Janet Travell, 95, Doctor Chosen To Treat Kennedy's Back Pain

BOSTON, Aug. 1—Janet Travell Powell, who as President John F. Kennedy's personal physician treated his chronic back problems and in so doing helped to inspire revival of the old-fashioned rocking chair, died today at her home in Northampton, Mass. She was 95.

Dr. Travell, as she was known professionally, had moved to Massachusetts a year ago after living in Washington for 35 years.

Dr. Travell became widely known in 1961, when she became the first woman to be personal physician to a President. The appointment caused a minor stir, especially in the military, which had been providing medical care to Presidents, their spouses and their children since the 1920's.

Kennedy praised his doctor effusively after announcing her selection. The President had been relying on her since 1955, when she saw the junior Senator from Massachusetts after the second operation on his back. Kennedy had been injured in World War II, and his back caused him pain for the rest of his life.

By the mid-1950's, Dr. Travell had established herself in the New York City medical community, first as a heart specialist, then as a specialist in treating muscle pain and in general pain management.

The doctor treated Kennedy with Novocain to relax cramps in his spinal muscles, and she suggested that he wear custom-made shoes after discovering that his left leg was three-quarters of an inch shorter than his right. But her lasting contribution to Presidential folklore (if not her main one to medicine) was the popularity of the rocking chair.

She believed that a rocking chair alleviated lower-back tension by keeping the muscles moving, contracting and relaxing. Throughout his brief Presidency, Kennedy's oak rocker with a cane seat was a familiar sight to White House photographers and, consequently, the public.

Early in her White House days, Dr. Travell was the focus of some political infighting, enough that one newspaper speculated that she might be forced to resign. As she recalled later in an interview, she became aware of the dissension and approached the President.

"I will do anything I can for you as long as you wish," Dr. Travell told him. "But I am ready to leave at a moment's notice, if that is your pleasure."

Kennedy replied: "I don't want you to leave. If I do, I will let you know."

Dr. Travell stayed at the White House after Kennedy's assassination in 1963, treating President Lyndon B. Johnson as well as other members of the Kennedy family and other Washington politicians.

After leaving the White House in 1965, she resumed teaching, joining the faculty of George Washington University, in Washington, which named her professor emeritus in 1988.

Dr. Travell had taught clinical pharmacology at Cornell University in the 1940's and 1950's before turning
to the study of pain, particularly muscle spasms, an area her father, Dr. Willard Travell of New York City, had specialized in.

Born in New York, Janet Travell graduated from Wellesley College and Cornell University's medical school. She began her career at New York Hospital in the late 1920's, studied arterial disease at Beth Israel Hospital and was a cardiologist at Sea View Hospital in Staten Island before joining the Cornell faculty.

Her husband, John W. G. Powell, died in 1973. Survivors include two daughters, a brother and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren.