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HISTORY

'Country Doctor': W. Eugene Smith's Landmark Photo Essay

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Dr. Ernest Ceriani made a house call on foot, Kremmling, Colo., 1948. The generalist was the lone physician serving a Rocky Mountain enclave that covered 400 square miles.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images

Written By: Ben Cosgrove

For his groundbreaking 1948 LIFE magazine photo essay, "Country Doctor" — seen here, in its entirety, followed by several unpublished photographs from the shoot — photographer W. Eugene Smith spent 23 days in Kremmling, Colo., chronicling the day-to-day challenges faced by an indefatigable general practitioner named Dr. Ernest Ceriani.

Smith's images from those three weeks remain fresh and revelatory as they deliver Dr. Ceriani, his patients and his fellow tough, uncompromising Coloradans.

Born on a sheep ranch in Wyoming, Dr. Ceriani attended Chicago's Loyola School of Medicine but opted not to pursue a medical career in the big city. In 1946, after a stint in the Navy, he was recruited by the hospital in Kremmling, and he and wife Bernetha, who was born in Colorado, settled into the rural

town. Dr. Ceriani was the sole physician for an area of about 400 square miles, inhabited by some 2,000 people.

Eugene Smith's at-times almost unsettlingly intimate pictures illustrate in poignant detail the challenges faced by a modest, tireless rural physician—and gradually reveal the inner workings and the outer trappings of what is clearly a uniquely rewarding life.

“Country Doctor” was an instant classic when published, establishing Smith as a master of the commanding young art form of the photo essay, and solidifying his stature as one of the most passionate and influential photojournalists of the 20th century. In 1979, the **W. Eugene Smith Memorial Fund** was founded to support those working in the profoundly humanistic style of photography to which Smith dedicated his life and his art.

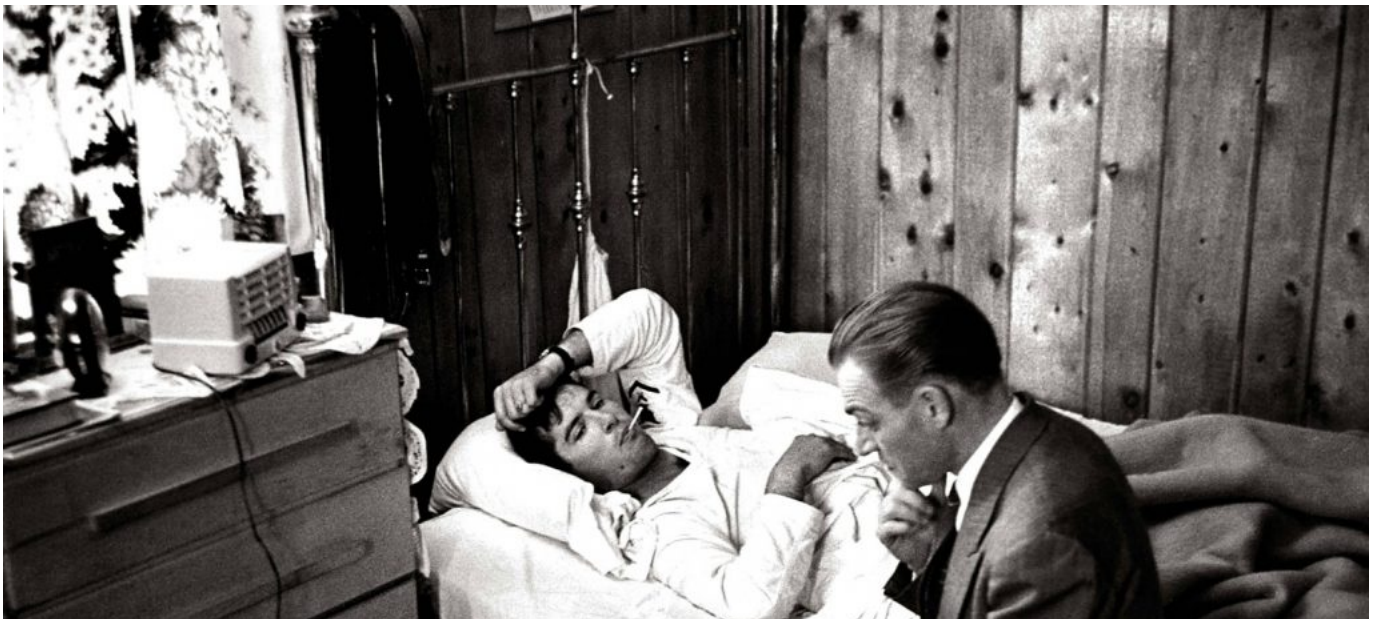


Dr. Ernest Ceriani made a house call on foot, Kremmling, Colo., 1948. The generalist was the lone physician serving a Rocky Mountain enclave that covered 400 square miles.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





Ralph Pickering held his 5-week-old baby while waiting to be Dr. Ceriani's first patient of the day. Pickering, a horseback guide to tourists coming to see the majestic Rocky Mountains, traveled from an outlying ranch to reach the doctor's office.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





