

Caddie Woodlawn and the Old Elm

Dunn County

A huge old elm in the village of Dunnville in Dunn County stood in the yard of “Dr. Crocker’s house.” In 1900, reports Christine Granger Klatt, who was there, it was the largest tree in the village. Its associations are both literary and historic. The significance of Caddie Woodlawn Park has been documented by an official Wisconsin Historical Society marker.

Dr. Walter Crocker, the first doctor in the area, treated patients as far away as Chippewa Falls and Menomonie and all through the pineries and logging camps. He built a home for himself and his family in Dunnville in 1856, when the dooryard elm was planted.

Oddly enough, Dunnville today is perhaps better known because of its literary connections than its historic importance. In the early 1850s, the village, seemingly, had everything going for it. As the county seat, it was ideally situated at the juncture of the Menomonie and Red Cedar Rivers and both rail and steamboat service were to link it with the rest of the state. But a fire in 1858 burned down the new wooden courthouse with all its records. Two years later Menomonie became the county seat and Dunnville settled into slow decline.

Fortunately, the fire spared Dr. Crocker’s house and the elm tree. In 1900, 11-year-old Christine Granger moved with her family to Dunnville. Mrs. Klatt recalled playing under the huge elm. By that time the Crockers had relocated to a farm on the Dunnville Prairie, destined to become even more famous in literary history than the village itself.

Christine, her sisters and friends played make-believe housekeeping games under the stately elm and had tea parties, with leaves and seeds for food and water for tea.

How did Dr. Crocker, planter of the elm tree, achieve literary fame? Through two books written by Carol Ryrie Brink. A description of Mrs. Crocker’s doll collection appears in *Magic Melons*, a story for young people. Mrs. Brink is much better known, however, for her Newbery Award-winning book, *Caddie Woodlawn*, written in 1935 and based on her grandmother Caddie Woodhouse’s stories of her pioneer Wisconsin girlhood on the Dunnville Prairie. The Crocker farm adjoined the Woodhouse (Woodlawn in the book) farm.

Mrs. Klatt and her sisters even attended the same school Caddie and her brothers and sisters had gone to between 1860 and 1867.

Source: Christine Granger Klatt, Menomonie