

Alf K. Stratte, M.D.

Alf Kenneth Stratte grew up in Dawson MN, the sixth child of Norwegian immigrants, Halvor and Anne Sather Stratte. After attending Carleton College for one year, he transferred to the University of Minnesota. Following in his father's footsteps, he enrolled in the School of Pharmacy, but his education was interrupted for two years by his service in the army during World War I. He joined the army in January, 1917 and was sent to Camp Dodge, Iowa. After Armistice Day, he was discharged in January, 1919 and continued his education at the University of Minnesota School of Medicine, graduating in 1924. While in college, he was a member of the U of M marching band, playing any brass instrument available.

Following the nine year courtship and long awaited marriage in 1924 to Margret Alma Schwirtz of Wabasha MN, whom he met as a freshman at Carleton College, Dr. Stratte opened his medical practice in Pine City MN in October of that year.

When the Strattes arrived in Pine City, Highway 61 was still a dirt road. During the early years, Dr. Stratte braved the muddy or snowy roads to make calls to patients who lived many miles from Pine City. During a winter blizzard, he sometimes called a city plow to clear the road ahead of his car. The farmers often met him on the main road with tractors, and once, a manure spreader. Occasionally, when the weather was stormy, his car slid into the ditch and kind neighboring farmers pulled him out with their tractors. He wore a huge fur lined coat and a beaver hat for these trips. When a young man was shot while hunting in the Chengwatana Forest, Dr. Stratte transported him by boat down the St. Croix River to get him to the hospital. Luckily, he had a wonderful sense of humor that got him through many of these adventures.

Several times a week he was called out in the middle of the night to see a sick patient. The fee at that time for his office visits was \$1.00, \$1.50 for a call to a farm, but by the time he retired in 1973, the office call had increased to \$3.00. A baby delivery in the patient's home in 1924 was \$20.00 and later jumped to \$25.00; these fees included the months of prenatal care. Countless times Dr. Stratte stayed all night with the mother, waiting for her baby to arrive. He was often paid with a load of wood, eggs, chickens, potatoes, garden produce, fish or nothing at all. After his death his children found one entire file drawer of unpaid accounts. If he transferred a patient to the Twin Cities, he often

drove the patient to the hospital in his own car. In 1936 his Plymouth was specially outfitted so he could slide a stretcher into the car through the trunk. His telephone answering service was the NW Bell operator. If he and Margret were invited to a party, he called the operator to tell her where he was spending the evening. To call the drugstore, he picked up the phone and said, "Give me Wilbur."

Dr. Stratte charmed his young patients with his magic tricks, taking nickels and dimes from their ears. In 1938 he organized a city wide kite contest. He loved to hunt pheasants with his brother Harold, a doctor in Windom MN, and to fish in Cross Lake and in the lakes in northern Minnesota with his friends. Several times during the 1930s he asked the owners of the three service stations near his house to dump their plowed snow on the lawn by the side of his house in order to make a very large hill which his children used for sledding and to dig out a fort. He was an expert at card tricks but, unfortunately, those secrets died with him. He also was a good poker player and enjoyed the weekly game with his friends. The family still has the five cards of his royal flush in spades. Proud of his Norwegian heritage, Dr. Stratte made lefse and lutefisk for his family every year. He played with the city band, under the direction of Joe Dufeck, at the summer concerts in the old Robinson Park wooden gazebo.

Capt. Stratte joined the Pine City National Guard, 125th horse drawn Field Artillery, in 1929 and in June spent two weeks as one of two medical officers at Camp McCoy, Sparta, WI. In February, 1941 he was called into active duty as a medical officer during World War II with the Pine City National Guard and stationed at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. His wife and children moved to Lake Charles, LA to be near him. Promoted to major, he was transferred to the 194th Field Artillery, Ft. Bragg, NC and later to Camp Gordon, SC and Carlyle Barracks, PA. The family moved with him whenever possible.

Major Stratte was sent overseas in 1943 with the 1107 Combat Engineers. He was stationed in England, France and Belgium before proceeding to Germany. He made friends with the local people wherever he was stationed except in Germany where it was not permitted. New friends in Cheshire, England, entertained him often; he went boar hunting in Belgium and delivered a baby in France when he was called by a local father-to-be.

Major Stratte was awarded the Bronze Star for heroic achievement on 28 September, 1944 in France. As written on the

citation, “Major Stratte, near Dinan, Brittany, France, administered medical attention to the enlisted personnel of another unit who had been injured when the truck in which they were riding caught fire. With complete disregard for the resulting explosions of gasoline and ammunition and without consideration for his personal safety, Major Stratte’s actions greatly alleviated the suffering of the enlisted personnel injured as a result of the accident. The skill and disregard for his personal safety displayed by Major Stratte reflect the highest credit upon himself and the military service.” With his 8 mm. movie camera he filmed the LSTs’ crossing of the Rhine River at St. Goar. On April 12, 1945, Just after Germany surrendered, Major Stratte inspected the concentration camp, Buchenwald, still housing the dead bodies, burned corpses and those starved prisoners who were still alive. His 8 mm. movies of this camp have now been transferred to a DVD for preservation. In a letter to his wife he said he “went to the camp so that in the future, if certain things are claimed to be nothing but propaganda, he would have proof.”

Following the war, Dr. Stratte reopened his medical office in the south end of the Rybak building in Pine City. On nights and weekends the Stratte house on Highway 61, and later their home on Cross Lake, served as an “emergency room” where travelers and locals came to have fish hooks removed, dirt specks extracted from their eyes, lacerations sutured and dressed, bones set and, on occasion, marital disputes solved. It was the job of his wife and his children to hold the flashlight and to keep the blood from dripping onto the carpet. In the “good old days” Dr. Stratte left his house unlocked, his physician’s bag in the car and the car keys in the ignition so that he could answer a call for help as quickly as possible. Sometimes Constable Korf would quietly open the door of the Stratte house, climb the stairs into the bedroom to awaken Dr. Stratte for a late night house call.

He served on the Pine City School Board for 28 years. He was a member of the Pine City Development Corporation, State Medical Association, and the Eastern Minnesota Medical Association. Col. Stratte was awarded Minnesota’s highest award, the Medal of Merit, by Gov. Orville Freeman at Camp Ripley. He was also honored by having his portrait hung in the Pine City Armory. In 1973 he was the recipient of Pine City’s “Citizen of the Year”, the first time it was awarded to anyone. He also was honored by WCCO Radio with the “Good Neighbor Award.”

After practicing medicine in Pine City for 50 years, Dr. Stratte

retired in 1974. He died on November 12, 1991 and is buried in Birchwood Cemetery next to his wife, Margret.

Dr. and Mrs. Stratte were the parents of three children: Margery Stratte Swanson (Mrs. Bayliss), Pine City; Alf K. Stratte, Jr., Cambridge; and Jon R. Stratte, M.D. (Janice) Stillwater. There are eight grandchildren: Margret Swanson, Peter Swanson, Ann Stratte, Mary Swanson Jensen, Elisabeth Swanson Raasch, Susan Stratte Hall and Sarah Stratte Quickel.