



Marcena Ricker

by Teresa K. Lehr

Dr. Marcena Sherman Ricker was a well-known and highly respected physician in her day. She was a graduate of Rochester City Hospital's Training School for Nurses. Born in Castile, New York on July 23, 1852, she began her adult career as a teacher. But after three years, she decided that serving the sick and the less fortunate was her calling. In 1880, she enrolled with City Hospital's first class of student nurses, graduating in 1884. Subsequently, she earned her M. D. degree at the Homeopathic Hospital in Cleveland, received post graduate training in New York City, and returned to Rochester in 1888 to establish a private practice that focused on women's and children's diseases.

She was a member of the Lake Avenue Baptist Church, where she met her husband, Wentworth G. Ricker, a widower with two daughters and the founder of a Rochester manufacturing concern. They were married in June 1893. For the rest of their lives the Rickers would be among the most active lay leaders of their church. In addition, Dr. Ricker's inspiration and leadership led to the creation of the Fairport Baptist Home in 1904.

Although she had graduated from City Hospital's nurse training school, her preparation as a homeopathic physician precluded her practicing there. But rejection by her alma mater may not have been disappointing to the doctor. She was one of the first women to be appointed to the Rochester Homeopathic Hospital (Genesee Hospital).

Like many of her colleagues, Dr. Ricker considered tending the impoverished sick without charge as her moral duty. In 1894, she served as one of the volunteer medical staff members and a charter member of the Board of Managers of the Door of Hope, a home for unwed mothers on Troup Street. The doctor's tenure on the Board and on the medical staff of the Door of Hope lasted until the spring of 1912.

Marcena Ricker, M.D. gained distinction by caring for Susan B. Anthony in her final illness. Although she was not herself a suffragist, the physician had long been a close friend of Miss Anthony and her personal physician. It was Dr. Ricker who was the official spokesperson to the press, reporting daily on the condition of her famous patient during her final illness. And on March 13, 1906, it was Dr. Ricker's description of the suffragist's final hours that the New York Times relied on for its front-page coverage of Miss Anthony's death.

Dr. Ricker undertook many other activities in the service of the aged and disadvantaged, her patients, and her community. Other organizations that benefited from her leadership and active involvement include the YWCA and the WCTU. Dr. Ricker died on January 18, 1933.





**"I'M STAYING HERE ALL NIGHT."
The Vigil of Marcena Ricker, M.D., Susan B. Anthony's Doctor**
by Teresa K. Lehr

Before medical and technological advances like antibiotics, intravenous procedures, and respirators, pneumonia was a dreaded and often fatal disease, especially among the elderly. Care givers could do little more than make a victim as comfortable as possible, ensure that the environment fostered rest, encourage the patient to take light nourishment, and pray. Thus, for an early 20th-century physician, a house call might mean spending days, and even nights, at a patient's bedside.

Such was the case when Susan B. Anthony fell ill early in March 1906. She and her sister, Mary, had just returned to their Madison Street home in Rochester after being featured at the national convention of the Woman's Suffrage Association. A painful attack of facial neuralgia had prevented Miss Anthony from attending the celebration of her 86th birthday in New York City. Rochesterians learned that the suffragist had come home on March 2 when the Democrat and Chronicle announced: "After a long and exciting life of work for the cause of her sex and humanity, Miss Anthony is now resting from public work." For the next week and a half, Dr. Marcena Ricker, her physician, tended the famous patient and informed the press daily about her condition, keeping a careful balance between hope and despair.

Dr. Ricker was a unique woman for her time. Born Marcena E. Sherman in Castile, New York, on July 23, 1852, she attended local seminaries, eventually graduating from Albany Normal College. Like her patient, she began as a teacher, but after three years, she redirected her career. Joining the first class at the newly established Rochester City (now Dr. Rochester General) Hospital Nurses Training School, Miss Sherman completed a two-year program in March, 1884 and continued her medical studies at the Cleveland Homeopathic Hospital, becoming one of the small but growing number of females to pursue a medical doctor's degree. Following post-graduate work in New York City, she returned to Rochester to open a practice devoted to diseases of women and children. As a woman and a homeopathic physician, Dr. Sherman was not invited to join the attending staff of the prestigious Rochester City Hospital, which held religiously to the tenets of "regular" medicine. The Homeopathic Hospital (now Genesee Hospital), however, welcomed her services.

In 1893, Dr. Sherman married Wentworth G. Ricker, a successful manufacturer and inventor, but at a time when married women of means normally spent their lives in homemaking, social activities, and volunteer work, she chose to continue her medical practice. Two years later, Dr. Ricker was appointed a director and attending physician for the Door of Hope, a benevolent institution that gave shelter and medical care to "redeemable" unwed mothers-to-be. Some time in the late 19th century, she and Susan B. Anthony began a close friendship, and Dr. Ricker became the famous suffragist's personal physician.





On Saturday, March 3, 1906, the local newspaper admitted that Miss Anthony was not merely resting; she was recuperating from a bout with pneumonia "as rapidly as a young person could be expected to." The source of this and of all the news about the patient's progress was Dr. Marcena Ricker. Identified at first only as the patient's physician, Dr. Ricker remained the major conduit of information to the community, making daily reports that offered enough details to satisfy well-wishers so that they would not deluge the home with telephone calls and visits.

