



*Preserving, promoting, and developing Wellington North's unique cultural resources to build a vibrant community and a prosperous economy.*

## **CULTURAL MOMENT FOR JANUARY 13, 2025 CELEBRATES DR. HELEN REYNOLDS**



*Dr. Helen Reynolds. This is the only photo in the Mount Forest Museum and Archives of Dr. Reynolds. Photo circa 1880.*

Helen Reynolds was born in Mount Forest on June 7, 1860. Her father, John, was an Irish farmer and carpenter, and her mother Margaret came from Quebec. On the family farm and throughout her early schooling at Mount Forest High School and the Mount Forest Model School, Helen demonstrated a passion for Natural Sciences. Even with the intellectual and emotional drive to pursue medicine, Helen's choice to do so was both brave and remarkable for the time.

Although Queen's University (Kingston) accepted six women to Medical School in 1881, including Helen Reynolds, they were met with considerable hostility. By 1882, the faculty had created an impossible situation for the female students. Being separated for anatomy dissection was somewhat acceptable but not when the women were constantly insulted and excluded from "all obstetrical lectures to avoid their own embarrassment." The Professors lodged a formal complaint to the University that, "women restricted academic freedom" because lectures had to be "garbled to suit their refined sensibilities." The College caved, and all female students were expelled in 1883. The Queen's Faculty of Medicine would not reinstate female medical students until 1943. Fortunately for Helen Reynolds, a sympathetic group in Kingston took them in after founding the Women's Medical College. Helen graduated in 1885 with the highest marks of all women... and men.

Helen opened up her first practice in Toronto. It was a hard living, especially at night when Helen carried a length of chain for self-defense. Helen also had to open a boarding house to supplement her earnings. When she contracted pneumonia in 1889, Helen came home to Mount Forest to convalesce and joined the office of her younger brother, Dr. Albert Reynolds, on Main Street. She specialized in the diseases of women and children as men would seldom trust her knowledge. After marrying Thomas Ryan in 1890, the couple moved to Sudbury where Helen opened a practice in her home – reaching patients by canoe, rail handcar and on foot. It was a life filled with remote surgeries, accidents and smallpox epidemics as well as raising five children. When they retired to Victoria, B.C. in 1907, Helen could not practice medicine in that province as a woman, but she unofficially continued to care for the poor and immigrant neighborhoods for many more years.

Helen passed away on July 6, 1947 at the age of 87. Her home in Victoria, known as Ownyara, is considered a heritage property and, as of 2019, was still owned by members of her family.

Dr. Helen Reynolds would no doubt be happy to know the number of female graduates from Canadian medical schools in recent years has been slightly higher than men.

*Submitted by the Wellington North Cultural Roundtable*