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## Review of *Fifty Years a Country Doctor* By Hull Cook

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*Fifty Years a Country Doctor.* By Hull Cook. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. vii + 203 pp. \$12.00 paper.

This is a book about an endangered, soon to be extinct species: the country doctor who was also a neighbor and friend and a familiar feature of rural life on the Great Plains in the earlier part of this century. Doctor Hull Cook became a physician in the early twentieth century and practiced medicine in Colorado, Texas, and Nebraska, where he served the residents of the Sidney area for many years.

Dr. Cook delivered babies at home, made house calls in all weather, and drove to some of those houses in a wagon, later in a Model T. He did not have the benefit of high technology, CAT scans or MRIs, but his caring concern for his patients and his good instincts served him well when all a physician usually had available was his knowledge and skill and what he could carry in a satchel or improvise on the spot. The practice of medicine was often truly an art: a physician had to rely on insight and intuition as much as on clinical knowledge. Complicated births at home and serious farm accidents added up to patients who shouldn't have made it, according to the odds, but sometimes did.

The accounts of Cook's medical training and his duties in the Emergency Room at Robert B. Greene Memorial Hospital in San Antonio, Texas, are not for the squeamish but reflect the reality of his time. While things may look different in today's hospitals and ERs, the life and death issues faced by emergency room personnel have not changed much. People had accidents, got shot or stabbed, and sometimes just got very sick as often then as now.

Cook has the talents of a born storyteller. Surprising perhaps in a book of medical anecdotes, many of the stories are hilarious, others touching. While Cook doesn't hesitate to use slapstick humor in his stories—such as the one about the “popcorn lady,” who polished off “about three dishpans” of popcorn, or the tilting examination table that tilted patients onto

the floor (the reader can fill in the details)—he also shows compassion and caring for his patients, often young women facing childbirth in dangerous conditions, or people with serious injuries from farm equipment.

As a personal memoir, this book gives insight into life in rural Nebraska in the thirties and forties, and also provides a glimpse into the personality of one rather colorful country doctor and his practice. If, as Cook warns us in his preface, things sound “somewhat bizarre, you must remember that times change.” In spite of a ribald sense of humor, Doctor Cook dedicates his volume lovingly not only to his family, but to “the many trusting souls who put their lives in my hands.”

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