



Dr. Seagrave, right, and her friend Florence Denny Heliker wore their French uniforms at a 1919 dinner in their honor at the Women's University Club of Seattle. Seagrave is wearing the silver medal she received from the French government for her heroic service.
Bushnell photo/The Seattle Times

MABEL SEAGRAVE, M.D.

LIVING UP TO THE MOTTO

Mabel Seagrave, the “lady doctor” from Seattle, wasn’t rattled by the gruesome battlefield wounds she saw in France in the long, cruel summer of 1918. Her surgical skills and bedside manner impressed everyone. In the months to come, however, *Madame la doctoresse* admitted to being overwhelmed at times by a deluge of refugees suffering from the deadly “Spanish flu.” The highly contagious respiratory virus ravaged the immune systems of young soldiers in the trenches and thousands of hapless, undernourished civilians fleeing the fighting. The hunchback from a nearby village “was the nearest to an able-bodied man they could get to bury the dead.”

At great peril of becoming ill herself, Dr. Seagrave stayed on after the November 11th armistice to work at a Red Cross hospital. Awarded the silver *Médaille d’honneur* as a token of France’s gratitude, she had “labored as a superwoman to check the plague and relieve suffering,” another volunteer said. Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, presented Seagrave the group’s Merit of Honor award, saying she had demonstrated that strength, courage and patriotism were not just male attributes.

War hero, influential surgeon, lecturer and raconteur, Mabel Seagrave would qualify as a remarkable woman in any era. In hers she was extraordinary. She was one of the first Seattle women to attend elite Wellesley College in Massachusetts. After graduating from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in 1911, she spent 18 months as the house physician at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children before returning to Seattle.

Judging from photos, you’d never guess that Seagrave—somber in a mannish starched white shirt and necktie—could switch from an OB-GYN lecture to show-stopping impersonations of Teddy Roosevelt, Benito Mussolini and the bawdy actress Mae West at the “Stunt Nights” staged by the Women’s University Club of Seattle in the 1920s. She loved fun, fast horses and adventure.

WORLD WAR I was at its apex when Dr. Seagrave and her Wellesley chum, Florence Denny Heliker, were sent to France by the National American Woman Suffrage Association to staff a refugee hospital. Both were ardent suffragists. Heliker, in fact,



Dr. Seagrave treats a soldier with an injured foot at a field hospital in France in 1918. *University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW39542*

was a granddaughter of Seattle pioneer Arthur A. Denny, an early champion of gender equality.*

Donning khaki uniforms, Seagrave and Heliker rejected Victorian gender norms of faint-hearted femininity. “All the male members of my family who could serve their country in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars did so,” Seagrave told a reporter as she and Heliker boarded a troop ship. “As there were few men in my family able to enlist in this war, it was plainly up to me to ‘carry on.’ ” The head of the Suffrage Association’s overseas hospital unit, Dr. Caroline Finley, told a reporter that the women doctors and nurses were doing “a fine thing for suffrage.” Seagrave also jumped at the chance to enhance her skills in a battlefield setting. Surgeons would be confronted with “unusual wounds” and split-second decisions, she enthused, adding:

Just to see such cavities opened up will give the surgeon a chance to demonstrate things which heretofore have been more or less experimental. Experience gained now is going to make it possible to introduce great alleviations of suffering to the race. Military surgery in France today is of the greatest educational value, and an opportunity all surgeons must covet.

The Women’s Oversea [*sic*] Hospitals, U.S.A., which sent 78 women physicians to Europe during the war, saved countless lives, Seagrave told *The Seattle Daily Times* when she arrived back home in 1919. “Not a man in the outfit,” she said of the hospital where she and Heliker worked 18-hour days. “Indeed, we scarcely saw

* At the first meeting of the Territorial Assembly in 1854, Arthur Denny proposed that “all white females over the age of 18” be allowed to vote. The amendment was defeated by one vote. Washington women had to wait 56 years to achieve permanent suffrage.