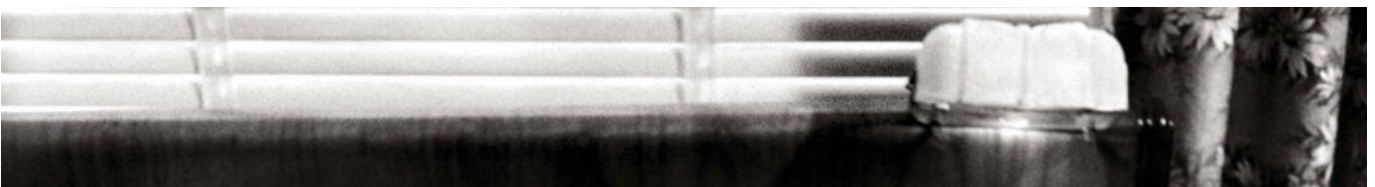
Dr. Ceriani sat at the bedside of a patient as he assessed flu symptoms during a house call. When Smith began "Country Doctor," he shot for a period of time with no film in his camera, to help Ceriani get used to his presence without wasting precious film.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



In the backseat of a car, Dr. Ceriani administered a shot of morphine to a 60-year-old tourist from Chicago, seen here with her grandson, who was suffering from a mild heart disturbance.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





Dr. Ceriani examined a feverish 4-year-old girl suffering from tonsillitis. Although most of his patients were children, Ceriani was initially inexperienced in pediatrics when he started his practice, and studied up on it whenever he had the chance.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



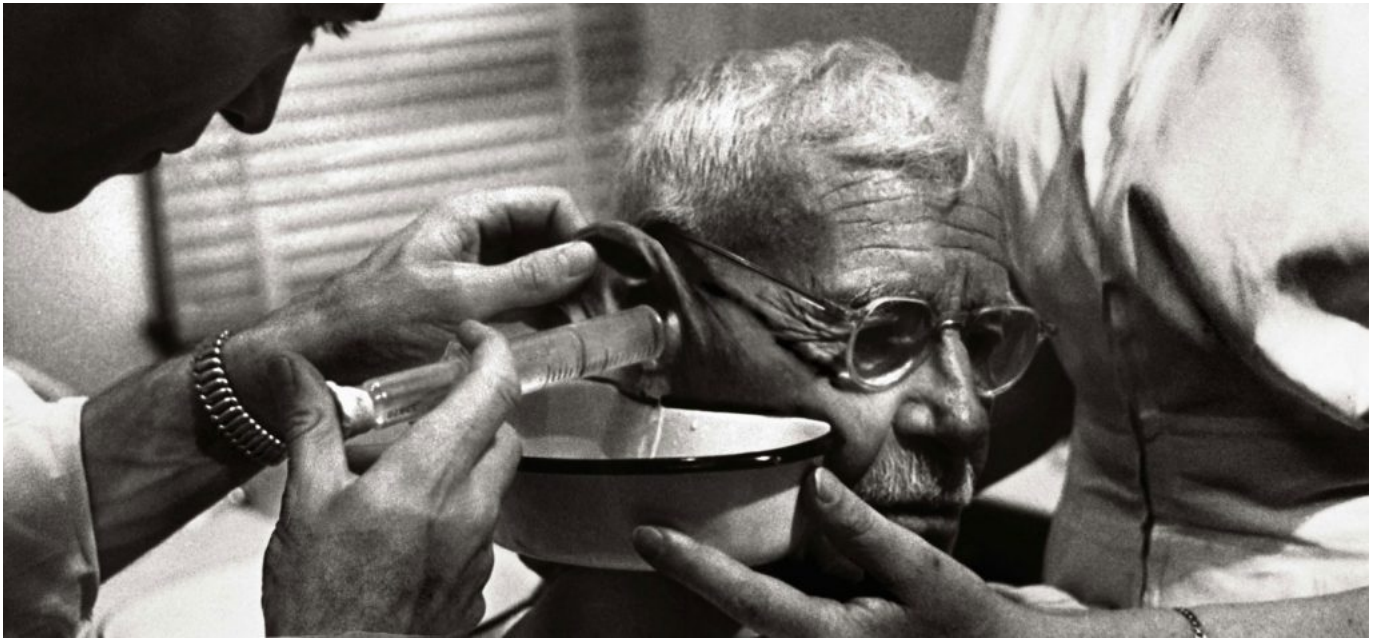


Though he had no vacations and few days off, Dr. Ceriani did have use of a small hospital, which was equipped with an X-ray machine, an autoclave and an oxygen tent, among other medical necessities. Here, he explained an X-ray — he developed the film himself — to one of his rancher patients. W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



The doctor taped a patient who broke some ribs after a horse rolled over him. "His income for covering a dozen fields is less than a city doctor makes by specializing in just one," LIFE's editors noted, "but Ceriani is compensated by the affection of his patients and neighbors, by the high place he has earned in his community and by the fact that he is his own boss. For him, this is enough." W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





Dr. Ceriani used a syringe to irrigate wax from an elderly man's ear to improve his hearing.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images

