

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Pioneer Doctors and Druggists

Fever and ague shook the frontier in 1838. Disease stalked the Black Hawk Purchase and few pioneers escaped his "scorpion sting." On January 6th Mrs. Martha Rorer, the wife of David Rorer, died in Burlington. The number of deaths during the summer and fall was appalling. On October 1st the second death within a fortnight struck the home of James McKeel in lower Burlington, carrying away the son and namesake of the bereaved father. "The death of James," declared the *Iowa Territorial Gazette*, "is particularly lamented, owing to the fact, that no one suspected his illness. On Monday morning, he was about the house as usual; in the middle of the day he was taken with a chill, and the following night was a corpse!"

Such gloomy notices were common. On the evening of September 15th William Janes died of apoplexy. His daughter and her husband had only recently been the "target for the shafts of the archer, Death," leaving the remaining mem-

bers of the family "borne down by the deepest affliction." Well might a Burlington editor exclaim: "Awful fatality!"

The scourge of fever and ague was noted by many immigrants. "As we drew near Burlington, in front of a little hut on the river bank, sat a girl and a lad—most pitiable looking objects, uncared for, hollow-eyes, sallow-faced. They had crawled out into the warm sun with chattering teeth to see the boat pass. To mother's inquiries, the captain said: 'If you've never seen that kind of sickness I reckon you must be a Yankee; that's the ague. I'm feared you'll see plenty of it if you stay long in these parts. They call it here the swamp devil, and it will take the roses out of the cheeks of those plump little ones of yours mighty quick. Cure it? No, madam. No cure for it; have to wear it out. I had it a year when I first went on the river.' " Stricken by the dismal outlook, the immigrants decided not to locate near the river but moved inland.

It was fortunate for the pioneers that a number of physicians had crossed the Mississippi. Not all were graduates of medical schools. Many had obtained their education by "reading" for a few months with some older physician and assisting him in his practice. When they felt they knew enough the young Aesculapians would then begin searching for openings, frequently choosing some new settlement on the frontier. Their stock of

drugs and medicine was usually limited to a generous supply of calomel, some jalap, aloes, Dover's powder, castor oil, and Peruvian bark. In case of fever a patient was generally bled, every physician carrying lancets for this purpose. If a drastic cathartic, followed by letting blood, and perhaps a "fly blister," did not improve the patient, the doctor "would look wise and trust to a rugged constitution to pull the sick man through."

Some of these pioneer doctors had been educated at the best medical schools in America and one at least in Europe. Dr. Richard Plumbe, who was a graduate of the University of Leyden, Holland, confidently informed Dubuque residents that he had "long adopted the European plan of practice" in bilious fevers and intermittent fever or ague, and would undertake their cure "in a few hours, without the use of a single grain of Calomel." So confident was Dr. Plumbe of his ability to cure that he agreed to return his "very moderate" fee to the patient "if the treatment should prove unsuccessful."

Another Dubuque physician, Dr. Frederick Andros, graduated from the Parsons Medical School of Brown University in 1826. Born in Berkeley, Massachusetts, in 1804, Dr. Andros gave up his five-year-old practice at Dubuque in 1838 and moved to Clayton County to engage in agriculture. He acted as the first clerk of the court in Clayton County. He resumed the practice of

medicine in 1845, serving as surgeon at Fort Atkinson and also as physician to the Winnebago Indian Agency.

John Linton of Kentucky managed the Winnebago Mission for the Reverend David Lowry from 1837 to 1842. Returning to Kentucky he studied medicine for two years at Springfield. After attending lectures at Saint Louis in 1845, Dr. Linton established an office at Garnavillo where he became associated with Dr. Andros.

Having graduated in 1836 from Jefferson Medical College at Philadelphia, Dr. Joel C. Walker came to Fort Madison in December of that year. When municipal government was established in Fort Madison in 1838, Dr. Walker was appointed health officer of the town. His office was at the post office on Market Street. He was clerk of the Territorial district court for five years, was elected mayor of Fort Madison in 1853, and served as collector of internal revenue for the first district of Iowa from 1862 to 1867.