Doctors, nurses and ambulance drivers at a Red Cross field hospital in France in 1918. The photo is from an album that belonged to Seagrave. *University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW39907*

men at all at first. All the French males were at war, save a few tottering graybeards. We had to do all our own heavy work ...including making coffins. Our plumber was a former New York actress. Our carpenter was just out of a fashionable girl's school. Our chauffeurs were all girls."

Like Seagrave and Heliker, many of the "girls" had attended prestigious women's liberal arts colleges that challenged graduates to make a difference in the world. At Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Smith, Wellesley and Vassar, sisterhood was steeped in idealism. Heliker, who could have been a Seattle society lady pouring tea at book talks, volunteered as an X-Ray technician with Seagrave's unit after undergoing weeks of training. When the ship carrying her equipment was torpedoed by a German U-Boat, Heliker "turned her hand to any and all tasks," Dr. Seagrave said. "Sometimes she was an undertaker; sometimes she assisted in the operating room." Heliker insisted that her friend was the real hero, noting that Seagrave came down with pneumonia before they departed for Europe but would not hear of being left behind. Nothing could stop her, Heliker said.

On arrival in France, they were temporarily pressed into service at a battlefield "evacuation" hospital where 12-stretcher ambulances were arriving hourly. Then, at an overwhelmed refugee hospital near Labouheyre in southern France, they discovered there were only two other physicians. Moaning, feverish people were dying, literally left and right. At the peak of the war, an



Mabel laughs as another volunteer shows off her baggy pants. *University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW39906*



estimated 10,000 refugees swarmed the area around the previously “sleepy little village.” Seagrave also traveled 40 miles twice a week to oversee village clinics. Her “strength was marvelous,” Heliker said.

The Red Cross field hospital where they volunteered after the armistice was in an overrun town called Foug in northeastern France—the Western Front during the war. The shooting had ended, but typhoid and dysentery were rampant and the flu was more deadly than war. More American Doughboys died from diseases, primarily the flu, than were killed in combat.* The virus would claim at least 50 million victims worldwide—some say twice that. In America, an estimated 675,000 people died in one year, including Donald J. Trump’s grandfather. Franklin D. Roosevelt, a young assistant secretary of the Navy, nearly died of the flu after touring the battlefields.

ANOTHER AMERICAN RED CROSS volunteer from the Pacific Northwest, Marion Randall Parsons, was convalescing at the hospital on the afternoon of November 11, 1918, when Dr. Seagrave arrived from a visit to the village. “They’ve signed the armistice!” she shouted. “Hurrah, the war is over!” The mayor wanted everyone to join in the celebration. And what a celebration it was, Parsons wrote in a letter home:

We went just as we happened to be—nurses in uniforms and white veils; the pharmacist in a blue apron—the cook drying reddened hands on hers; the doctor with her cap on one side, and the convalescent from Mont de

Marsan with her ankles swathed in woolly white socks of trooper size. ...

“Come, walk beside me,” said the mayor. “I want Americans around me today.”

The crowd was already gathering, drawn by the wild and joyous clangor of the church bells ... A drum and a trumpet, which was spasmodically sputtering out the notes of the Marseillaise, swung into line too, and in a moment every voice in the crowd was signing, or shouting “Vive la France!” ...

* 63,114 deaths from disease vs. 53,402 in combat

All the crowd went with us back to the mayor's house. ... "We must sing the Star Spangled Banner," I said. So we gathered together on the mayor's steps, fourteen American women, and sang with all our strength.

Seagrave remembered it as one of the great moments in her eventful life. No one who knew her was surprised by the courage and determination she demonstrated in France. She made it to Johns Hopkins on pure merit, and left a successful medical practice in downtown Seattle to volunteer for the overseas hospital. Public service was the hallmark of her medical career. She always said her goal in life was to live by Wellesley's motto: *Non Ministrari sed Ministrare*. "Not to be ministered unto, but to minister."