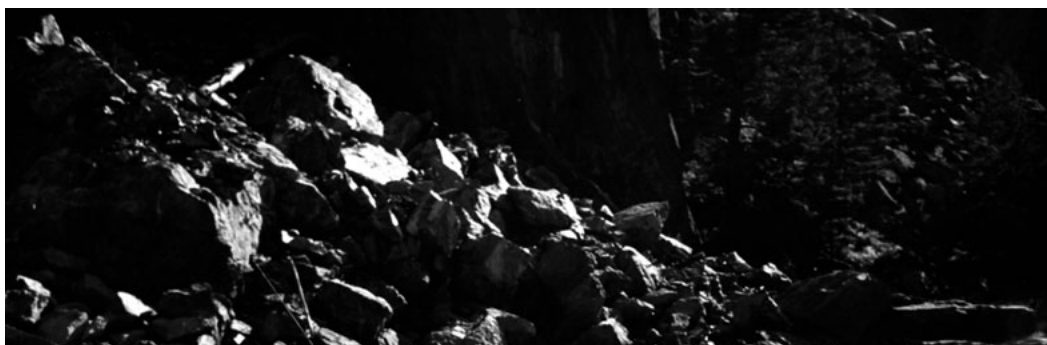




Dr. Ceriani examined the stitches in the lacerated hand of a young patient.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



Two friends transported Dr. Ceriani to Gore Canyon so he could enjoy a few hours of recreational fishing, a rare treat for the hard-working physician.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





Dr. Ceriani fly-fished on the Colorado River.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



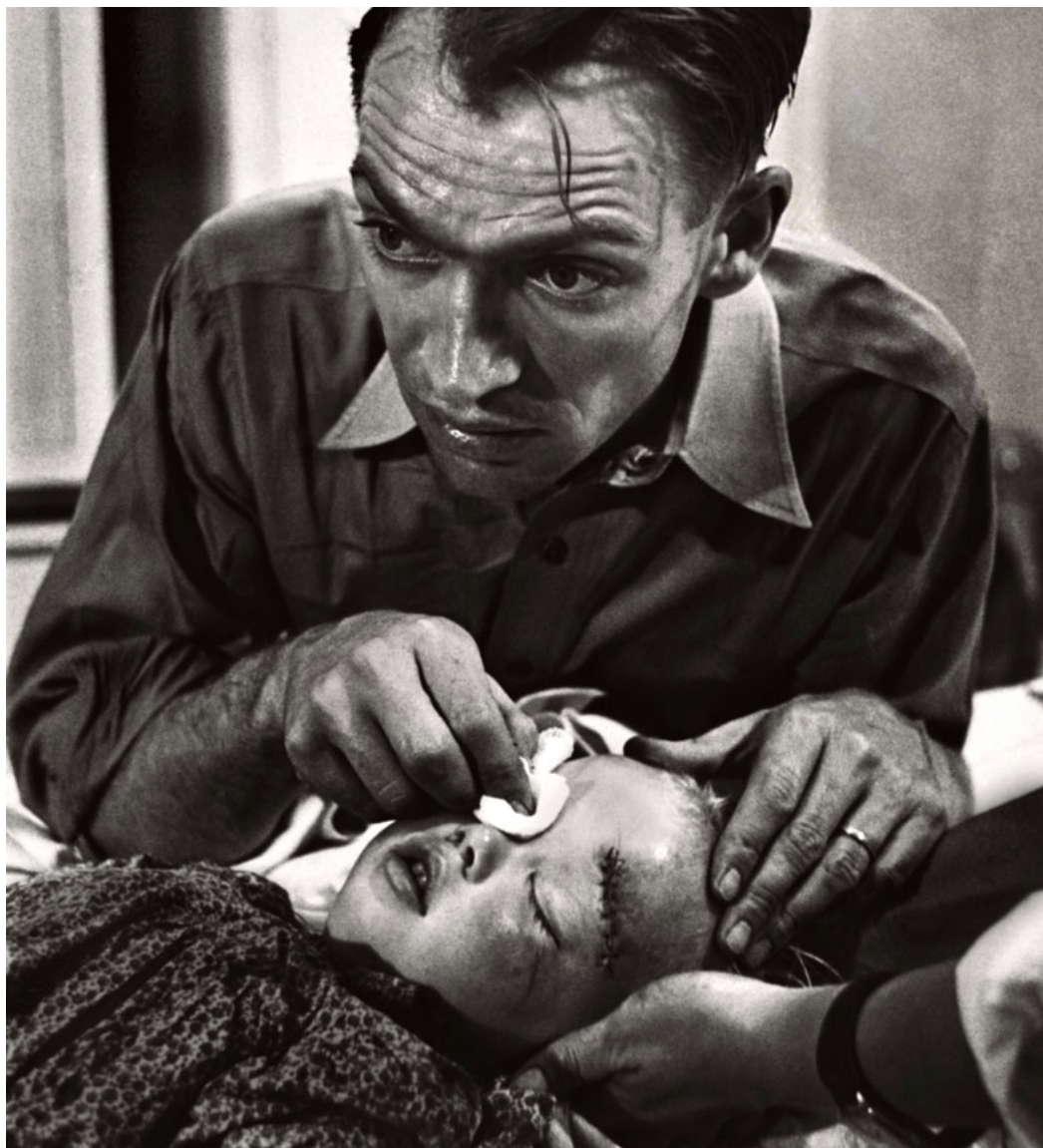


Thirty minutes into his fishing excursion, Dr. Ceriani was called to an emergency: A young girl hasd been kicked in the head by a horse and was badly injured.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



