

# Editor's Note



The following article, **Margaret Mitchell's Lost Letter to a Kansas Horse & Buggy Doctor**, by Jane F. Knapp, M.D. and Robert D. Schremmer, M.D., provides a glimpse into the history of medicine in Kansas. It was published originally in **Missouri Medicine** in the November/December 2011 issue. We appreciate Dr. John Hagan, Editor of **Missouri Medicine**, for allowing the Kansas Journal of Medicine to reprint it.

PERSPECTIVE FEATURE



Arthur Hertzler at his desk.  
Courtesy of the Kansas Learning Center  
for Health.

## Margaret Mitchell's Lost Letter to a Kansas Horse & Buggy Doctor

by Jane F. Knapp, MD  
& Robert D. Schremmer, MD

The correspondence of Arthur Emanuel Hertzler, MD, included an unpublished letter from *Gone With the Wind* author Margaret Mitchell. In it she offers reasons why she never wrote a second novel.

A career in medicine is a journey that can take many paths. A few years ago, inspired by a poster symposium at the annual Pediatric Academic Societies meeting, we got hooked on exploring the history of Midwestern pediatrics. Specifically, we wanted to focus on people and events relating to children's health care in our home states of Missouri and Kansas.<sup>1-4</sup> In 2010, we decided to profile Arthur Emanuel Hertzler, a small town Kansas physician who in his day enjoyed an international reputation following the publication of his 1938 bestseller *The Horse and Buggy Doctor*.<sup>5</sup>

Once we started our research, information on Hertzler's life and in particular the pediatric aspects of his practice weren't hard to find. He started his medical career in Halstead, Kansas, on May 1, 1895, the same day a tornado hit the town.<sup>6</sup> His practice was varied, broad, and spanned over 50 years. He cared for all the common childhood ailments of the time and quite frequently performed, "kitchen table surgery" on children and adults alike. His stories on the ravages of diphtheria are chilling and his account of the house call he made to drain an empyema on a 14-year-old boy is as graphic and dramatic

as anything we might encounter today.<sup>5</sup> He was a prolific writer who kept records on all his patients and authored 20 medical textbooks, several in popular literature and over 100 scientific papers. Our studies of his books and collected papers from the Clendening History of Medicine Library at the University of Kansas School of Medicine uncovered a man of strong opinions and rambling prose who never shied away from speaking his mind in public or in print.

The last step in our research was a journey to Halstead, population 2085 ([www.halsteadks.com](http://www.halsteadks.com)). We wanted to spend time talking to the locals, see the place where Hertzler built a clinic and a hospital, and review the remaining archives on his life now stored at the Kansas Learning Center for Health (KLCH).

Halstead is a three-hour drive southwest of Kansas City into farm country. Entering the town on Kansas Highway 89, renamed the Hertzler Memorial Highway, we found a typical small Midwestern community. Grain elevators bordered Main Street and flanked the inevitable railroad tracks. A water tower rose in the distance framed by nothing more than the vivid blue expanse of cloudless prairie sky.

The KLCH is in a new building just down the road. It was founded through the Hertzler Research Foundation by Dr. Irene Koenke, Hertzler's wife. We were warmly greeted and showed to the piles of scrapbooks and boxes stacked for our visit on a table next to the 4 ft high eyeball

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exhibit. It was quiet because there weren't any school tours that day; a perfect time for poring through old records.

It didn't take long to discover the letter from Margaret Mitchell on her personalized stationary dated September 7, 1944. (See Figure 1, next page.) Our first thoughts inevitably were, "*The Gone With the Wind* Margaret Mitchell?" It was soon apparent that it was indeed the Margaret Mitchell, and that she was a fan as she put it "of Hertzler's pungent writing style." Based on our collective knowledge of Arthur's writing, we easily related. The letter was obviously from one writer to another and typified her special talent as a storyteller. She began by referring to Hertzler's book *Ventures in Science of a Country Surgeon*.<sup>7</sup> Toward the end of the book, in a chapter entitled, "The Writing of Books," he notes that he had been introduced to Margaret Mitchell, and described her as, "the most remarkable person I have ever met."<sup>7</sup>

The next to last paragraph piqued our curiosity. In her letter, Margaret Mitchell tells Arthur Hertzler why, as of 1944, she had not written another book. On further reading we learned that biographers have well chronicled her father Eugene Mitchell's ill health, protracted decline and Margaret's immersion in his care.<sup>8,9</sup> They have also recounted multiple other stressors, including her struggle to cope with the notoriety and complexities of her life following the publication of *Gone With the Wind*, her own poor health, and her husband's frailty. Interestingly, after her death in 1949 her husband and brother wrote to her correspondents requesting that they destroy her letters<sup>9</sup> but Arthur had died in 1946 soon after retirement. That letter, tucked away in Kansas for decades, provides the opportunity to revisit Margaret's thoughts on writing again with the clarity and poignancy of her own words. In a touch of irony she ended by urging him to write more.



**Margaret Mitchell, circa 1941.**  
Source: U.S. Library of Congress.

The letter from Margaret Mitchell wasn't the only find. There was a copy of a letter from Albert Einstein dated June 24, 1944, in which he thanks Hertzler for sending him a copy of *The Grounds of an Old Surgeons Faith*.<sup>10</sup> A retinue of the 1941 Chicago Cubs sent a letter autographed by players, coaches, the manager, trainer, and newspapermen thanking him for the steaks he supplied to their dining car during a train trip through Wichita. They also sent along a thick packet of autographed individual and group pictures; there's a good one of Dizzy Dean. Fellow Kansan Karl Menninger sent a letter congratulating Hertzler on his career achievements when Arthur retired in 1946. The letters left us flush with the thrill of discovery, but also struck by this sturdy and enduring form of communication much richer in composition than the hastily deleted e-mails and superficial texts and tweets of today.

Ultimately, the most rewarding part of this journey into history was the visit to Halstead. For it was there that we gained an understanding of Arthur Hertzler, the person behind the books. Before we left we viewed the glass display cases filled with memorabilia in the back of the museum. There among the old medical instruments was a large leather bound copy of *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Decem* the anatomy text by Adriani Spigelii (also known as Adriaan van den Spiegel), published in Venice in 1627.<sup>11</sup> From signatures in the front of the book it appears to have once been owned by Franz Leydig. Hertzler was a serious student of anatomy. In 1899, he took a two-year hiatus from his practice to study anatomy and surgical pathology with Virchow and Waldeyer in Berlin. In the *Horse and Buggy Doctor* he writes of his great respect for his teachers and notes that, "no American teacher ever showed me the many favors that many of these German professors did."<sup>5</sup> We saw the picture of his beloved daughter, Agnes, the black-eyed girl that he refers to several times in *The Horse and Buggy Doctor*. Agnes, we learned through personal communication with KLCH staff, died at 18 during an appendectomy being performed by her father. The story of her tragic death supplied the heretofore



**MARGARET MITCHELL**

Atlanta, Georgia  
September, 1944

Dear Doctor Hertzler:

Last night I began picking about in "Ventures in Science of a Country Surgeon," for I have the bad habit of never starting a book at the beginning and reading it to the end. As a child I was reproved for picking all the raisins out of puddings and eating them first, and I have not improved much since then. After eating the raisins I always ate all the pudding, too, so I could never understand why my practice was reprehensible. While putting in my fingers to pull out a medical raisin, whom should I find but myself. To say I was surprised is a very great understatement. To say I was pleased and flattered at what you said is such an understatement I scarcely have the courage to put it down. I ate this raisin immediately and enjoyed it very much and thank you so much for your forthright remark.

I not only get information from your medical books but I get vast entertainment. I do not know anyone who writes as pungently as you do. Nor do I know anyone who can use a meat axe on the pompous or the misguided or the overstuffed with such deadly aim. I know I should not get so much pleasure and laughter from books as serious as yours, but I do and must confess it. I think you must be an extraordinarily able teacher with never a dull moment in your classes, for you have a vigorous mind and you certainly speak it.