MABEL ALEXANDRIA SEAGRAVE was born in Cheyenne, the cattle-town capital of Wyoming, in 1882 to Arthur A. and Selina Stone Glass Seagrave. Arthur Amasa Seagrave, a descendant of Massachusetts Bay Colony Puritans, was a construction engineer for the Union Pacific Railroad. After a stint as a Wells-Fargo agent in Portland, he arrived in Seattle in 1885 and dabbled in real estate. The following year, tragedy struck the family. Selina Seagrave, only 38 years old, died of an illness. Mabel was motherless at the vulnerable age of 4. Happily, the precocious child acquired a "notably kind and devoted" stepmother two years later when her father married a Seattle woman, Sarah Chatham.



Seagrave around the age of 8 in 1890.
University of Washington Libraries,
Special Collections, SOC9751

Shortly after Seattle's great fire of 1889, Mabel's father built the Seagrave Hotel, followed by a bigger and better one near Pioneer Square. It was the fourth Seattle hotel to be named the Occidental. The Seagraves lived in the five-story hotel throughout Mabel's childhood. She was an inquisitive girl who loved talking with hotel guests from far-flung places. In the summer of 1897, when Mabel was 15, Seattle became the gateway to the Klondike gold fields. Nine-thousand prospectors and suppliers departed the city's docks in the space of eight weeks. And in the months to come Seattle became a haven for returning miners. The city's hotels and boarding houses were sleeping six to a room. An estimated 20,000 newcomers arrived in 18 months. Arthur Seagrave, while "making no pretension to being a Sunday school scholar," prided himself on running an upstanding establishment. There was no

“saloon bar” at the Occidental, he noted, and the “uncouth” characters flooding the city could look elsewhere for lodging, newly rich or not.

Mabel Seagrave spent her grade-school years at Denny School, an impressive new two-story building that opened in 1884 on Battery Street, between 5th and 6th Avenues in Belltown. She was an exceptional all-around student, excelling in math, biology and chemistry. She loved acting in school plays.

In 1900, at the outset of her senior year at Seattle High School, Seagrave’s skill as a horsewoman was reported in a *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* feature on the growth of the Seattle Riding Club. One event—a mock “hare and hounds” chase—took place on a Saturday in September near what is now called the Central District. The chase started at the intersection of 18th Avenue and Madison Street, with the rider playing the hare galloping down 18th to the place where the pavement ended. With club-member “hounds” in hot pursuit, the hare entered “a tangle of wood roads and bypaths.” Some hounds were “greatly confused.” But Seagrave stayed on the hare’s tail. “There was a splendid run down 17th Avenue to the flag, with a spectacular finish,” the *P-I* wrote. “Miss Mabel Seagrave, mounted on her swift horse Frank, led all the way down the avenue” until Herbert S. Upper, vice president of the club, finally nudged past her “and won with scarcely eight feet to spare. So close was the finish that by unanimous sentiment of the club, the honors were divided between Miss Seagrave and Mr. Upper.”

Mabel hated losing. Frank probably did, too.



Seagrave at Wellesley College around 1904. She was active in athletics and the Republican Club. *Wellesley College*

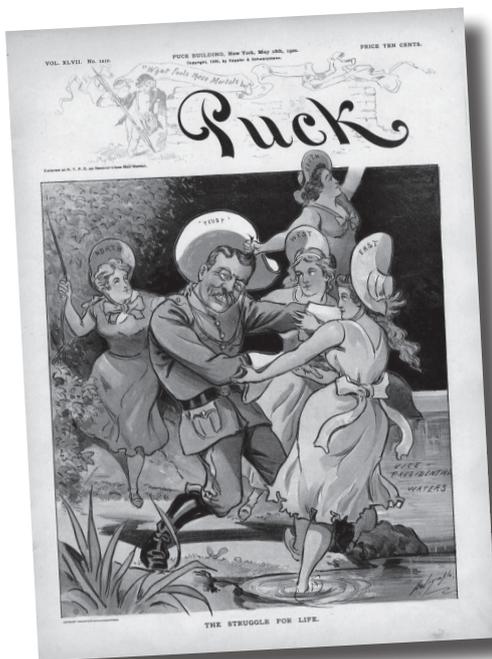
SEAGRAVE WAS CO-VALEDICTORIAN of the 65-member Seattle High School Class of 1901. Her address on the role of 20th Century women was warmly applauded by a standing-room-only crowd of 2,000 at the city’s Grand Opera House.

