Note: No known connection to Dakota County.

Nellie Barsness

One of ten children to Norweigan immigrants, Nellie Barsness was born on July 9, 1873 in Pope County, Minnesota. Her parents were Nels N. Barsness, a veteran of the Civil War, and Bertha O. Thorenson Barsness. Nellie's medical education began in 1898. She also attended a teacher's college in St. Cloud, MN (today's St. Cloud State University). She then moved to South Dakota to work as a teacher for a few years. Barsness was one of six students to receive a nursing degree from St. Barnabus Hospital in Minneapolis, MN in 1901. Barsness completed her medical degree from the University of Minnesota Medical School in 1902- the first woman to accomplish this! She then worked as a physician at the Lutheran Hospital in St. Paul. In 1904, Dr. Barsness traveled to Niagara Falls to attend the first medical conference about a new technology: X-Rays. She had learned to operate the equipment during her internship in the electrotherapeutics department at the St. Paul Lutheran Hospital. In 1910, she went to Europe for additional training.

Initially, Dr. Barsness attempted to enlist with the U.S. Medical Reserve Corps but was rejected because of sexism. Determined to help any way she could, she left the United States on September 22, 1918. After arriving in Bordeaux, France in late 1918, Barsness traveled to the village of Cempuis by way of Paris. Dr. Barsness volunteered for the French Army at the Women's Overseas Hospital in Cempuis. She worked as an ophthalmologist, treating soldiers that had been gassed. From there, her group traveled to Nancy, France to replace Red Cross physicians. While there, Dr. Barsness led a dispensary clinic for local patients in Neuves-Maisons. Dr. Barsness also helped care for refugees in Rheims, France in April of 1919. Barsness was heralded and decorated by the French Minister for her ability to "work under most hazardous conditions". Barsness returned to St. Paul in late 1919, after serving in France for 15 months.

After the war, Dr. Barsness visited her sister Johanna (also known as Jennie) in Idaho. She then lived with her widowed sister Thilda and Thilda's son Henry Jr. in St. Paul. Then, Dr. Barsness was a physician at the State Reformatory for Women in Shakopee. Additionally, Dr. Barsness served as the State Health Director for the Women's Christian Temperance Union. In 1927, Dr. Barsness returned to Europe to study eye surgery in Berlin and Vienna. Furthermore, she established an Ear, Nose, and Throat practice and did post-graduate work in New York and Chicago. Interestingly, Dr. Barsness invented and patented the public bathroom toilet seat cover. After Thilda's death in 1938, Dr. Barsness adopted Henry Jr. Dr. Barsness retired in 1953 and died in St. Paul on May 12, 1966. She was a highly respected and honored doctor in the medical community, and paved the way for other women doctors in the 20th century and beyond. She was buried at Lake Ben Cemetery in Pope City, MN. Harry Simmonds Jr. bequeathed $1 million

to fund a scholarship program in her name for female medical students at the University of Minnesota in 1996, when he died.

Nellie (middle row) with the 1902 graduating class of University of MN Medical School. (Photo courtesy of University of Minnesota and "Dr. Nellie: A Physician's Experience in the Great War" by Johannes R. Allert.)

Photo source:
http://www.iroquoistheater.com/barsness-sisters-from-Minneapolis-survived-iroquois-theater-fire.php

Dr. Barsness at a medical clinic in Vienna in 1927 (front row, left). (Photo courtesy the Pope County Historical Society and “Dr. Nellie: A Physician’s Experience in the Great War" by Johannes R. Allert.)

An undated photo of Dr. Barsness late in life. (Photo courtesy the Pope County Historical Society and “Dr. Nellie: A Physician’s Experience in the Great War” by Johannes R. Allert.)