The child's worried parents looked on as Dr. Ceriani, surrounded by nurses, examined their two-year-old daughter.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





Dr. Ceriani had stitched the girl's wound to minimize scarring, but he then had to find a way to tell the parents that her eye could not be saved and they needed to take her a specialist in Denver to have it removed.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





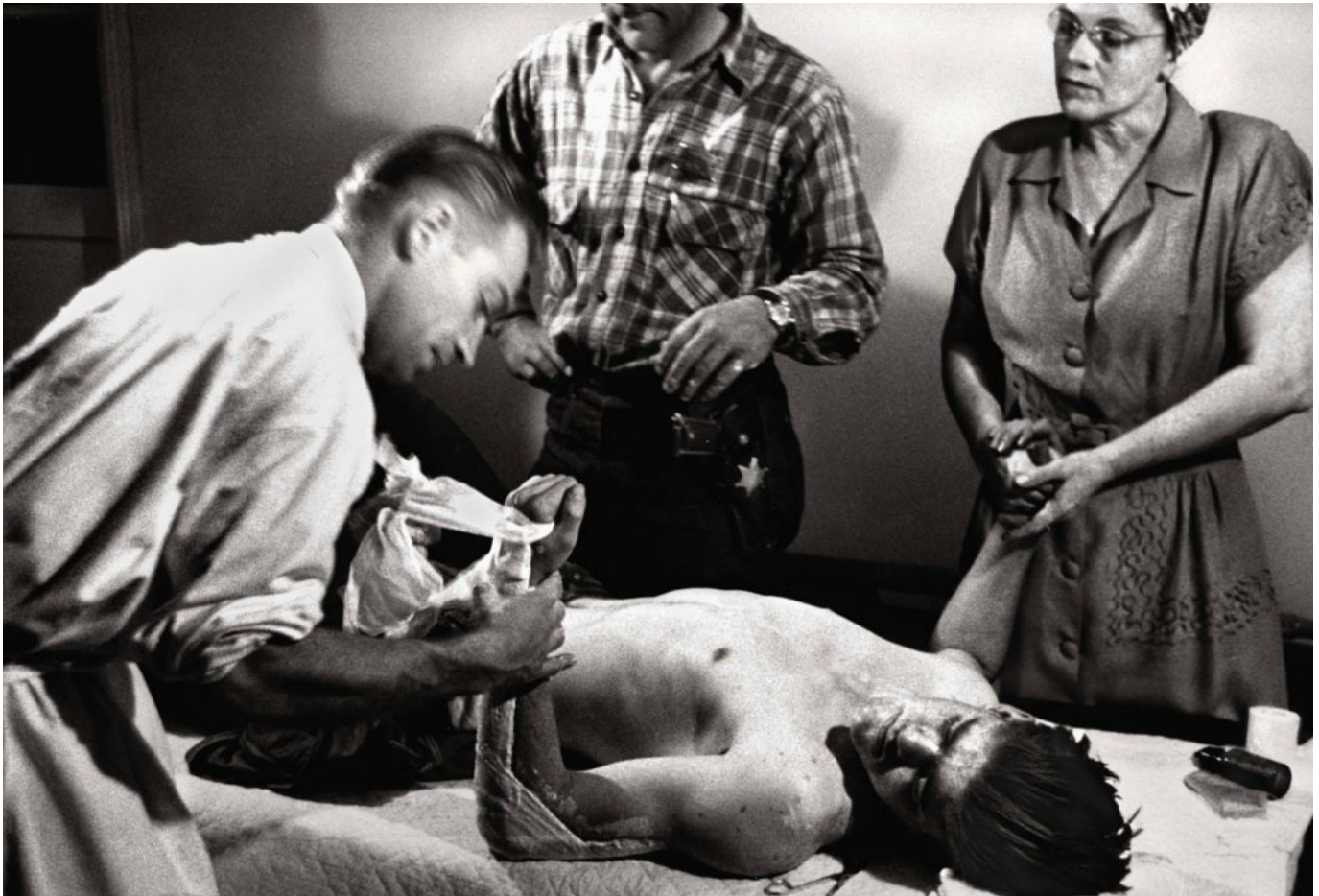
The doctor helped a rancher carry his son into the hospital. The inebriated young man dislocated his elbow when he was thrown from a bronco at a rodeo.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





The injured elbow required a painful reset.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