Wellesley College, striving to geographically diversify its enrollment, may have recruited Seagrave. Likely this came at the recommendation of Florence Denny, who had matriculated at the prestigious Massachusetts school the year before. Whatever the case, the sturdy, bespectacled young woman from Seattle was a good fit. She was studious but sociable, with a puckish sense of humor. She tried her hand at everything. At the college’s 1902 Field Day, Seagrave won the first low-hurdles heat and placed second overall, helping secure

the championship for the Class of '05. "But no one who wandered about over the grounds through that long, golden, Indian Summer day, watching and cheering one sport after another, could help realizing that Field Day meant something besides points and class rivalry," the student newspaper said. It was a day to "rejoice in the open world of Wellesley, and take a long breath in the midst of a hurrying, restless life." Seagrave may well have written that. She was a literary editor of the *College News*, as well as treasurer of the Executive Board of Student Government. She was practically fluent in German, conversational in French and solid in Latin.

When an illness claimed her stepmother in 1903, Seagrave withdrew from college for a semester to return to Seattle and comfort her father. She was back on campus in the fall of 1904 and an enthusiastic member of the Republican Club, boosting the candidacy of President Theodore Roosevelt. With her gift for mimicry, Seagrave portrayed Roosevelt's Secretary of War, Elihu Root, at a torchlight rally. The *College News* offered a stirring account:

"Rah, Rah, Teddy!" was the rally call that announced the assembling of Republican forces on Monday night. Such a parade, such costumes, such yells and cheers, such torch lights and illuminations, such political enthusiasm, surely have never before been known at Wellesley! ... Nor were the Freshmen to be outdone, for "Roosie's Rooters" from the Noanett [dormitory] were all present in workingman's blouses and red neckties, each with a dinner pail swinging at her side. It would be impossible to tell of the costumes and cheers of all the houses.



Teddy Roosevelt was depicted on the cover of *Puck* magazine courting suffragists.

Roosevelt was handily elected. Seagrave's impersonation of the "Rough Rider," complete with bushy mustache and nose-pinching *pince-nez* spectacles, would delight friends for decades to come.

After graduating from Wellesley in 1905, Seagrave taught math at Seattle's new high school on Broadway for two



Seagrave is #34 in the 1911 class photo at Johns Hopkins Medical School. There were only seven women among the 89 graduates. *The Alan Chesney Medical Archives of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions.*

years before matriculating at Johns Hopkins Medical School in 1907. In order to meet the Baltimore school's stringent entrance requirements she took an intensive Physics laboratory course at the University of Washington.

A pioneer in clinical training, Johns Hopkins was also a gender-equality pioneer. Throughout the 1880s and early '90s, "women were generally considered too frivolous and delicate to handle full-strength medical education, with its gory emphasis on human anatomy and disease," historians at Johns Hopkins wrote. "So people were understandably shocked when word spread in 1893 that there were three women in Hopkins' first medical school class. The step was revolutionary. Except for a few women's colleges, very few American medical schools of any stature then allowed a woman to take a degree."*

Seagrave was one of seven women in Hopkins' 89-member Class of 1911. In 1910, women represented 2.6 percent of American medical school graduates. It wasn't until 1970 that women made up more than 6 percent of any medical school class in the United States.

In 1928, Seagrave was one of two women admitted to the prestigious American College of Surgeons. (It initiated 600 men that year.) The news made headlines throughout the West. The ACS, which admitted its first woman in 1913, initiated no more than five a year until 1975.

Fast forward to 2019: The U.S. has a serious physician shortage, yet women doctors still face career barriers. Medical association surveys and media reports point to blatant pay inequities and inadequate support for their family responsibilities, especially childcare. Women doctors say they get less respect than their male colleagues. They're second-guessed more often and subjected to slights they're supposed to shrug off. "Women physicians are all too accustomed to having the

* In 2018, 57 women and 63 men entered Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. Its admission rate was 3.9 percent.



