Steven Woodruff, M.D.’73, sits in his office at the Central Vermont Medical Center in Berlin and carefully sorts through a stack of faded newspaper clippings commemorating the achievements of his grandfather and father — both medical doctors with strong ties to the University of Vermont College of Medicine.

Sept. 20, 2010, marked the hundredth anniversary of the day in 1910 when his grandfather first hung out his shingle on Barre’s South Main Street, beginning an unbroken century of medical care by the three Woodruff doctors to the Barre area and, in fact, to much of central Vermont. The most recent clipping in Steven Woodruff’s hands, from the Barre Times-Argus, celebrates this milestone.

“So many people noticed this,” Steven Woodruff says of the newspaper story. An obstetrician, gynecologist, surgeon, and specialist in women’s health care who lives in Barre town, he was already used to attention. He is often stopped on the street or at the hospital by women whose babies he delivered or who he has cared for. Now, he’s stopped by some citizens who remember all three generations of the family’s doctors — and many who were cared for by more than one of them.

“You can’t be from Barre, Vermont, and not know of the Woodruff family,” says Barre Mayor Thom Lauzon. “Medicine is a very demanding profession, and it takes a special kind of family not only to continue that tradition, but also to maintain such a commitment to their patients.” In addition, he says, “through the medical societies the Woodruffs were involved in, their reputation expands throughout New England. It’s quite a legacy.”
The story begins in 1910 with John Woodruff, M.D., who, like his grandson, specialized in obstetrics and gynecology. After opening his first office that fall, he soon moved to the first floor of a Victorian-era house at 13 East Street in Barre; the family lived on the second and third floors. Years later, his son, Frank Woodruff, M.D. ’43, had his practice there, too. The father and son sometimes even worked as a team — in one instance, John Woodruff performed a Caesarian section and Frank Woodruff, an internist and surgeon, administered the anesthesia.

Fueled by its busy granite industry — (30 percent of the granite used in the nation in 1910 came from Barre) the city’s population had nearly doubled in the two decades prior to the start of John Woodruff’s practice. His patients came from what was at that time the most ethnically diverse town in Vermont, with large numbers of new residents from Italy, Greece, Scandinavia, and Lebanon.

John Woodruff also performed many general surgeries in addition to his work delivering babies. “My grandfather was a specialist before there were specialties,” Steven Woodruff says with pride. “He pioneered a number of surgical procedures, unorthodox back then.”

“People were always knocking on his door.” says Steven Woodruff, who is the last of the family in Barre to practice medicine. “He worked at Barre City Hospital and the Central Vermont Hospital in Barre.”

John Woodruff received his M.D. from Bowdoin’s Medical School of Maine after first beginning his undergraduate studies at UVM. For the first three years after setting up practice, he took the train from Barre to Burlington to work as an instructor in surgery at the UVM College of Medicine. In World War I he served as a captain in the U.S. Army Medical Corps.

Steven Woodruff pulls out pages of a journal his grandfather kept during his first year of practice. In it, John Woodruff recalls making house calls in a horse and buggy during the summer, and during that first winter — which must have been a rough one — doing 144 days of sleighing to get to his patients. There’s also a black-and-white photograph of a nurse at her wedding, where John Woodruff gave the bride away. “He had performed an emergency appendectomy on her a week earlier,” Steven Woodruff explains.

John Woodruff performed one of the first blood transfusions in Vermont, placing the husband in a chair and his wife on the floor, letting the force of gravity transport the blood through a tube. He repaired a hip fracture with a horse nail, and drained a patient’s pleural cavity to cure her pneumonia in 1915.

“He had a big ego, but a big talent to back it up,” Steven Woodruff says. “The first time he did a radical operation on a patient with breast cancer, a colleague remarked, ‘Doctor, you have killed that woman.’ The patient survived.” This was back in the days when, as John Woodruff recalled in a letter, “cancer was something to be concealed, and was thought of as an almost hopeless disease.”

A colorful man who, according to Steven, “loved to make the nurses blush,” John Woodruff also had a sense of humor that bordered on the ribald. He retired in 1964 but remained active in the Vermont Division of the American Cancer Society, of which he was a local founder and former president, and the Vermont Tuberculosis and Health Association. His practice was always a busy one; indeed, as long as there was a telephone near, he was always on call. For his vacations, he went fishing in Canada. “Otherwise,” says Steven Woodruff, “people were always knocking on his door.”

Life for John Woodruff came full circle, as things often do. He and his wife spent their last years at a retirement home that had once functioned as Barre City Hospital, where he had practiced for years. He died in 1989.