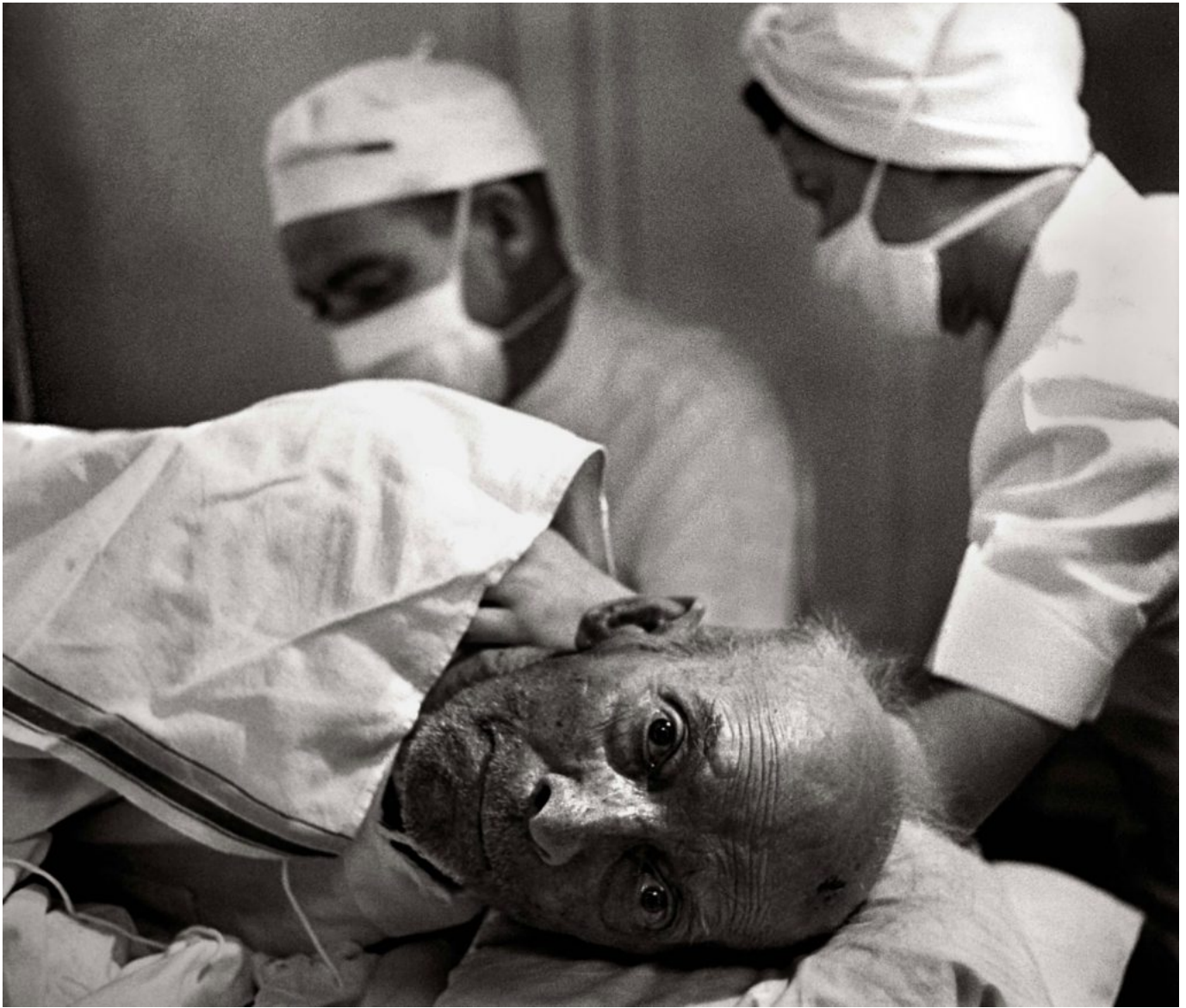
"Don't tell my mother," said the young man. Still under the effects of ether, he didn't realize she'd been holding his hand during the procedure.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



Dr. Ceriani checked the blood pressure of 85-year-old Thomas Mitchell, who came to the hospital with a gangrenous leg. Knowing that Mitchell might not be strong enough to endure the necessary amputation, Ceriani had been postponing surgery.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



When Mitchell finally rallied, the doctor gently carried him from the basement ward up to the operating room of the hospital, which had no elevator.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



Dr. Ceriani gave the 85-year-old man spinal anesthesia before amputating his gangrenous left leg.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



Dr. Ceriani responded to a late-night call when an 82-year-old man suffered a heart attack at a boarding house. Town marshal Chancy Van Pelt and one of the man's fellow tenants stood by. W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