By Monday of the following week, Miss Anthony had taken a turn for the worse. Her fever had spiked, and now both lungs were infected, although one of them was clearing. Because of the seriousness of the situation, Dr. Ricker stayed overnight at the Anthony home to give her feverish and restless patient constant attention. Thereafter, the little house on Madison Street became a hospital for a single patient, with Mary Anthony, nurses M. A. Shanks and Mabel Nichols, and Dr. Marcena Ricker in attendance. The physician, finally revealed in the press as Dr. Ricker, reported that her patient's condition was critical.

Toward midweek, the tense household was able to relax somewhat, for Miss Anthony's temperature had stabilized, and she was able to retain a little nourishment. When Dr. Ricker looked in on Wednesday morning, she was sleeping so peacefully that the physician decided not to disturb her for an examination. As the week progressed, the patient became more alert and her spirits heightened. The improvements continued, and by Friday, the physician reported optimistically to the newspaper, "All symptoms are favorable, fully as good as I expected to find them at this time, and the only alarming one is the weakness. When a high fever has existed, it always leaves the patient extremely weak. Miss Anthony is holding her own."

On Thursday evening, March 8, a visitor arrived at the Anthony home. The Rev. Anna Howard Shaw, unaware that her mentor was critically ill and hoping to discuss the movement's strategy in an impending women's suffrage vote in Oregon, stopped in Rochester on her way west. The visit energized the aging suffragist, but at the same time, it threatened to exhaust her. To keep the house as quiet as possible, Mary Anthony asked local well-wishers to avoid telephoning and telegram messengers and service people to make deliveries at the side entrance rather than at the front door. Now, Dr. Ricker had to exercise her professional authority. All day on Friday, she timed the meetings of the two women, allowing only five minutes per hour to plan for the future of the movement. The curative powers of sleep, she insisted, were essential for her patient's recovery.

But perhaps the stimulation was more than Susan's system could handle. On Saturday, her condition started a roller coaster course that would end at a full stop. Saturday night was a restless one, but on Sunday, Dr. Ricker reported that Miss Anthony's temperature, pulse, and respiration were nearly normal and that she was "eating with relish." "Her mental condition," the physician reported, "is a great improvement over Friday. On that





day, she was so exhilarated by the presence of the Rev. Shaw that she overexerted mentally. She was very direct with me today. (She asked,) 'How long is it going to be, doctor? How soon do you think I shall be able to get out of bed and begin work again?'"

On Sunday, March 11, the long vigil turned into a deathwatch. Monday's edition of the newspaper conveyed Dr. Ricker's diagnosis without its customary Victorian verbal embroidery. "Susan B. Anthony is dying," the paper reported candidly. According to the physician's account: "She was exceptionally bright (Sunday) morning. She was able to retain nourishment and was cheerful. At one o'clock, she seemed a bit stronger. Miss Anthony said she was impatient to get strong enough to sit up. She said she would try to be patient. At two o'clock, Miss Anthony took some nourishment and said it tasted better than anything she had taken in some time. At 3:30 o'clock, she was taken with a sudden pain in the heart and in a few moments became unconscious. It looks now as if she would not last many hours." Again, the physician remained with her patient overnight.

At 12:40 a.m. on March 13, the great suffragist died peacefully with Dr. Marcena Ricker at her bedside. The physician reported the cause of death as "heart failure, induced by pneumonia of both lungs. She had had serious valvular heart trouble for the last six or seven years. Her lungs were practically clear, and the pneumonia had yielded to treatment, but the weakness of her heart prevented recovery.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the local reporting of Miss Anthony's final illness and passing is the editorial decision about where in Rochester newspapers the events of her illness were reported. All of the articles, even Miss Anthony's obituary, appeared on inside pages along with other stories about local events and personalities. The editors of the New York Times, on the other hand, felt that this was a front-page item. Not only was the news of Susan B. Anthony's death accorded full-column status on page one, but the news of her struggle had also appeared there on the previous Saturday. Whether the local decision was prompted by a conviction that Miss Anthony was one of Rochester's own and her story belonged with other Rochesterians or by a sense that she was an aging aberration who had campaigned for years in a losing cause, we can only surmise. Nevertheless, the daily reports in the Democrat and Chronicle and the Union and Advertiser make it clear that Marcena E. Sherman Ricker, M.D., played a major role in trying to keep the famous suffragist alive and in disseminating information about her patient's condition.

After the death of her friend and patient, Dr. Ricker lived a long and active life, not as a woman's suffrage champion, but as one who dedicated herself to the welfare of women victimized by their inequality, their economic dependence, and their powerlessness. She continued her association with the Door of Hope, which has evolved into today's Hillside Children's Center. She was active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the YWCA. And it was Dr. Ricker's leadership that led to the establishment of the Fairport Baptist Home for the Aging, which prospered under her direction until her death on January 17, 1933.





We can wonder if Dr. Ricker ever learned that she had been quoted on the front page of the *New York Times*. But given her selfless dedication to the unfortunate women of Rochester, it may not have mattered to her. Perhaps what might have meant more is the fact that she and her husband rest in the same neighborhood where her intimate friend, Susan B. Anthony, and so many other dedicated and active women lie, in Mount Hope Cemetery.

The Ricker plot is located in Range 4, Lot 90, of Mount Hope Cemetery. To locate it, enter the cemetery at the south entrance on Mount Hope Avenue (opposite the Distillery) and park near the first stop sign. Directly ahead is the Leake family monument, and behind it is the Macy family monument. The opposite side of the Macy monument reads "Ricker")

From the *Epitaph*

