

Dr. Helen Dexter, 103, was one of the area's first dermatologists

By Andrew Meacham, St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer, Saturday, September 24, 2011

BELLEAIR — Long after she stopped driving, Dr. Helen Dexter walked the 2 miles each way from her Belleair home to continuing education classes on Indian Rocks Road. Approaching 100 years old, she wanted to keep her physician's license active. Passers-by saw a tiny woman in a navy blue polyester dress, aviator glasses and a hat to block the sun. By then, Dr. Dexter had already lived the equivalent of multiple lifetimes. She had worked as an archaeologist in Russia and then earned a medical degree. She had overcome discrimination, in part because she had refused to acknowledge it was there.

Dr. Dexter, one of the first female physicians in the Clearwater area, as well as one of the first dermatologists, died Tuesday. She was 103.

Thirty years ago, she served three terms on the Belleair City Commission, defeating younger opponents in races in which age was considered an issue. "She was her own person," said longtime friend Jim Howley, 91. "She did what she wanted to do."

Helen Louise Taylor was born July 28, 1908, in Cincinnati. Her father, a physician, died when she was 12, so her family enrolled her in a boarding school in France.

The well-traveled youngster was in Alaska as a teenager when a local discovery aroused her interest: Sled dogs had unearthed the remains of a woolly mammoth. She majored in archaeology at Bryn Mawr College, where she competed for the skiing and swimming teams. As a dormitory leader, she sometimes had to bust classmate Katharine Hepburn when she tried to sneak out past curfew.

A trip by ocean liner to Russia, where she was to work as an archaeologist, promised new beginnings, including conversations with fellow passenger George Bernard Shaw. "She did chat with him," said Lissa Dexter, her daughter. "She said he was more interested in the college students than the other passengers."

She found her work interesting but lonely. She returned to the United States to pursue a medical degree at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University, where she was one of four women in her class. The move furthered her career but might have disappointed her family, who had hoped she would marry into European nobility.

In about 1935 she married Dr. Morris Dexter, her bacteriology professor. The couple moved to Cincinnati, where she completed her training in dermatology. She worked as a physician while her husband served in the Navy during World War II. In 1954, the family moved to Belleair.

Dr. Dexter started a solo dermatology practice in Clearwater, sometimes accepting produce or chickens as payment for her services. "At that time, black people came in through the back door of the office," said Lissa Dexter, 68. "She insisted that people of color would be going through the front door. Her secretary almost quit." Her daughter believes Dr. Dexter also faced discrimination as a female physician but said, "She never acknowledged that anything was difficult."

She and her husband turned their yard into a sanctuary for orchids and bromeliads, which they acquired personally from several continents.

In 1979, alarmed by U.S. Steel's plans for a dense residential development surrounding the Belleview Biltmore, she ran successfully for a seat on the Belleair City Commission. "At the time, the town was being courted by developers," said former Mayor Kent Weible. "That's really when government changed, putting more power into the hands of the residents."

Dr. Dexter outlived most of her contemporaries. Morris Dexter died in 1992. A daughter, Katharine, died in 2001 at age 63. Dr. Dexter went on daily 45-minute swims in the gulf until age 90. She enjoyed birthdays, including her own 103rd birthday celebration aboard the *Starlight Majesty*.

Asked once to pass along her secret for living a long life, she said, "I never think about my age."

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