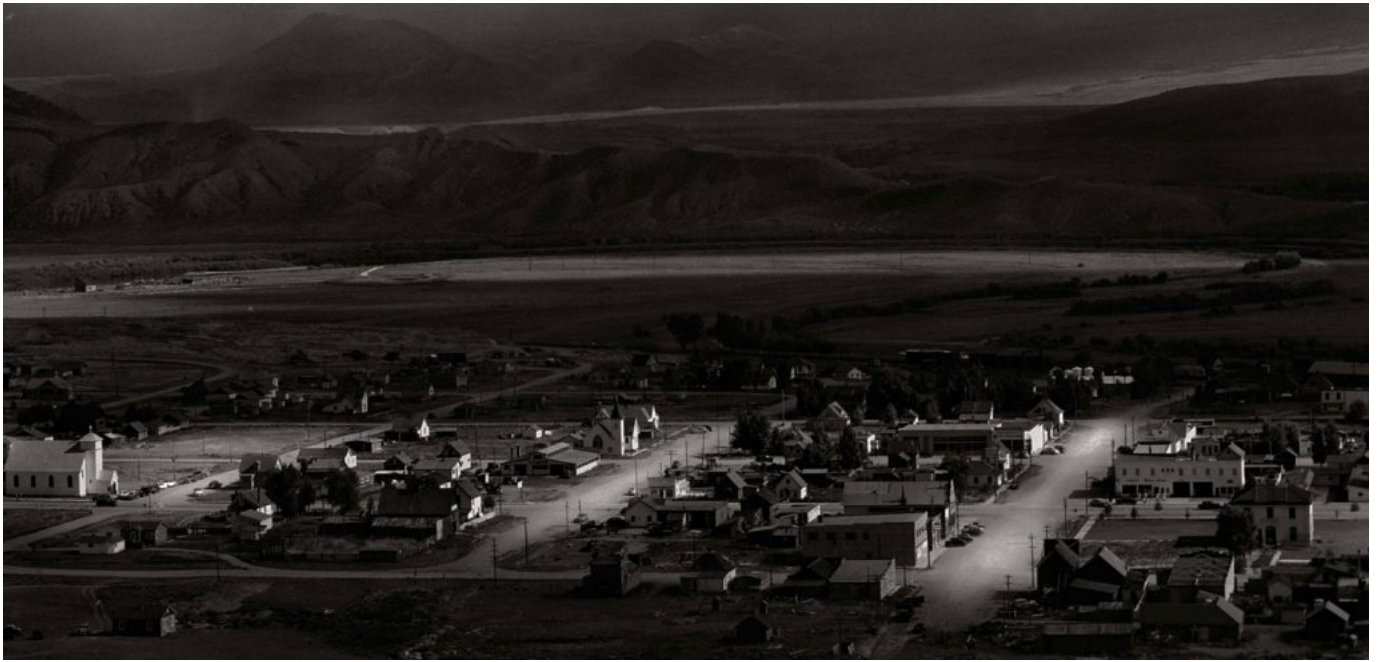
Knowing the man who suffered the heart attack at the boarding house will not make it through the night, Dr. Ceriani called for a priest from the kitchen.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



Dr. Ceriani helped the town marshal carry the heart attack victim to the ambulance. There, the country doctor would see that his patient was as comfortable as possible, knowing there was nothing he can do to save him.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





The treeless ranching community of Kremmling, Colo., stood on a 7,000-ft. plateau beneath the towering Rocky Mountains.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



Dr. Ceriani held 11-month-old son Gary as his wife, Bernetha, steadied 3-year-old Phillip on a fence while watching a parade. Though they'd been married for four years at the time Smith was profiling the doctor, Mrs. Ceriani still struggled with the unpredictability of her husband's schedule.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





A fund-raising committee in Kremmling was able to raise \$35,000 in 1947 to purchase the home of the town's retiring physician and turn it into a 14-bed hospital. The funds were used to stock the tiny hospital with as much equipment — some of it war surplus — as could be afforded. Middle Park Hospital had only three wards that could accommodate 14 patients. With a new hospital in place, the town then put out a call for a new general practitioner — a call answered by Dr. Ceriani.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images