Dr. Seagrave when she was establishing her successful practice as an OB/GYN specialist in Seattle. *University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW39540*

title ‘Doctor’ left out when introduced by colleagues or addressed by staff members and patients. They’re more likely than male physicians to be called by first name only at medical conferences and in clinical settings,” Lisa Esposito, a writer for *U.S. News & World Report*, wrote in a 2018 study of the challenges women physicians face.

Imagine what Mabel Seagrave faced in 1911 when a female doctor was a novelty. Female physicians in her era stuck together. Seagrave wrote her father in 1910 that the female physicians of New York offered her \$1,000 as an inducement to locate in Manhattan after she received her medical degree and studied abroad.

Though she loved the work, after 18 months at the New York Infirmity for Women and Children, Seagrave headed home to rapidly growing Seattle. She was impressed that Washington women had won the

right to vote two years earlier, in 1910. Seattle’s female physicians were among “the hundreds of thoroughly educated professional women of the city” who campaigned for the suffrage amendment approved by nearly 64 percent of the voters. Building on that decisive victory, they were now redoubling their efforts for national suffrage, outraged that the men who made the laws seemed to regard “the vote of the lowest class of their own sex ...including loafers, drunkards and jailbirds ...as superior to that of the highest class of women.”

Seagrave, 31, was warmly welcomed by Seattle’s established female physicians. Among them were Maude Parker, a dedicated suffragist, and Lillian Irwin, Sarah Dean, Mariette Marsh Armstrong, Mary Skinner, and Harriet Clark, who would serve with the Red Cross in Greece during World War I. Those women were among the seven founding members of the Medical Women’s Club of Seattle, which was organized in 1906. Their ranks grew to 24 with the arrival of Dr. Seagrave in 1912. In all, there were 450 physicians in Seattle. The city’s population would grow by nearly 33 percent to 315,000 between 1910 and 1920.

Seagrave’s energy registered immediately as the Medical Women’s Club reached out to female physicians around the state. And in Oregon and Idaho as well. The goal was creation of a Tri-State Women’s Medical Society. Nena J. Croake, a Tacoma doctor elected to the Legislature in 1912, was an enthusiastic supporter of their efforts to advance the standing of women physicians. Croake, was vice president of the Washington Equal Suffrage Association, and had been active in the suffrage movement since 1889.

DR. SEAGRAVE'S JOHNS HOPKINS degree and overseas exploits opened doors. Her sheer competence and force of personality—together with the lingering frontier character of the Northwest in her era—also helped her gain entrée denied to women doctors in the East. In her study of women physicians and the profession of medicine from 1850 to 1995, Ellen S. More writes:

[W]omen who did become physicians faced extremely limited opportunities for internships, residencies, hospital staff positions, medical school faculty appointments, specialty society memberships—that is, for entrée to the profession's upper tiers. Many women physicians continued to work as generalists in private practice or in community health long after male physicians began joining the ranks of hospitals, medical schools, and specialty societies.

The Brooks Brothers shirts and neckties Seagrave wore early in her career likely were part of her doctor “uniform” to counter gender bias. Or perhaps they suited her fine. Seagrave may have been a trailblazer in that regard as well. By the mid-1920s, however, when she was a revered member of the King County Medical Society, she wore dresses. The women's news pages of *The Seattle Daily Times* remarked on the blue lace gown, accented by an orchid corsage, she wore at a high-society wedding reception.

She was “Dr. Mabel” to her friends. Her patients, especially children, loved her “gentle, reassuring smile.” To have “a little chat with her was to get a sunnier slant on life,” the *King County Medical Bulletin* wrote.

Seagrave volunteered early on with the Children's Welfare Division of the Seattle Health Department, overseeing dental clinics for underprivileged children. Her Wellesley and Soroptimist Club friend, Florence Denny Heliker, was now a probation officer with the county Juvenile Court. Seagrave volunteered to help there, too, as well as at Seattle's new Children's Orthopedic Hospital.* Her OB-GYN practice thrived. Her lectures on infant care drew crowds of women to the Bon Marché department store. She reported on child-care facilities in Seattle.

