

Dr. Urling C. Coe

'Doc' was also a bank president, a real-estate dealer and Bend's second mayor



Robert Agli

Dr. Michael Coe, a Bend orthopedic surgeon, carries on the local medical tradition of his grandfather's cousin Dr. Urling Coe.

Dr. Coe dealt with a huge diversity of medical issues, from birth to dentistry, gunshot wounds and the pandemic of 1918.

DR. URLING C. COE was the most prominent doctor in the early years of settlement in Central Oregon. A graduate of the University of Missouri and the Eclectic College of Cincinnati, Ohio, Coe arrived in the booming frontier town of Bend in 1905, seeking adventure and opportunity.

"I was just where I wanted to be," he wrote, "in the heart of the last pioneering stock country of the West, ready to hang out my shingle in a wide open town. I was a young medico 23 years old and eager to get going.

"New business buildings were being rushed to completion and many new residences were under construction. Nearly half of [the residents] were still living in tents. There were eight saloons with open gambling and a lusty red-light district consisting of several small shacks on the riverbank in the lower end of town. There was hurry and bustle on all sides and a tang of romance and excitement in the air...

"In the county seat, Prineville, 35 miles to the east, there were four doctors who ... ranged the enormous territory. There was not a graduate nurse in the county, and the nearest hospital was 160 miles away."

Coe practiced medicine in Central Oregon until 1918, when he moved his practice to Portland. Like so many pioneers, he was also an entrepreneur and an active participant in family and community. He was a leader in the creation of Bend's first hospital, a bank organizer and president, a real-estate dealer and Bend's second mayor.

But Urling Coe is best known for his imminently readable book, *Frontier Doctor: Observations on Central Oregon and the Changing West*. It offers a vivid account of what it was like to be a horse-and-buggy practitioner in the days when Central Oregon was a frontier.

"I tried to answer all the calls that came in," he wrote, "but I was sometimes too busy to see everyone who called me. I spent most of my time in the buggy rushing around among my patients

by JAMES L. GARDNER

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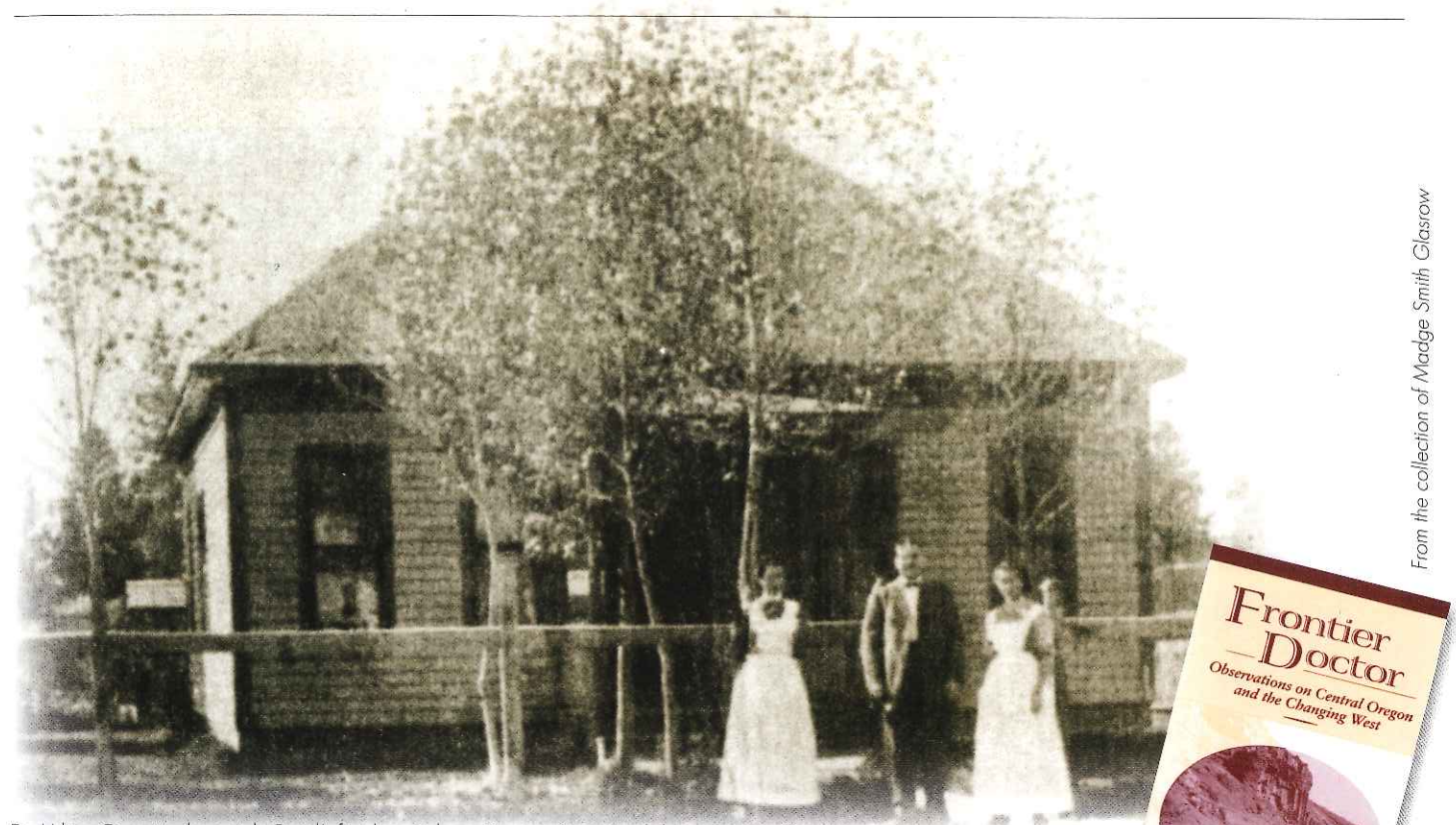
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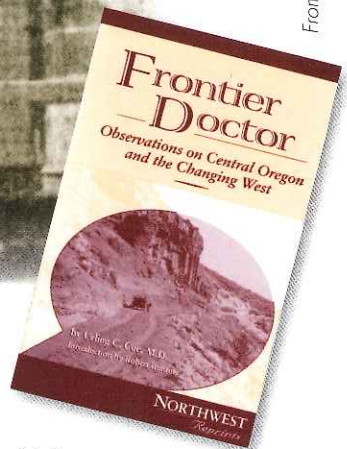
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Dr. Urling Coe stands outside Bend's first hospital, on Oregon Street, with his nursing staff. The photo comes from Coe's book, *Frontier Doctor* (inset).



