

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: The First Canadian Woman Dentist

Katerina von Holt
Co-op Student
Aurora Museum & Archives

During the late 1800s it would be common to find anesthesia, vitalized air and baked porcelain inlays at a dentist's office. One thing that wasn't common was to have a woman as your dentist. At that time, all licensed dentists were men and it remained that way in Canada until 1893 when the first woman graduated from dental school. Who was this trailblazer that was successfully breaking down barriers and stereotypes? Well, she was an Auroran, of course!

Born in 1865, Caroline Louise Josephine Irwin grew up in Aurora and attended the public school on Church Street that predated the 1886 building that exists today.

In 1877, Josephine married John Wells, who became a qualified dentist in 1882. John's career as a dentist, took him and his family to many different parts of Ontario, including Meaford in 1887, Aurora that same year, and then Toronto in 1890.

Due to health issues, John had to end his career much earlier than expected. This posed a problem for the young family, how would they make a living? The answer was for Josephine to take on the family business of dentistry.

Josephine began studying informally under her husband's guidance and soon enrolled in the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario to get formal accreditation.

In October 1893, Josephine graduated from the college and became the first woman in Canada to practice as a Licentiate in Dental Surgery. During the beginning of her career, Josephine treated Aurorans on a weekly or biweekly basis. She also travelled to Maple and Stouffville to offer her dentistry services ? all well caring for her own young children.

It did not take long before Josephine wanted to upgrade her credentials.

In 1899, she wrote the exams required to become a Doctor of Dental Surgery. This year also marked the end of her service in Aurora as she began working for provincial public institutions. In this new position, Josephine provided dental care for people in prisons, asylums and schools all while maintaining a private practice in Toronto.

In 1918, Josephine became the manager of dental care in all provincial hospitals and schools ? a position she continued in until her retirement in 1928.

To learn more about Josephine's story please read, An Aurora ABC: Stories from Aurora's Forgotten Past by Jacqueline Stuart.