where the apartments are and gave it to the community for a hospital. It was a two-story building, and he gave it to the doctors of the community for their use so that they could treat their patients. His argument was that instead of sending their nurses outside of town for their general medical training, this could be used as a general hospital training. There was no charge for laundry. No charge for nursing--no charge for food. The daily hospital cost--I have forgotten what it was exactly--was around $2.50 or $3.00 a day or something like that. There was no expense--so this accumulated as a General Hospital Fund

until 1923--it was carried on the books as such and amounted to about $35,000. Dr. Munson early realized that the facilities of this cottage were not adequate for a community hospital and he spent $5,000 of his own money in drawing up the plans for a small community hospital for Traverse City, and then tried to stimulate the community into building such a hospital. Well, someone from the state auditory office in 1923 in going over the books--there was an item--$35,000 for General Hospital Fund. So he questioned that; no state hospital has a general hospital, and Dr. Munson said "We have, and it is used by the community". "Well, there is no such thing as a general hospital--that will go into the State General Fund", and so the Traverse City State Hospital lost that amount of money. Dr. Munson immediately got on the ball and stimulated a committee of some 30-35 people, including Dr. E. L. Thirlby, who made a trip down to Lansing and called on Governor Grossbeck and complained bitterly about losing this money because it was hoped that this money would be the nucleus for the building of a general hospital. Governor Grossbeck told this committee--"We can't do anything about this. That money is gone. The only thing we can do is to create in the Traverse City State Hospital a general hospital, and we will put in a bill creating such--we will put in $78,000 to build it". So, the bill was passed, and it is, I believe, the only instance in existance where a state mental institution had a general hospital to be used by the surrounding community. Of course, when they started to build the thing, it went way, way up beyond the $78,000. In fact, it was somewhere around $225,000 to build the original Munson Hospital, and of course, it was named after Dr. Munson because of his interest in this. The administration was in the hands of the Traverse City State Hospital until, I think, in Dr. Sheets' tenure here when it was turned over to the community

on a lease basis and the land was granted to the community. That used to be State Hospital grounds there.

So, Dr. Munson was really responsible for the Munson Hospital, and we all were happy that he still lived when it was dedicated. He was a great man of medicine.

Thank you very much.

Dr. McKenney:

Dr. Sladek: You have certainly been successful in bringing the past to life, and I am sure that all of us who are here now--will appreciate the qualities of Dr. Munson and that as we come and go through our grounds we will look up at the trees. Thank you, Dr. Sladek.