A Physician and His Ideal

Celebrating 100 Years

Decatur Memorial Hospital, 2300 N. Edward St., Decatur, Ill., 62526.

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Our Mission: To improve the health of the people of Central Illinois.

A Physician and His Ideal
To the hospital he gave his life

Celebrating 100 Years
1916—2016
This is the second in a series of pieces DMH plans to produce highlighting its first 100 years of service.

Editor’s note: Dr. Will Barnes is considered a driving force behind creating a hospital in Decatur where “babies could be born.” This information contained in this piece is based on information found in his obituary (a full-page tribute printed in the Decatur Herald May 1, 1930), and from a booklet entitled A Physician and His Ideal, published by Decatur Memorial Hospital in 1966.

The year was 1899. Mrs. Sue Hagaman decided that to get her idea moving, she needed help. Help from a powerful, influential member of the community. So she orchestrated a meeting between herself and THE Dr. William Barnes. That meeting sparked a unique collaboration and 17 years later, Decatur embraced its second hospital, a hospital where babies could be born: Decatur Memorial Hospital.

Though built by the determination and grit of many hard-working individuals, the lion’s share of the credit for Decatur Memorial Hospital goes to one rare man who took responsibility for helping establish and then directing the hospital’s crucial early years: Dr. “Will” Barnes.

But who was this man? He remains a mystery. But a compilation of information from a variety of sources provides some insight into this unique individual.

A physician.
A surgeon.
A true visionary.
And an inspiration—even 100 years later.

William David Barnes, MD
Sept. 3, 1860—May 1, 1930
Surgeon and Entomologist
Builder, Leader, humanitarian
To the hospital he gave his life

Above breaking ground in 1966 for the Staley Pavilion are, from left, William Barnes IV (great grandson to Dr. Will Barnes) G. William Madden (Vice President of the DMH Board of Directors) and Mrs. James H. (Daisy) Winters. Mrs. Winters worked with Mrs. Hagaman in the early 1900s and was present at the hospital’s original groundbreaking (inset).
Dr. Will Barnes died in his home at 7:15 am Thursday, May 1, 1930.

"Dr. Barnes had been ill for several weeks, suffering from heart trouble. He passed away in his chair, it being impossible for him to lie down without causing a great heart disturbance. He had been seriously ill since two weeks ago Thursday. Although unconscious a part of the time, Dr. Barnes was able to talk to members of the family until the end. His body will lie in state in his home at which time friends may call. The body will be taken to St. Louis for cremation. The family asks that no flowers be sent."

"The Medical Staff has lost its greatest inspiration...he has been a living example of the ideal physician who has given everything at his disposal, time, energy and money toward the relief of suffering," said Dr. Clarence E. McClelland, DMH Medical Staff president at the time of Dr. Barnes’ death. "The hospital will stand as a monument to this ideal."

### Dr. Barnes and Decatur Memorial Hospital

Unlike his critics at the time, Dr. Barnes did not think it was ridiculous to buy a 40-acre tract of land at 2300 N. Edward St. (located two miles north of downtown Decatur yet beyond the street car line and paved streets). Dr. Barnes dreamed that DMH would someday be a medical center, not just a hospital.

"His money, his talent, his prestige all went for the cause that was nearest his heart. The hospital was his life. His hopes for it were boundless. Dr. Will Barnes worked harder for Decatur Memorial Hospital than for his own success. He gave his life to it."

Always active, Dr. Barnes was a good golfer and one of the first in the community to take up the sport. He was president of the Central Illinois Golf Association. This bas-relief was a gift to the hospital, however, Dr. Barnes would not permit it to be placed in the hospital until after his death.

### Butterfly Hobby

Dr. Barnes won international recognition—as an entomologist. To scientists the world over, the name ‘Dr. Barnes’ was familiar due to his butterfly collection.

"He spared neither trouble nor expense in bringing together such a collection. He thought of it as a distinct contribution to science. He never tired of going into his ‘bughouse’ with a shaded lamp to study his butterflies. Sometimes he banteringly suggested that his friends probably thought him a damned fool. ‘You fellows cannot understand my fussing around with butterflies,’ he used to say. Nor did they.

Dr. Barnes’ butterfly collection was housed in a fire proof, storm-proof museum behind the family home. At his death in 1930, his collection was regarded as the largest and finest in the world with possibly 10,000 species and an estimated 473,000 specimens, even receiving praise in the 1936 National Geographic magazine.

A few months after his death, the U.S. government bought Dr. Barnes’ collection for $50,000; the collection was to be housed in the Smithsonian Institute. Half of the proceeds was given to the hospital.
William David Barnes was born Sept. 3, 1860, in Decatur, Ill., the son of Dr. William A. and Eleanor Sawyer Barnes—a “pioneer Decatur family.”

He graduated salutatorian from the Decatur High School in 1877. Then spent a year at Illinois State University, Normal, followed by a year at University of Illinois, Champaign. In 1879, he entered Harvard Medical School and graduated in 1886. He completed an internship at Boston City Hospital and then studied abroad in Heidelberg, Munich and Vienna.

In 1890, Dr. Barnes came home to Decatur and opened his medical practice. That same year he married Charlotte L. Gillette. The couple had two children: William Barnes, Jr., and Joan Dean Gillett Barnes.

“As a young man, he came back to his native town with a surgical technique developed by the greatest hospitals of this country and Europe. He would have made a name for himself in any large city. Decatur and central Illinois profited by his skill.”

He was often praised as an “outstanding physician and surgeon and as a diagnostician.” Not long after opening his practice, Dr. Barnes performed the area’s first bone graft. He grafted part of a cat’s hip bone to the face of a woman whose nose had been crushed.

“I very soon came to realize that I was working with a master surgeon, with that rare good quality—most excellent judgment. Skillfulness of hand, keenness in diagnosis, quickness of perception, gentleness and true sympathy made him outstanding,” said Dr. C.H., Tearnan, who was Dr. Barnes’ medical partner for 14 years.

In 1899, community member Mrs. Sue Hagaman orchestrated a meeting with THE Dr. Will Barnes. She needed his help to build a hospital in Decatur where babies could be born—and so the story of Decatur Memorial Hospital begins.