

## Emily Claggett Deming

Born: June 6, 1906

Death: January 21, 1998

In 1971, at the age of 65, Emily Claggett was told by her doctor that if she was “cooperative and lived in supportive care,” she could live “a year and possibly 18 months.” Her Aunt Cora Claggett, wife of her Uncle Arthur Claggett, had always said that she was “the stubbornness little brat that ever lived. . . . I think maybe stubborn has had something to do with staying around when I wasn’t really supposed to,” concluded Emily.

When Emily was seven years old, her father, Charles Eugene Deming (1862 – 1913) died. Emily and her mother, Emily Maud Claggett Deming (1851 – 1939) sold the family farm in Coopersville, MI, and moved to Chicago (Oak Park) to live with her mother’s brother, who was a medical doctor, and his wife. Emily had this to say about her Uncle Arthur: “I think probably he was one of those people who was a true Jekyll and Hyde because [anybody] whose life he ever touched was . . . permanently damaged.”

In Emily’s case, “he had sutured [her] uterus where it didn’t belong and [had] done some other dreadful things.” For example, when she was 14 years old, her uncle said that she had cancer. Emily was never sure whether she had the disease, but she “was bleeding constantly . . . [she] bled probably 20 days out of every month, and it was bad.” In order to treat her, Emily’s uncle, first, [got] her mother’s money (when Emily’s grandfather died, her mother inherited some money) . . . and used it to buy what he said . . . was the first privately owned radium in the United States.” Then, he administered what Emily called her “first radium insertion. . . . That radium destroyed [her] thermal control [and] damaged one kidney.” She concluded, “This, that, and the other thing I’ve had tried on me, and I guess I’m pretty lucky because this June (1990), I’ll be 84.” Yet, Emily knew from talking with her Aunt Cora that her uncle “had fixed [her uterus], so that there would never be another Deming.”

According to Emily, going to the same Chicago high school for 4 years was the only good thing that came out of those 7 years with her uncle and aunt. In her grammar school years, because of her father’s job as a “timber cruiser and scaler,” the family moved 24 times. The family had to go where the timber was. “So it isn’t very unusual that I never learned to parse a sentence properly,” said Emily. Still, the family read a lot of books, and her mother read often to both her husband and her daughter. “Reading was always part of going to bed,” she said.

After leaving her uncle’s home, Emily and her mother briefly lived in Wilmette, IL, and then in 1923, when Emily was 17 years old, they moved back to Coopersville. Upon returning, her first job was working for Selena Royal, who was the leading lady with the acting company, the Wright Players. At that time, Spencer Tracy played the leading man in the troupe. Emily’s duties included dressing Miss Royal, making scripted sounds offstage, and occasionally performing walk-on parts. Because of her culinary skills, Emily soon became the company’s cook. “We

worked at the Powers old opera house as long as Spencer and Selena were with the company,” Emily said.

She worked briefly for another actress, Marguerite Fields, and then moved on as a milliner apprentice for Leocadia Jones. That position lasted only 6 – 7 months, according to Emily, and then she was hired by Bell Telephone Company. However, because she was “bleeding and having surgery quite often,” she was unable to do that job. So she moved on to Butterworth Hospital.

From 1926 to 1961, Emily worked at the hospital. She started out as a night switchboard operator, working six nights a week, 10 hours a night. After 18 months, she was promoted to the “Patient Information” phone line, still on the night shift. About a year later, she asked her boss, Miss Cora Barbour, assistant superintendent, whether she could change one of her shifts as she wanted to attend a new voter luncheon. When Miss Barbour found out that Emily was not 21 years old, she said that “she had to let her go.” At that time, Emily started to cry and said, “You never asked me how old I was. . . . And [Miss Barbour] said, ‘But you looked so old. I didn’t have to. . . .’”

Thankfully, Miss Barbour never followed through on her threat to dismiss her. Emily continued to work for her for several years. About Miss Barbour, Emily had the following to say:

She was the most humane, the most thoughtful, and the kindest, and the most efficient human being I ever knew. . . . In the worst of the Depression, there was a time . . . [or] two . . . when there simply was not enough money to cover even the little half payroll that we were, and Miss Barbour covered the payroll. . . . We were getting \$30, \$45 a month, and there would have been no food for anybody if we hadn’t gotten our pitiful little checks, and it was Miss Barbour’s money that paid for it.

At the time, as the hospital’s assistant superintendent, Miss Barbour’s salary was \$100 a month. Emily said that “they [i.e., board members, other administrators] thought that was really very much out of line for a woman.”

