Ruth Jackson, MD, 1902–1994

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ABSTRACT

This article commemorates Dr. Ruth Jackson for her contributions to orthopedic surgery and her status as a trailblazer for women in orthopedic surgery, becoming the first female member of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons. She died on August 28, 1994, at the age of 91.

KEYWORDS Cervical syndrome; female physicians; orthopedic surgery; women in medicine

Ruth Jackson (*Figure 1*) was born in Scranton, Iowa, on December 13, 1902. When she began her undergraduate education at the University of Texas at Austin, her father told her she could not complete premedical studies, so instead she studied sociology. She attended medical school at Baylor College of Medicine (known then as Baylor University College of Medicine) and then completed an internship at Worcester Memorial Hospital in Massachusetts in 1928. Originally, she wanted to train to become a general surgeon. She was unable to do so because she was a woman. Following her internship, she began her training in orthopedics with Dr. Arthur Steindler from 1928 to 1930 at the University of Iowa, working with patients who had polio. She completed another year of residency at Worcester Memorial Hospital, where she trained as an intern. She then moved to Dallas, Texas, and completed her orthopedic residency from 1931 to 1932.¹

EARLY CAREER, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND LEADERSHIP

Following residency in 1932, she began practicing in Dallas during the Great Depression. She did not accept pay and earned \$3 an hour from the Work Projects Administration, an agency that was part of the New Deal. The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgery was founded in 1933. All male orthopedic surgeons were granted membership. Dr. Jackson was told she had to pass the American Board of Orthopedic Surgery examination, which she did in 1937 while she was chief of orthopedics at Parkland Hospital in Dallas. She also established the first orthopedic residency

at Parkland Hospital.² She was the first board-certified female orthopedic surgeon, as well as the first female member of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgery.

She was on the staff of Baylor University Hospital in Dallas from 1939 to 1945. During this time, she mentored Margaret Watkins, MD, who went on to become a renowned orthopedic surgeon.¹

LATE CAREER, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND RESEARCH

She was in private practice in Dallas for 38 years. During this time, she took an interest in patients with cervical spine issues. She published a book, *The Cervical Syndrome*, in 1966 after collecting data on over 15,000 patients she treated.³ Two additional articles from 1949 and 1955 also summarized her experience with cervical spine problems.^{4,5} She created the Jackson Cervipillow to decrease pain in patients with whiplash injuries as a sleep aid. The design of the pillow is described in her 1949 article.⁵ Dr. Jackson stopped operating in 1974 but did not stop seeing patients until 1989. She founded the Baylor University Ruth Jackson Library in Dallas.¹ Dr. Jackson was also one of the founders of the Texas Orthopedic Association, along with Dr. W. B. Carrell, Dr. Clayton, and Dr. Schonfield; this association has grown and remains active to this day.⁶

RUTH JACKSON ORTHOPEDIC SOCIETY

In 1983, the Ruth Jackson Orthopedic Society was established to “promote professional development of and for women in orthopaedics throughout all stages of their

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Figure 1. Dr. Ruth Jackson.

career.”² The founding members include Dr. Jackson herself (Dallas, TX), Liebe S. Diamond, MD (Baltimore, MD), Mary L. Morden, MD (Baltimore, MD), Sandra Thompson, MD (Boston, MA), Jacqueline Perry, MD (Downey, CA), and Mary Ann Shannon, MD (Minneapolis, MN). Current members range from medical students to practicing orthopedic surgeons. Membership is open to all genders. The society offers mentorship programs, scholarships and grants for medical students and residents, seasonal newsletters with updates about the organization and upcoming opportunities, and an annual meeting that includes a leadership symposium. The current president is Marlene DeMaio, MD.²

CONCLUSION

Dr. Ruth Jackson played a vital and historic role, not only in the growth and development of orthopedics at Baylor University Medical Center (*Figure 2*), but for all women in orthopedics. Her contributions to the Department of Orthopedic Surgery at Baylor allowed for major advancements and renovations in 1986. Even into her 90s, she continued to fish, shoot guns, and advocate for her patients.¹ She was regarded as a premier orthopedic surgeon, leader, and example for future generations. The dedication to surgery and her patients of this 5'2" woman parallels her famous quote: “I’m little, but I’m mighty.”^{1,7}

Figure 2. Dr. Ruth Jackson, age 84, outside of her clinic at Baylor University Medical Center in 1986.

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