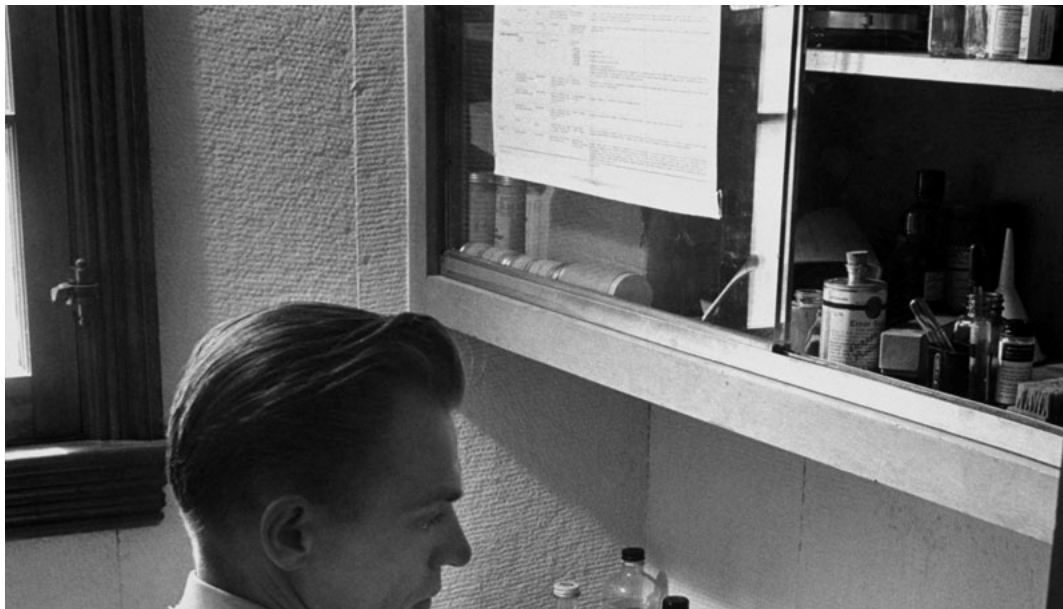


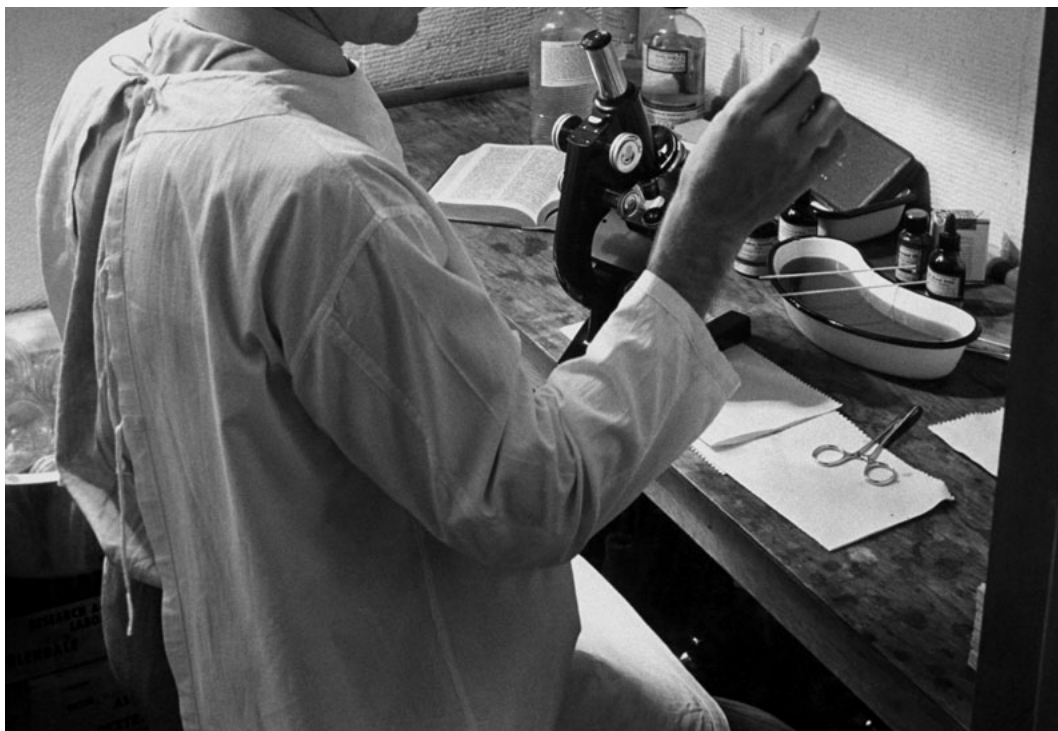
After finishing a surgery that lasted until 2 AM, Dr. Ceriani stood exhausted in the hospital kitchen with

W. Eugene Smith's 'Country Doctor': Revisiting a Landmark Photo Essay

After finishing a surgery that lasted until 2 AM, Dr. Ceriani stood exhausted in the hospital kitchen with a cup of coffee and a cigarette. "The nurses," LIFE noted, "constantly admonish him to relax and rest, but because they are well aware that he cannot, they keep a potful of fresh coffee simmering for him at all hours."

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images

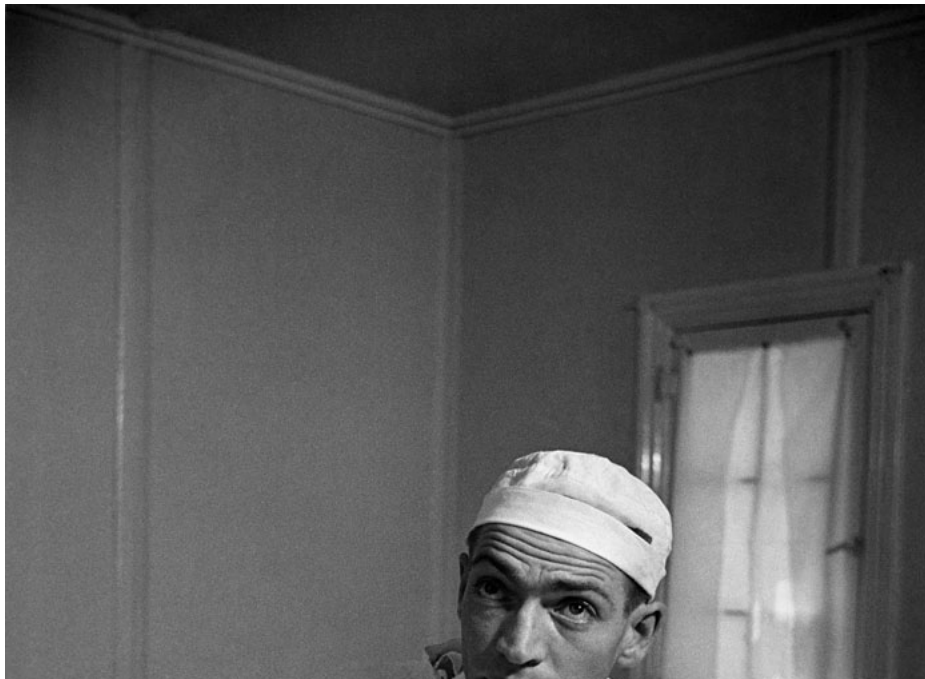




Not published in LIFE. Dr. Ernest Ceriani in the small Kremmling, Colo., hospital.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



Not published in LIFE. Doctor Ceriani checked 4-year-old Jimmy Free's foot, cut when the boy stepped on broken glass.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





Not published in LIFE. Dr. Ceriani examined his handiwork after the partial amputation of a patient's leg, Kremmling, Colo., August 1948. The patient, Thomas Mitchell, was suffering from a gangrenous infection.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



Not published in LIFE. An operating room in Kremmling, Colo.