I had enjoyed Chronic Appendicitis enormously, for I have the rare good luck of having an old fashioned doctor for a friend and I have heard him express himself in similar terms on this same subject. I read parts of it to my husband, who listened with interest equal to mine. Then, picking about in the section, Ventures in Therapeutics, my eyes fell upon the words "sciatica and compressed nerves." I read this section aloud, too, and I cannot tell you how enchanted my husband and I were by what you wrote. I would like to say that I "rolled on the floor" at your remarks about the specialists and their work upon the spine, but, dear Doctor, I do not roll on the floor these days, nor roll anywhere, because I am one of those people who had my intervertebral disks worked on eighteen months ago and am in far worse shape than before. However, I suppose that I am mentally in fine condition, for I can laugh about this section of your book when too deep a laugh is not very pleasant. The doctor who yanked out my disk is inviting me back to the hospital to do the operation over, and when he issues his next invite I think I'll quote him, line and page, from your book. After I had read my husband the part about you and the hash and the stomach pump and the cardia, he had to take off his glasses and wipe them because he had laughed till he had cried. He said that you must be one of the most remarkable people in shoe leather to be able to make your point about the strength of these muscles with such vividness. "The Doctor is a salty cuss," he said, "and you certainly were lucky to meet him. I only wish I had the chance to know him myself."

I did not write you after I had read your book on the "Diseases of the Thyroid Gland," but it was not through lack of interest. I read it slowly and with care, harassing the old fashioned friend I mentioned above for meanings of medical terms and explanations of surgical technique which no layman can know. That is an impressive volume, impressive especially when I think of the many years' study and thought which went into making it. If you had no other monument except this it would be a greater monument than most men can ever hope for, but here you go along writing other books just as good!

I had intended to write you about the thyroid book, but my father died in June and I did not have time or the heart. He had been ill so long---six years in all, and the last three in the hospital. He would not have a kidney stone removed many years ago when he was in excellent health and he delayed far too long in having a prostatic operation. Three years ago we did not expect him to live another week, and for his sake I wish it had been that way. He had the constitution of an ox and just how he stayed alive his doctors did not know. I'm sure you've seen uremia and abscessed kidneys and toxemia and pneumonia enough so that I do not have to tell you what those years were. When people ask why I have not written another book, I look at them in wonder, for how can one do creative work in a constant worry like this or when physical fatigue reaches the point of exhaustion every day. I hope that my own health will improve now that I do not have to bend over high hospital beds or fix pillows or lift or strain. I've had it on my mind so often to thank you for that book, for I really got a lot out of it.

You do not fool me at all and I do not think you are fooling yourself by your statement in the front of your "Ventures"---"this is probably my last book." I know there'll be plenty of others.

Cordially,  
*Margaret*



missing perspective into Arthur's pungent writing style. It also provided us insight into the personal loss that we now understood, from other papers we examined at the KLCH, haunted him throughout his life.

Our poster on *The Life and Times of a Kansas Horse and Buggy Doctor and His Recollections on the Care of Children* was presented at the 2011 Pediatric Academic Societies Meeting.<sup>12</sup> It focused on Arthur's professional career as a physician on the Kansas prairie in a time when it took stamina and grit to reach your patients and skill, experience and ingenuity once you got there. It recounted stories of his care for children whom he said, "always came first."<sup>5</sup> But, our poster didn't tell the less public story we found preserved in the letters, scrapbooks, displays and oral history of Halstead. It seemed a shame not to share it.

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### Figure 1 (opposite page)

Scanned copy of Margaret Mitchell's letter to Author Hertzler. Courtesy of the Kansas Learning Center for Health. Recreated for Missouri Medicine.



Hertzler Memorial Highway sign on the outskirts of Halstead, KS. Photo by R. Schremmer, MD.



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