

Biographical Sketch

Ruth Jackson, MD, FACS 1902–1994

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Abstract This biographical sketch on Ruth Jackson corresponds to the historic text, *The Classic: The Cervical Syndrome*, available at DOI [10.1007/s11999-010-1278-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11999-010-1278-8).

Ruth Jackson, the first female member of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, spent a lifetime breaking down barriers so that she and other women could contribute to clinical care and education. Our symposium this month is devoted to gender issues in orthopaedic surgery, and we dedicate this issue to the memory of Dr. Jackson and her pioneering efforts.

She was born Dec. 13, 1902, on a farm near Scranton, Iowa. She was by her own description a “tomboy” who enjoyed working with horses, shooting, and carpentry. She also assisted her mother in midwifery. When she was 14, the family moved to Texas, and upon completing high school, she told her parents she planned to take premedical instruction at the University of Texas-Austin. Her father disapproved, and she instead became a sociology major. However, in her junior year as a sociology student she visited a family whose father couldn’t work because of his knee pain. So she “gave myself a good talking to.... You need to find out what is wrong with that man’s knee and put him back to work so he can take care of his family” [8]. Over her father’s repeated objections, she changed her major to premedicine before graduating in 1924 [6, 8].

Jackson was one of only four women among more than 100 first-year students at the Baylor University College of

Medicine (now Baylor College of Medicine, independent from the University). Some 21st century readers may be unfamiliar with the obstacles placed before female medical students in many institutions during this era. During Jackson’s time at Baylor, female students were not allowed to examine male patients, although male students could examine patients of either sex. During orientation, the female students were told they would need to score grades 10 points higher than male students in order to graduate with “equal standing” [8]. If this was true, Jackson must have performed quite well, given that she graduated eighth in her class in 1928 [6].

She was determined to become a general surgeon. However, no general surgery internships were available for women. She found a rotating internship at an all-female institution, Worcester (Mass.) Memorial Hospital in 1928 [8], but with the path to a career in general surgery blocked, she accepted an opportunity that same year to train in orthopaedic surgery under the legendary teacher Arthur Steindler, MD (1878–1959), at the University of Iowa [5]. Under Steindler’s tutelage, she became dedicated to the practice of orthopaedics. “I can’t describe the feeling I had when I was helping one of these kids, but I knew then this experience was among the most rewarding for me. It was then that I decided on orthopaedic surgery” [8]. She returned to Worcester in 1930 and continued her residency in orthopaedics, then served as a resident physician for the Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children in Dallas, Texas, during 1931–32 [8].

It was during her time in Dallas that the value of her orthopaedic training quite literally hit home. Her father called her with an urgent request: her nephew had been shot in the shoulder and required treatment. She hurried to their home near McAllen, Texas, hundreds of miles south of Dallas, and performed the operation to remove bone

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chips and debris from the wounded shoulder. This act considerably raised her father's opinion of female surgeons; he is reputed to have told her that "if she never did anything more in medicine, she had already repaid him for all that her education had cost him" [6].

After completing her residency in 1932, Jackson opened a private practice in Dallas. This was perhaps the worst year of the Great Depression, and she shared an office and receptionist with five other physicians. She performed reconstructive procedures to gain experience, accepting no pay, and performed physical examinations for the Works Progress Administration, earning \$3 an hour [8].

Upon the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgery's founding in 1933, all practicing male orthopaedic surgeons automatically were granted membership. Once again excluded, Jackson learned that she could only be a member if she passed American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery examination. She completed her boards in 1937 and became not only the first board-certified woman but also the first female member of the AAOS [6, 8]. By then she was Chief of Orthopaedics at Parkland Hospital in Dallas [4]. In 1939 she joined the staff of Baylor University Hospital and encouraged another young physician, Margaret Watkins, MD, to train in orthopaedics. Watkins later joined Jackson in practice and became a prominent figure in orthopaedic surgery [4].

In 1945 Jackson opened the private Dallas clinic where she practiced for the remaining 38 years of her career [6]. She had married, but divorced after two years and concentrated on her work, which increasingly focused on a large number of patients with cervical spine problems. Jackson herself had suffered significant cervical spine pain

after a 1936 automobile accident. She developed the Jackson Cervipillow, which was designed to support the neck during sleep and ease pain [8]. She collected data on more than 15,000 patients and published her findings in a 1956 book of the same name [3]. In the article we republish today from 1949, she reviewed 400 cases [1]. She subsequently published a more general article on the cervical syndrome in 1955 [2]. (Supplementary materials are available with the online version of CORR.)

Late in her career, Jackson received an honor rarely bestowed on any living person: in 1983, the Ruth Jackson



Fig. 2 Ruth Jackson, MD in her 20s or 30s. Photograph provided courtesy of Stella Gauthier, The Ruth Jackson Orthopaedic Society, with permission of Mrs. Patsy Jackson.



Fig. 1 Ruth Jackson is shown as a young woman. Photograph provided courtesy of Stella Gauthier, The Ruth Jackson Orthopaedic Society, with permission of Mrs. Patsy Jackson.



Fig. 3 A portrait of Ruth Jackson, MD. Photograph provided courtesy of Stella Gauthier, The Ruth Jackson Orthopaedic Society, with permission of Mrs. Patsy Jackson.



Fig. 4 Ruth Jackson, MD is shown in later years. Photograph provided courtesy of Stella Gauthier, The Ruth Jackson Orthopaedic Society, with permission of Mrs. Patsy Jackson.

Orthopaedic Society (RJOS) was formed as a support network for the increasing number of women in orthopaedics. The membership is open to practicing surgeons, residents, fellows, and medical students, and provides mentorship and practical advice to young female orthopaedists (although the group welcomes members of both sexes). The society today has more than 450 members, meaning that no woman who wishes to practice in

orthopaedics has to replicate Jackson's sometimes lonely struggle [7].

Although Jackson stopped operating in 1974, she continued to see patients until 1989. She created a research foundation and established Baylor University's Ruth Jackson Library [4]. She remained an active shooter and fisher into her ninth decade, and died August 28, 1994, in Dallas. She dedicated her life to easing her patients' suffering, and was an example to future generations of orthopaedic surgeons—both female and male—in her determination to succeed against all obstacles. As the 5-foot 2-inch tall Jackson often said of herself, "I'm little, but I'm mighty" [6].

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