W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





Not published in LIFE. Dr. Ceriani with a patient.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images

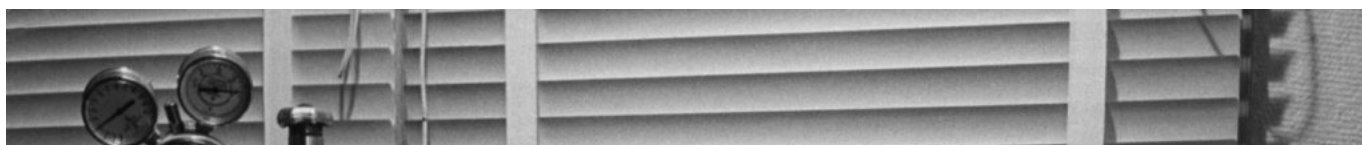


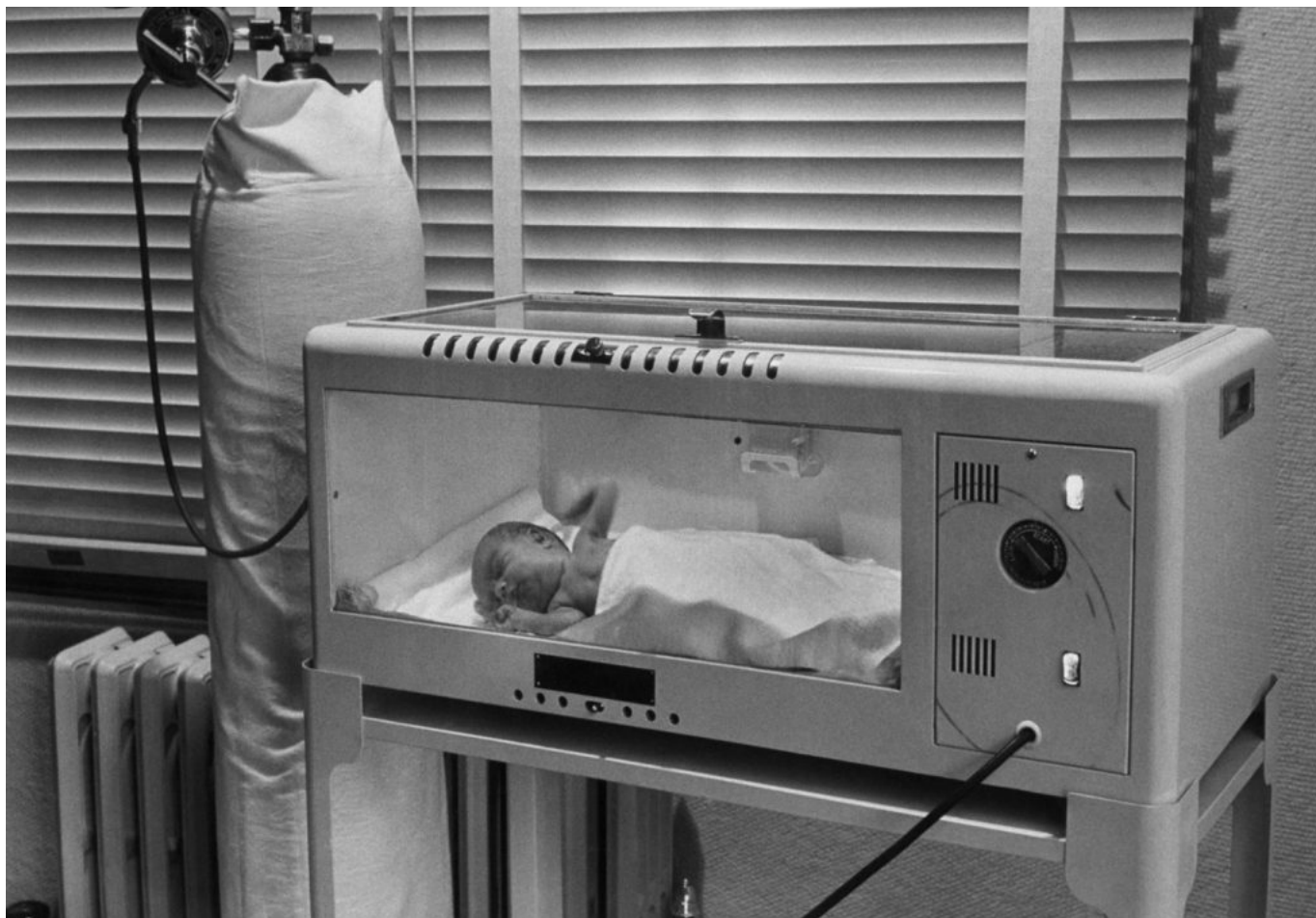


Not published in LIFE. Dr. Ernest Ceriani delivered a baby.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images



Not published in LIFE. Maternity ward, Kremmling, Colo., 1948.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





Not published in LIFE. An incubator in Kremmling, Colo., 1948.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images





Not published in LIFE. Dr. Ernest Ceriani on his way to a house call in foul weather, Kremmling, Colo., 1948.
W. Eugene Smith/Life Pictures/Getty Images

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