Unlike his raucous father, Frank Woodruff was a quiet man with a shy sense of humor and a reassuring manner. “I never heard him raise his voice,” says Steven Woodruff. Frank Woodruff opened his practice in the late 1940s, after serving in Europe during World War II as a battalion surgeon in the Third Army under Gen. George S. Patton. He worked at Barre City Hospital until the Central Vermont Medical Center opened in 1968, and served as president of the medical staff at both hospitals. Two of his brothers also graduated from the UVM College of Medicine — James (also from the Class of 1943) in Randolph, Vt., and John (Class of 1938) in California.
During his residency in Burlington, Frank Woodruff and family lived for a while at Fort Ethan Allen in Winookski in a row of houses that, says Steven Woodruff, "was aptly called Pregnany Row." In 1969, Frank Woodruff became the first doctor in Vermont to use a defibrillator; he also was the first local physician to install a pacemaker. He ran the tuberculosis sanatorium in Barre, an area that was hard by pulmonic disease from the dusty granite sheds and quarries. In one of his letters, he recalls the days when, "You had to cut someone open to see if they had cancer, long before we had CAT scans and ultrasonics." He once told an interviewer, “Medicine has been good to me. There’s been so much progress...a sudden surge, an explosion of technology and other medical advances.” He transferred from surgery to the CVMC emergency room in 1980 and worked there until his retirement in 1985. But he continued to work part-time as a physician for Disabilities Determination Services, a job he had held previously for 25 years, until his death in 1996. Steven Woodruff has fond memories of growing up on Tremont Street, just a few blocks away from his grandparents’ home. He is one of nine children, and the only one who became a physician.

Contrary to what people might think, he was never pressured to go into medicine. “My family never expressed that expectation,” he says. He was an English major at Boston College before attending Harvard Medical School. "The Woodruff family's dedication and commitment to our community." All in all, a pretty impressive legacy.

Steven Woodruff in service to one distinct community distinguishes him from his father, Dr. Frank W. Woodruff, an orthopaedic surgeon and a professor at the University of Vermont College of Medicine from 1931 to 1934, and also knows the Woodruff family, says she still gets calls from Frank Woodruff’s former patients asking for “little Stevie Woodruff.”

The Bove family’s connections to UVM and the medical profession are also longstanding and deep. Ernest Bove, M.D. ’03 is a Rutland urologist. His father, Edward, was a 1946 graduate of the College and a Rutland area practitioner in obstetrics and gynecology for 28 years. Ernest’s daughter, Erica Bove Mahany, received her M.D. from the College in 2009, and is now a resident in obstetrics and gynecology at Columbia University Medical Center in New York. The Irwins have produced multiple generations of graduates from the College — Sidney Alpert, M.D. ’40, Jeffrey R. Alpert, M.D. ’72, and Jeffrey B. Alpert, M.D. ’04, who is now an assistant professor of radiology at SUNY Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, N.Y. The Vargas family, rooted in Vermont, also has multiple sibling alumni. Three Vargas sisters — Sara, Hannah, and Alison — received their M.D. from the College in 1994, 1996, and 2000, respectively. Sara is a pediatric radiologist at Boston Children’s Hospital and also knows the Woodruff family, says she still gets calls from Frank Woodruff’s former patients asking for “little Stevie Woodruff.”

A modest, affable man who seems more like his father than his grandfather in manner, “is great at putting patients at ease,” says Carol Washburn, R.N., who has worked in Steven Woodruff’s office for 21 years. “He’s calm and easygoing, and I’ve never seen him get angry,” she notes, adding that “if only he made house calls, he’d be just like the old-fashioned doctors of his grandfather’s time. He gives each patient the time she needs.” Washburn, who grew up in Williamstown, Vt., and also knows the Woodruff family, says she still gets calls from Frank Woodruff’s former patients asking for “little Stevie Woodruff.”

With retirement coming into view in a few years, Steven Woodruff represents the end of an era. Some day several years from now, there will be no more Doctors Woodruff to serve Barre and Central Vermont, a community of more than 66,000 people. One of his daughters is now in nursing school and plans to work in another community, and his other daughter is a veterinarian at an equine clinic in Kentucky. "The community appreciates all the years of dedication the Woodruff doctors gave us,” says Dana Mason, who was CEO of Central Vermont Medical Center until her retirement in 2007. “Dedicating one’s life to medicine is a daunting task, and their personal service and sacrifice are very much appreciated.”

All three Woodruff doctors married nurses and, as Steven Woodruff describes, “the family was blessed with strong women.” His great-grandmother, Ellen Hamilton, was one of the first two women elected to Phi Beta Kappa at UVM in 1871–2 (UVM was the first to allow women into the society). His grandmother was a horsewoman, “the first to wear pants and refuse to ride sidesaddle,” Steven Woodruff says, adding that “she also kept three boys and a husband in line.” His mother never worked as a nurse but raised nine children and ran the home. “My father kept office hours three evenings a week and on Saturdays, so he wasn’t at home much.”

Steven Woodruff met his wife, Monica, while in medical school and she worked part-time in his office for many years. Like his grandmother and his daughter, Steven’s wife is also passionate about horses. So as the time draws closer for Steven Woodruff to retire, chances are the people who stop him on the street will not only be offering him thanks but also some fond farewells.

“Central Vermont has been blessed to have three generations of Woodruff physicians take care of our community over the past 100 years,” says Judy Tarr, current CEO of CVMC. “Dr. Steven Woodruff has been responsible for welcoming hundreds of healthy newborns to our community over 34 years. He and his father and grandfather have provided high quality, compassionate care to the residents of Central Vermont for an entire century and we at CVMC are very grateful for the Woodruff family’s dedication and commitment to our community.” All in all, a pretty impressive legacy.