In 1939, shortly after her mother died, Emily was promoted by Miss Barbour to the Admissions Office. As the admissions officer, Emily was in charge of scheduling patients’ surgeries, hospital stays, and dismissals. She was asked to spend “6 weeks at a [Chicago hospital] as the first full-scale hospital housekeeper intern. That [position] had been invented.” According to Emily, housekeeping was starting to do “all the things that the nursing department had previously done,” such as patient check outs and making beds.

When she returned from Chicago, Emily accepted the new position of housekeeping director. During her tenure in that position, she not only did her everyday duties but also brought two chapters of the National Executive Housekeepers Association to Grand Rapids. She was also a member of the National Laundry Managers Association. Furthermore, she attended conferences and published articles at the request of the hospital superintendent. Emily organized or presented at the Tri-State Hospital Association in Chicago and wrote between 80 and 100 published articles in professional journals; most notably, according to Emily, the Journal of American Hospitals

Association. In addition, Emily “invented the first classes for housekeeping employees and a graduating service that really was the talk of the professionals for about 5 years before [her 1954] book was published.”

In 1948, Butterworth’s sister hospital in San Joachim, CA, had lost its accreditation, and the personnel, including food preparation and food service, had gone on strike. Emily was given a leave of absence from the housekeeping department to go to San Joachim and manage the food service as an “intern.” Emily said her department did not strike because of her “threats.” She pointed out that lives, particularly newborn babies, were dependent on their care and the workers could picket on their time off. “I didn’t have a single person refuse their shift, and we covered food service and that [included preparing the] food for 2,000 people,” Emily said.

She was also in charge of building “dormitories to house about 200 employees” and taking “out several buildings that were too dilapidated to hold on to.” When she arrived in San Joachim, the hospital complex had 40 buildings on 500 acres. The laborers for whom she was in charge were prisoners of war from a nearby camp in Stockton, CA. “It was an interesting and learning experience,” concluded Emily. But she also said, “It was probably the most traumatic 3 years of my life. It was totally impossible.”

When she returned to Grand Rapids, Emily stayed at Butterworth Hospital for another 10 years in the housekeeping department. During that time, she was “having [her] normal quota of surgery and medical problems and pneumonia and stuff, and it was decided that [she] should probably do something a little less strenuous. . . .” So for the next 2 years, Emily worked for a Mr. Starr at the Morton House. As the business was going under, she said to Mr. Starr, “Well, if you take that sign down on Monroe Ave. and build a Welcome Home for the Blind, I’d like to run it for you.” Consequently, Emily was first hired as the resident director of the old home, and then three years later her job transferred to the new home. About that job, Emily said, “I took the job more because, as a friend of mine said, ‘I didn’t have much sense when I took it,’ and I said, ‘No, I didn’t take it with my sense. I took it with my heart.’”

One of her main duties as resident director was fund raising. For example, she raised \$9,000 to enclose a porch on the side of the house. She also “invented” the annual Strawberry Festival, which at the time of this interview was in its 24<sup>th</sup> year. Over that time, it grew from the garage to the lawn and surrounding park. Among the many arts and crafts with a strawberry theme, the Welcome Home Guild members offered their jams and jellies and specialty breads for sale. At the time of this interview, however, because of old age, the guild members were turning the festival over to the local chapter of the Lions Club to run.

About her education, Emily regretted not earning a college degree. “I had enough credit, but it didn’t make a degree because nothing came together in the right things. And I think for a long time I resented the fact that I could have done other things, but I didn’t have the degree that made it possible.” Nevertheless, when she retired in 1971, Emily remained active in the community and in learning. First, when the Olds Manor was in bankruptcy, she recruited Duncan Littefair, from Fountain Street Church, to help her prevent the eviction of its residents. Then, she recruited Alberta Massingill, who was well known in the community, to help her start a large-print book exchange among all the area nursing homes and homes for the aging. “That [exchange] is simply

a godsend to the people who live in [these residences],” said Emily. She also started taking classes at OLLI (formerly Emeritus), at Aquinas College. “[It] has been the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me personally. . . . I was given a scholarship . . . or I couldn’t attend any of the classes, and it has just been a godsend. Nothing that ever happened to me has given me such joy.”

At the time of this interview, Emily was living in Porter Hills Retirement Village. There she was taking classes, volunteering at the greeters’ office, and filling in as she was needed. She concluded, “I have the best of all worlds.”

This interview also has information about Emily’s childhood and her parents and grandparents, which was not included in this summary.

Other Resources:

[https://books.google.com/books/about/Lessons\\_in\\_Good\\_Housekeeping.html?id=DUOKnQEACAAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Lessons_in_Good_Housekeeping.html?id=DUOKnQEACAAJ)