

## Pioneer Doctor



Dr. O.H. Gerdes of Eureka, S.D. Photo taken about 1935. Dr. Gerdes, as pioneer doctor of area, had many challenging experiences while practicing medicine on the Dakota frontier.

By Bruce G. Mehlhaff

One of Eureka's better known pioneers was its dedicated country doctor, Otto H. Gerdes. From 1893 until his death in 1936, he made his rounds in a practice that covered much of the area served by PRAIRIES Magazine today.

The biographical material about "Doc" Gerdes can be briefly summarized. He was born in Germany in 1868. He came to America in 1885, graduated from Rush Medical College in 1892, and arrived in Eureka in March, 1893. There he met and married Bertha Bryan, raised a family of four children, and practiced medicine for 43 years.

The lion's share of this practice was based on house calls which meant long hours on the road, day or night, in all types of weather. And therein lie a multitude of stories.

Dr. Gerdes of Eureka, S.D. began his career making rounds on a bicycle, but he soon graduated to the horse and buggy. The doctor also helped usher in the auto age. His first car was an

Dr. Gerdes—picture taken about 1903.





**PHOTO ABOVE:** Tammen's Pharmacy, later the Koch-Gerdes Drug Store. Dr. Gerdes and John Maag are standing on either side of door. Others in picture have not been identified. The drug store was located on Eureka's main street where Straub Furniture is currently located.

Note German was used to advertise on sign and wall.  
**PHOTO BELOW:** Interior of Koch-Gerdes Drug Store. Dr. Gerdes and John Maag are standing behind the counter. Note richly patterned ceiling and rear wall.





**Gerdes Memorial Stone situated between Highway 10 and the south shore of Lake Eureka. The inscription reads: "In Memoriam, Dr. O.H. Gerdes, 1868-1936, He gave his best—43 years of faithful service."**

Orient Buckboard—a vehicle that was little more than a motorized wagon manipulated by a steering rod! The Orient was not noted for its power. When faced with a hill, everyone had to get out and push the car to the top!

The doctor knew his territory well, often to the precise location of every stone in the road. But at times he requested farmers to mark their homes when he called. They did this by tying a ribbon to the gate post during the day or by hanging a lantern there at night.

#### **Train Accident Averted**

In order to get some sleep between calls, the doctor often took a driver with him on his rounds. Nevertheless, the routine was wearing and often dangerous. One winter night, when

returning alone from a call at Hillsview, he bundled up securely in his heavy fur coat, settled back to rest, and let his horses take him home. He was startled awake when the horses suddenly stopped. He looked up to see an unscheduled train cross the road ahead of him!

Winter calls also brought the threat of being caught in a blizzard. At such times he sought the nearest farmstead and pulled into the barn until the wind subsided. If caught in the open, he would make use of hay stacks for warmth and protection.

In addition to his medical practice, Dr. Gerdes was also the pharmacist for the Koch-Gerdes Drug Store and a founder of the Eureka State Bank. He was a member of the school board for 23 years and served as mayor of Eureka from 1930 to 1932.

In those rare moments when he could relax, Dr. Gerdes enjoyed his family, reading mysteries, and raising show chickens. He took great pride in



**Dr. Gerdes and his daughters Irene and Lillian seated in horse and buggy.**

the ribbons his Silver Laced Wyandottes won at local fairs and eastern shows.

In 1937 a memorial stone was placed on the shore on Lake Eureka as a tribute to the man who had become a legend in the community—Dr. O.H. Gerdes. ■

(Bruce Mehlhoff of Eureka, S.D. is a grandson of the pioneer doctor, O.H. Gerdes.)



**Dr. O.H. and Bertha (Bryan) Gerdes' wedding photo, 1894.**