

1996 MAY

**THE E.M. FINE MEMORIAL BRIDGE
ERNEST M. FINE, M.D.**

Humboldt and Del Norte Counties have a long tradition of naming the bridges over our many streams and rivers after local prominent citizens, and, at least in 2 instances, these citizens were physicians. In May 1996, the Harold Comfort, M.D. bridge across the Van Duzen River was dedicated (see other story). But almost 60 years ago, in 1939, the eponymous E.M. Fine Bridge was dedicated in Del Norte County. This is a bridge across the Smith River on Highway 101. Dr.

Fine was considered a pioneer Del Norte County physician. Dr. Ernest M. Fine was born in Monterey County, moved to Ukiah as a youth, and graduated from the Cooper Medical College in San Francisco in 1898. He served his internship at Lane Hospital, and in 1899, moved to Crescent City to begin general practice. This was at a time that there were no paved roads in Del Norte County, and often, in winter the roads were so bad that they were all but impassable. It was in those primitive conditions that Dr. Fine made house and farm calls. He was on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week for everything from delivering a baby to setting a broken bone. Despite the terrible conditions of the roads, he never missed a house call. He usually used a horse and buggy from a local livery stable, but in an emergency he might use just a saddle horse. Dr. Fine did maintain an office in Crescent City, but he did make calls from the Klamath to the Smith rivers. In 1905, Dr. Fine bought a new Ford roadster. This car, pre-dating the Model T, was a single seat, doorless red, crank started, rickety, temperamental contraption. It had a four cylinder engine that was serviced by the doctor himself. He was his own mechanic, and every once in a while he would tear the engine down and make the necessary adjustments.

Occasionally, on a call, he would run out of fuel, and since gas wasn't always available from farmers he would borrow a few gallons of kerosene, and limp home on that. His home was about 3 blocks from his office, so he invested in an early Harley-Davidson motorcycle to drive the short distance from home to office. He had no special price for his services but charged according to what he judged to be the complexity of the problem. For minor services that took up very little time he would often make no charge. However, on distant house calls he would charge a fixed fee: a house call down to Klamath cost the patient \$25. When injured men came in to be treated, especially men from the logging camps or the mill, they were taken to the American Hotel on Front Street. As the population grew there was a growing need for a hospital, where injured and sick patients could be taken care of properly. The first building used for a hospital was at 3rd and J, but it was too small. When the Bertch family moved away, Dr. Fine purchased their large home and turned it into a hospital. This was the first true hospital in Crescent City. It became known as the Dr. Fine hospital, and served the residents of Crescent City until the 1920's when it was destroyed by fire. Dr. Fine practiced when this part of the state was still "frontier" and medicine itself was still quite primitive, but many of our more elderly residents owe their physical well-being and lives to Dr. Fine's skill, and he personifies the spirit of the rough and tumble settlers who came up here in the early years of this century.

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