From the collection of Madge Smith Glasrow

scattered all over the country. There were days at a time when I did not have my clothes off or go to bed. Most of the sleep I managed to get was in the buggy while driving."

One night, coming back from a call, Coe inadvertently happened upon some cattle rustlers:

"As I drew near ... I could see men and horses around the fire. Suddenly I heard the thudding of galloping horses and three riders loomed up out of the darkness in front of me. Before I realized what was going on, two of the riders grabbed my horse's bridle and the third dashed up on the one side of the buggy and pointed a gun at my head.

"Reach fur the stars, ole timer!" a deep musical bass voice boomed. I dropped the lines and stuck my hands in the air.

"I had a six-shooter close at hand, but the fellow had the drop on me before I knew what was happening and he acted as though he meant business.

"What's up, boys?" I asked in a voice that didn't sound like my own. "No one made a sound, but the man who held a gun on me leaned forward in his saddle, peering at me through the darkness. In a moment the hand that held the gun slowly dropped to his side, and the deep bass voice boomed out in a good-natured laugh.

"Oh, hell, it's Doc, boys," he said, still laughing. ... After questioning me at some length in a rather friendly manner, the deep-voiced rustler said, "Well, Doc, go on 'bout yer business an' I'll

be gettin back to mine. Jest be sure shore an' remember you ain't seen nothin' or heard nothin' along the road tonight an' everything'll be jake. I know yer a smart man an' savvy aplenty what's liable to happen to any maverick that talks too much. Adios."

Like other early practitioners, Dr. Coe dealt with a huge diversity of medical issues, from birth to dentistry, gunshot wounds and the pandemic of 1918.

Ironically, one of his indirect descendants—the great grandson of his father's brother—is now an orthopedic surgeon affiliated with The Center—Orthopedic and Neurological Care and Research in Bend.

Dr. Michael Coe has read *Frontier Doctor*, of course, and found it inspiring, exciting—and frustrating, for the breadth of medical practice involved, combined with the lack of professional tools and medical team backup. It is, he says, "a world apart" from his own highly specialized practice of today.

Michael Coe and his family came to Bend for professional and technical opportunities, as well as the lifestyle and recreation at their fingertips. And, yes, he is asked about the family connection "all the time." ■

Jim Gardner, the managing partner of Ranch at the Canyons and the president emeritus of Portland's Lewis and Clark College, is the author of books on Central Oregon history and geology.