Several doctors came from the medical schools in Cincinnati. Dr. John W. Finley, who came to Dubuque in 1836, was a native of North Carolina. He was a graduate of Jacksonville College and had read medicine in Missouri two years before receiving his medical degree from the Cincinnati College of Medicine and Surgery in 1836. At Dubuque, where he practiced for forty-one years, he tendered his services in "all the branches of

*Medicine, Surgery, and Midwifery.*" Dr. Finley was elected coroner in 1838. Thirty-six years later he helped found the Dubuque Medical Society.

Another Cincinnati-trained physician was Dr. Enos Lowe, perhaps the best known and most popular of Burlington practitioners. Born in North Carolina in 1804, trained in Ohio Medical College at Cincinnati, Dr. Enos Lowe came from Greencastle, Indiana, to Burlington about 1836. His career is illustrative of the widespread interests of many members of the medical profession. He was appointed postmaster at Burlington in 1838. In 1844 he was elected a member of the first Constitutional Convention and presided over the second Convention in 1846. When the United States land office was established at Iowa City he was appointed receiver. In 1853 he was named receiver at Council Bluffs, becoming one of the founders of Omaha that same year. Despite an intensely active career he lived to the age of seventy-six.

Some of the physicians who inserted their cards in the newspapers in 1838 made it clear that they did not care to extend their practice outside the city limits. In sharp contrast, Dr. Campbell Gilmer, who settled three miles northwest of Fort Madison in 1835, covered a wide range of territory. Generous to a fault, Dr. Gilmer answered "all calls, day or night, no matter what the state

of the weather, and never made inquiry as to whether the patient was able to pay the fee." He died on his farm near Fort Madison on July 9, 1865.

Many physicians living in the smaller inland communities served a large area. In Des Moines County the first doctor to locate in Yellow Springs Township was Dr. Samuel Fullenweider, while Dr. Jeremiah Hall was the first to practice in Danville Township. Dr. Hall came from Wisconsin in 1837. The circuit of this typical "Doctor on Horseback" embraced all the territory within a radius of ten or fifteen miles of Danville. In addition to faithfully discharging his professional duties, Dr. Hall helped build the first school. He was also an active Congregationalist. Of him it was said: "No one ever lived in Danville Township who was more loved, honored and respected."

At least three physicians were natives of Vermont and appear to have received their early training in that State. Dr. Stephen Langworthy had practiced in Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois, before following his sons to the mineral region in Iowa. He became an influential Dubuque citizen, in 1838 serving as president of the day at the Fourth of July celebration.

Dr. Egbert S. Barrows of Vermont, came to Rockingham early in 1836, having been a surgeon in the Seminole Indian War. A rugged and resolute man, Dr. Barrows is said to have punished

one patient, who forsook him for another doctor only to return uncured, by charging and actually collecting a fee of \$100 for a dose of Epsom salts. He numbered Antoine Le Claire among his patients.

Another Vermonter was Dr. S. S. Ransom, who came to Burlington in 1835. In his card in the *Gazette* of 1838, Dr. Ransom declared himself well qualified, having had ten years experience in treating the diseases common to the upper Mississippi Valley as well as considerable intern work in hospitals and infirmaries. He was supplied with surgical instruments and was ready to perform any operation committed to his charge.

There were others, like Dr. Ransom, who through training and experience, could lay claim to a degree of specialization. Dr. T. R. Lurton, who came to Dubuque from Alton, Illinois, expected to devote his special attention to the diseases of women and children and to operative and dental surgery. He believed his eight years of practice amply qualified him to combat the common diseases in the mineral region and hoped his private upstairs office would attract a "liberal share of the public patronage."

Although many doctors busied themselves in local and state activities, few physicians paid so little attention to their profession as did Dr. Isaac Galland. Galland came to Lee County in 1829 and settled at Nashville (Galland), a few miles

below Montrose. Soon after the half-breeds were permitted to sell their lands in the Half-breed Tract, Galland was appointed agent for the New York Land Company. In 1839 he became a convert to the Mormon faith and for a year was private secretary to Joseph Smith. When Dr. Galland died at Fort Madison in 1858, he was described as a "tolerably good physician, a tolerably good lawyer" and a man who was "deeply learned in ancient as well as modern history, and had few superiors in the West either as a speaker or writer."