Seagrave was accorded privileges at all of Seattle's hospitals and became chief of staff at Seattle General Hospital. The hospital's internship program for nurses and physicians was one of her abiding interests. She gave lectures warning against the over-prescription of morphine, and in 1926 delivered an address to the State Conference of Social Agencies on the underlying causes of “sex delinquency” among young girls—a hot topic in the “Roaring Twenties.” Seagrave was simultaneously liberal and conservative, freely offering her married patients advice on contraception,

* The Dr. Mabel Seagrave Guild of Children's Orthopedic Hospital was organized in 1937 by her friends and admirers.

yet also worrying that too many young people were “in a modified way having trial marriages.” She wrote:

The ease with which contraceptives are purchased at cigar stores and drug stores has given youth a false sense of security from possible infection and conception, and in the absence of any idealism about marriage and home many have in their own language “gone the limit.”

The era had become so promiscuous, she added, that some “more or less steadily employed” young women were occasionally having sex “for monetary gain, but more commonly in exchange for a good time. In fact, these girls consider themselves quite apart from prostitutes for three reasons: first, they have other means of support; secondly, they have only one or two men with whom they have intercourse; thirdly, they charge no fee. They feel no inferiority.” Worse, Seagrave wrote, she was seeing increasing numbers of freewheeling young women coming to her for pregnancy tests, having been “told by their men friends that everyone has abortions—that there is nothing to that.” Her conclusion was that “the pendulum” had swung too far to the side of “lawlessness and individual freedom.”

IN 1921-22, Seagrave headed the committee that oversaw construction of the impressive new home of the Women’s University Club. Wearing the caps and gowns of their alma maters, the club’s present and past trustees, each carrying a lighted candle, descended the staircase into the drawing room and placed the candles on the fireplace mantel. To signify hospitality, Dr. Seagrave lit the fire with “a great green candle.”

She was a patron of the Cornish School of Music and the Seattle Art Museum, as well as regional director of the Soroptimist Clubs, dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls around the world.

Never married, Dr. Seagrave shared her home with her father, who died at the age 85 in 1927. “For a year I tried to go on living at my old home, but it was too lonesome,” she told the Johns Hopkins alumni bulletin. She rented out the house and moved in with a dear friend from Wellesley’s Class of 1909, Willye Anderson White, the widow of a prominent Seattle financier. Dr. Seagrave became an honorary aunt to her friend’s three children—Fred, 18, Horace, 16, and 9-year-old Willye Jr. In January of 1929, the five of them set sail from San Francisco on an ocean liner for a trip around the world. They spent three months in Vienna, where Seagrave met with noted surgeons and visited hospitals. From there they rented a motor car and roamed Eastern Europe. The “trip of a lifetime” included a flight from Paris to London. “I highly recommend the air to all,” Seagrave wrote.

Seagrave and White were having a quiet Sunday dinner at home when the

doctor suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. She died at 53 on November 10, 1935.* It was the day before the 17th anniversary of the armistice that ended the suffering “she had worked to alleviate with skill and valor,” one eulogy said. A few days earlier, Dr. Seagrave had attended a symposium on World Affairs.

“She was a woman of fortitude,” the *King County Medical Bulletin* wrote. “Her passing was as she would have chosen. There was ‘no sadness of farewell.’ There were no long days and nights of illness and failing strength; there was no time at which she was not at her accustomed post of duty in service to others.” Fifteen Seattle physicians were honorary pallbearers. Ironically they were all men.

Dr. Seagrave bequeathed a diamond ring to White; \$1,000 to her office nurse and \$500 to the Children’s Orthopedic Hospital. Most of the rest of her estate, estimated at \$15,000 to \$20,000 overall—\$275,000 to \$350,000 in 2018 dollars—was left to Florence Denny Heliker and White’s daughter.

In a letter to their Wellesley friends, Willye White wrote that Seagrave gave away more money than anyone knew. “She was always putting some youngster through college and I suppose never turned down anyone who asked for help. That’s who she was.”

John C. Hughes
Legacy Washington

* Dr. Seagrave’s death certificate was signed by her friend and personal physician, Minnie B. Burdon, another OB-GYN specialist who had been active in the suffrage movement.

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