

The Detwiler Brothers

By Carol Bruce

Several weeks ago this column focused on the little acetylene gas generating station located across the street from the Herndon Municipal Center. In that column I said that two brothers—Edwin (Dr. Ed) and Benjamin (Dr. Ben) Detwiler—founded the Herndon Gas Company at about the turn of the 20th century. (Actually, I referred to *Edward* and Benjamin; I'll explain later why Dr. Ed has undergone a name change.)

The Detwiler brothers were both prominent members of the Herndon community. Dr. Ed was a physician who settled in Herndon in 1887, after graduating from Jefferson Medical College (now a part of Thomas Jefferson University) in Philadelphia. Dr. Ben, who also settled in Herndon, was a dentist.

As befitting their positions in local society (in addition to serving on both the Town Council and the local school board, Dr. Ed was a multiple-term president of the Fairfax County Medical Society) both had large, important homes. In 1895, Dr. Ben built the Queen Anne Victorian at 825 Elden Street. He maintained his dental office in his home until he and his son Daniel, also a dentist, built the small brick building at 823 Elden Street in 1922. The structure at 825 Elden Street remains a private residence; the little brick building, which continued to serve as a dentist office until just a few years ago, has recently been converted to a residential use.

Dr. Ed lived at 763 Monroe Street (also still a private residence). His medical office, which he shared with another local doctor, was located at 711 Pine Street; today it is home to the Brush Strokes Salon. In the early 1900s, Dr. Ed built the home that he called The Summit at 800 Third Street. It is now a professional office center, owned and operated by current Town Council member Jasbinder Singh. Many long-time Herndon residents still refer to it as the Herndon Medical Center, however, after the use that existed there for many years, operated by a succession of physicians.

Both Detwiler brothers were innovators. As founders of the Herndon Gas Company, their homes were among the few in town that boasted gas lighting. The second gas generating house that still exists, and the only one remaining on private property, is located in the rear yard at 825 Elden Street.

Dr. Ed erected the first telephone pole in town, and both brothers were early subscribers to the first local phone company. At one point, Dr. Ed had a phone on the front porch of his office. If a patient arrived and the doctor was out, the patient needed only to pick up that phone and another phone would ring at the Third Street house. The two brothers also had the first two automobiles in town—and they were at that time the talk of the town.

Unfortunately, Dr. Ed met an untimely end. On the morning of February 29, 1916, he set out to make a house call on an elderly woman who lived on a small farm just outside of town. During that call, while Dr. Ed was attempting to convince his reluctant patient to

go to the hospital, her deranged son shot him in the thigh. The bullet hit the femoral artery and the doctor died in a matter of minutes.

As for Dr. Ed's name change: The plaque that the Historical Society installed on the Municipal Center gas house building during its restoration refers to Dr. Edward Detwiler. In the course of doing the research for this column I determined that Dr. Ed actually was Edwin Detwiler. The Historical Society plans to replace the existing plaque with a corrected one in the near future.