There were other physicians practicing in the Territory of Iowa in 1838. Dr. J. P. Stephenson settled near Denmark in Lee County sometime before 1838. He served a wide circuit until paralyzed in 1853. He died five years later. Dr. Zachariah Grant had begun the practice of medicine at Davenport as early as 1835. Dr. L. W. Hickok came from New York to Burlington in 1835 and kept his office one door north of the printing office. Besides running for Congress and serving as the Iowa boundary commissioner in 1838, Dr. James Davis practiced medicine on Water Street in Burlington. Dr. E. B. Price had his office in the corner of Dr. Adreon's drug store in Burlington. At Davenport Dr. A. C. Donaldson was already very popular in 1838. Dr. Robert Wyman, who practiced surgery at Fort Madison, published his card in the Fort Madison *Patriot* of March 24, 1838.

Many of the Iowa pioneers chose to prescribe their own medicine, aided no doubt by the numerous nostrums which were advertised as sure cures for all ailments. By 1838 a number of drug stores had been established west of the Mississippi. At Burlington Dr. J. L. Adreon, late of Baltimore, invited ailing citizens to visit his drug store on Water Street at the sign of the Golden Mortar where his large stock of personally selected drugs and medicines were for sale at the "most reasonable terms." All orders from the country were "neatly and accurately put up." In addition to drugs Dr. Adreon sold paints, oils, dye-stuffs, perfumery, confectionaries, tobacco, "Segars," snuffs, and similar articles. He also offered citizens of Burlington and the vicinity his professional services in medicine and surgery.

William S. Edgar & Company advertised their new cash drug store as prepared to sell fresh drugs and medicines, paints, oils, glass, and dye-stuffs. Citizens of Fort Madison were invited through the columns of the *Patriot* to patronize this enterprising Burlington drug store with its fancy line of goods.

Timothy Mason's Good Samaritan Drug Store advised the afflicted that Dr. John Sappington's Anti-Bilious Pills were a "certain remedy for the cure and prevention of Ague and Fever, Typhus Fever, &c, &c." At this time quinine pills were used so extensively throughout the upper Mississippi

Valley that the supply was often exhausted. According to Dr. Barrows, Sappington's pills were "indirectly the power which worked steamboats up the river" and were used in many households. Each box contained four dozen pills and each pill contained two grains of quinine.

The claims of these quack medicines were well nigh unlimited. According to the *Iowa Territorial Gazette*, they apparently could "create an appetite in the most delicate stomach, or physic a horse." A single remedy was supposed to be good for any ailment. "One pill dissolved in a bucket of water," scoffed the editor, "will be found a perfectly winter-proof lining for canal embankments; placed in steamboat boilers, they will effectually prevent their bursting, and greatly increase the speed of the boats."

Although many doctors doubtless extracted teeth, professional dentists had arrived in Iowa by 1838. At Dubuque Dr. T. A. Livermore informed the public that his four years of practice at Galena had won him many references for his skill as a surgeon-dentist. If decayed teeth were "plugged with gold or silver, in a proper manner" by Dr. Livermore, they could "almost invariably be preserved during life." Dr. Livermore also assured those who had lost the "roots or fangs" of their teeth that they could have teeth inserted "by means of a gold or silver clasp, of an indestructible substance, that will not change their color, which

will answer in many respects, the purpose of natural teeth." He could also cure that "disagreeable disease" known as "Gum Scurvy." In extracting teeth Dr. Livermore generally used the "Forceps" which gave far less pain than the "Turnkey." The doctor was prepared to wait upon persons at their own residence.

Dr. C. F. Rowell, a surgeon-dentist, had taken a room at Mrs. Parrott's Hotel in Burlington where he was prepared to wait on those needing his professional service. Dr. Rowell had a supply of "artificial teeth of superior quality" which he fastened on pivots or gold plates as the occasion demanded. The durability of these teeth, which could be used for years without the "least change of colour," could not help but win general approbation. Dr. Rowell cleaned teeth, restoring them to their natural whiteness without the use of acid, or the least injury to the enamel. He filled teeth on a "new and improved plan with little or no pain which he warrants for life." His long and successful experience as a dentist led Dr. Rowell to guarantee general satisfaction or no charges would be made for services.

The medical profession performed heroic work on the Iowa frontier of 1838. Disease and sickness were present everywhere and patients were widely scattered. Times were hard and the professional men could rarely expect to receive cash for their services. Their work was all too often a

labor of love, but despite their inadequate training they did it reasonably well. Nevertheless, the sum of human pain endured for lack of proper care must have been enormous. And the pioneer doctor was frequently the only person on the frontier to alleviate this suffering and distress.

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