Dentist added to Alaska Women’s Hall of Fame

March 19, 2012

By Jean Williams, ADA News staff

Anchorage, Alaska—She tooled around at the wheel of a Ford Model T on cross-country treks, and she made her way by dog sled to populations needing dental treatment in icy enclaves. Two of her practices burned to the ground and she either regrouped or rebuilt—but she kept seeking and finding ways to treat patients who needed her.

Even if she were a turn-of-the-century male dentist, she’d probably be remarkable.

But Dr. Leonie von Zesch, born in Texas in 1882, is that much more a standout for her accomplishments, given the limits she surmounted because of her gender. For her valiant accomplishments, Dr. von Zesch has been inducted into the Alaska Women’s Hall of Fame.

“I’m totally and completely smitten with the lady,” said Gail West, an Alaska Women’s Hall of Fame board member. “My husband and I have lived in Alaska for 50 years and wonder why we’ve never heard of her.”

The Alaska Women’s Hall of Fame was founded in 2010 to underscore the accomplishments of remarkable and noteworthy women in various fields. Although a Texas native, Dr. von Zesch spent a large
Remarkable life: Dr. Leonie von Zesch, shown here at age 21, is featured in a memoir her niece has published. The daughter of a German count and countess, Dr. von Zesch was born in Texas in 1882. She practiced dentistry in San Francisco—surviving the 1906 earthquake before moving to Alaska. © Jane G. Troutman Family Trust

Dr. von Zesch was the daughter of German immigrants, a count and a countess. At 19, she graduated as a dental surgeon in 1902 from the College of Physicians and Surgeons in San Francisco (now the University of the Pacific, Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry) when women dentists were a rarity. She completed postgraduate study at Northwestern University in Chicago and at Columbia University in New York.

The Alaska Women’s Hall of Fame inductees are heralded on www.alaskawomenshalloffame.org.

“We have 95 women on the website and knowing lots about all of them, what she did and accomplished, she is above and beyond,” said Bonnie Jack, also an Alaska Women’s Hall of Fame board member. “She would be one of the stars of the hall of fame.”

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.

“Wealth of her career in Alaska. According to contemporary accounts, she was the first woman to be licensed as a dentist in the Territory of Alaska.

An early champion of access to care issues, Dr. von Zesch restored cavities of Army and Navy officers in California, tended to the oral health of Alaska native peoples in isolated villages, and established dental programs for schoolchildren in the state.
those who were disadvantaged," notes the January edition of Alaska Update, the Alaska Dental Association's newsletter.

A lot has changed in Alaska with regard to women in dentistry since Dr. von Zesch's pioneering days.

“Women dentists have played a significant role in the Alaska Dental Society,” said Jim Towle, Alaska Dental Society executive director. “The first woman president of the Alaska Dental Society is also the first woman president of the American Dental Association, Geraldine Morrow.”

“Dr. von Zesch was certainly a role model for dentists throughout Alaska and the country, with her perseverance and vision of access to care,” said Dr. Sheri Doniger, editor, AAWD (American Association of Women Dentists) Chronicle and member of the AAWD Executive Committee.

“With the growing number of women dentists entering the field more than 100 years later, Dr. Leonie von Zesch still shines as one of the original pioneers of our profession,” noted Dr. Doniger.

Last year, Lime Orchard Publications posthumously published “Leonie: A Woman Ahead of Her Time,” an autobiography. The unpublished manuscript had been among the ephemera and collectibles that Dr. von Zesch bequeathed to her niece, Jane Troutman, who is now 86 and lives in California.

“I grew up with Leonie as my aunt not knowing that she had devoted so much of her time and energy to dentistry,” Ms. Troutman said. “I never recognized any of this until I opened the boxes in 2002 and read her manuscript. I lived with greatness and didn't know it.”
Ms. Troutman saw to it that Dr. von Zesch’s memoirs were finally published, some 67 years after her aunt’s death on July 3, 1944, in Oakland, Calif., after a long illness. The book’s publishing paved the way for induction into the Alaska Women’s Hall of Fame.

“Both Jane and I started crying when we received the invitation to the induction ceremony,” said Gillian Payne, who helps Ms. Troutman manage her business affairs. “Leonie paid for Jane’s education, and I think that this is Jane’s way of thanking her and telling the world about the remarkable woman who was her aunt.”

The book details Dr. von Zesch’s sometimes-itinerant life.

She participated in relief efforts for nine months following the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, treating patients from a tent at the Presidio. Two years later, she treated thousands of sailors after the U.S. Navy established the Pacific Fleet in San Francisco.

She returned to her southwestern United States roots, where her patients included the Hopi Indians of Arizona’s high desert. Then in 1915, she embarked on a “15-year visit” to Alaska where she bravely traveled the perilous terrain—sometimes by way of self-piloted dog sled with her assistant or via biplane—to reach the most isolated populations needing dental services.

In the 1930s, she returned to California and treated the unemployed during the Depression, young men in the Civilian Conservation Corps, and prisoners at the California Institution for Women at Tehachapi, the first women’s prison in the state. It was her final professional position prior to death.

For more information about “Leonie: A Woman Ahead of Her Time” visit www.leoniethebook.com. The ADA Library has a copy available for member check out.