

**Lydia Holman pioneered
community nursing in N.C. mountains**

It was not long after the emergence of professional hospital nursing that nurses took their skills into the community to serve those in need. Lydia Holman came to Mitchell County from Pennsylvania at the turn of the 20th century and practiced for 58 years in poor, rural Appalachia. The range of her accomplishments is staggering: she was a nurse, midwife, social worker, dentist, educator and sometimes physician for hundreds of people in a 60-square-mile area.

Holman was born in 1868 in Philadelphia. She graduated from Philadelphia General Hospital in 1895. From 1898 to 1900, she served as an US Army nursing during the Spanish American War in Kentucky and Georgia.

In mid-December of 1900, Holman was requested to nurse Mrs. J.J. Irvine, the former president of Wellsley College who was desperately ill with typhoid fever. Irvine was at her family's home in Ledger, N.C., which was an isolated Appalachian village about 30 miles from the closest railroad.

As Mrs. Irvine's condition improved, Holman was called on by nearby residents to treat their illnesses. She became attached to the mountain folk, but realized that her hospital training would need to be supplemented with experience in community nursing before she could start this work. She returned north and spent two years nursing among the poor in Philadelphia and New York City.

Holman returned to Ledger in December of 1902. She soon secured a home and a horse, and started her work as an independent nurse. She was paid on a fee-for-service basis and also bartered her services for foodstuffs and household items.

By 1907, articles about Holman's work were published in several national nursing and health care magazines. Dr. William Welch, a pathologist at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, took an interest in her work. Together they formed for the Holman Association for the Promotion of Rural Nursing, Hygiene and Social Services. Chapters of the Holman Association were formed in several major Northeastern cities, and the chapters in Boston and Brooklyn supplied money to build and equip a 24-bed hospital in Spruce Pine.

Because her practice was so far-ranging, Holman was arrested for practicing medicine. This is her account of the event:

"It was very nicely done (the arrest itself). The arresting officer read his warrant. 'Now, Miss Holman, don't let it worry you. It will cost you every cent of \$50 and I would not do it; there ain't no reason why you should pay anything.' I took the man's advice and spent the whole day waiting for the people in the courthouse to decide what was to become of me. The solicitor read a very nice little bit of Scripture and dismissed the case. After court, 20 mountain men or more took credit for having the case thrown out. Then they came to assure me, all the neighbors and people I had never heard of, that I should go on with the work. They would be quite willing to hire teams and come to my defense."

And she did continue her work. The state of North Carolina made money available for public health efforts and put Holman in charge of administering these funds in Mitchell County.

By 1930, there were sufficient miles of paved roads in Mitchell County to make traveling by car faster and easier than riding a horse. Holman wrote to President Herbert Hoover saying that if she had a nice car, she would be able to drive voters to the polls to vote for him in the upcoming election. A 1931 Model A Ford was delivered to Holman from the White House. In 1936, she was elected to the Mitchell County Board of Health.

Holman died in 1960 at age 92 in the VA Hospital at Oteen near Asheville.