

# MINNESOTA HISTORY

## A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

---

VOLUME 20

SEPTEMBER, 1939

NUMBER 3

---

### HEALTH AND MEDICINE IN ROCHESTER, 1855-70<sup>1</sup>

SINCE THE TURN OF the century, when the amazing achievements of the Mayo brothers began to attract observers and reporters, the "paradox of Rochester" has been a theme for many writers. Here is a sophisticated, cosmopolitan city with some ten hospitals, thirty hotels, and other buildings near skyscraper size, a city on whose streets mingle great and small from all nations, a city that houses the world's largest medical clinic—and that city not Minneapolis, or Chicago, or some populous center on the eastern seaboard, but a little river valley town in midwestern America, away from the beaten trails of travel, among the cornfields, dairy farms, and market villages of southern Minnesota. That is the paradox. As one writer rhetorically phrased it, "Rochester . . . only a pin point on the maps of commerce, but a starred capital on the charts of medical science."

That is Rochester now, and it makes us wonder about Rochester then, in its early years, before the Mayo Clinic, or even the Mayo practice from which this institution has grown, dominated the city's activities and its fame. During the decade and a half from 1855 to 1870, Rochester grew from a stagecoach station consisting of a few rough shacks in the underbrush on the banks of the Zumbro into a busy,

<sup>1</sup> An expanded version of a paper read on June 15, 1939, at the Rochester session of the seventeenth state historical convention under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

booming town of about four thousand inhabitants. In the first years it was merely an ambitious village in the trade area tributary to the towns on the Mississippi where the steamboats stopped. Its location at the heart of the system of river valleys that veins the fertile acres of Olmsted County made it a natural center for the everyday trade of the vicinity, but the larger commerce flowed to and from Winona, Lake City, Wabasha, Minneiska, or Reads Landing.

Then settlement thickened and the railroad came. Rochester read its future in the caravans of prairie schooners that rolled slowly through the town, often to camp on the outskirts in a lively mixture of children, cows, and horses around the wagons and the cooking fires before moving on to homes in the hinterland. The weekly newspaper added a column or two of special news for Irish readers, and one of the storekeepers wrote a postscript to his advertisement: "German, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish spoken at our store." When at last in the fall of 1864 the railroad, moving westward from Winona, reached Rochester and a grain elevator was built alongside the tracks, the farmers forsook the road to the river towns for the shorter one to Rochester. Pioneer businessmen, restless, always watching for new promising locations, got the "Rochester emigration fever." Coming from near and far, they helped to build warehouses, open banks, and establish wholesaling firms. Soon Rochester had become a grain market and distributing center of enough importance to command the attention of trade journals and manufacturers in Milwaukee and Chicago.

Those were the days when wheat ruled Rochester. Wheat yields and wheat prices determined its prosperity. During the middle 1860's harvests and the machines to handle them were increasing; productive soil, a demand for wheat, and competition among buyers made profits high. In the fall,

or when sleighing was good in the winter, the roads into Rochester were lined with a procession of farmers on the way to dump their loads of grain into the wide-mouthed hoppers of the elevator. They and their wives and daughters, who had come along "to do a little trading," thronged the streets and the stores. Wheat buyers and speculators helped to fill the hotels and saloons, often to overflowing. Later in the decade, when glut and monopoly had rounded the corner, Rochester was an outstanding center in the "people's movement" that demanded legislation to relieve the pressure of hard times.

When the district court was in session or when it was time for taxpaying, the settlers roundabout drained into Rochester, the county seat, making their business the occasion for a holiday. State and county fairs brought crowds so in excess of the available accommodations that visitors slept on straw in the churches and paid fifty cents a night for the privilege. State conventions met there too—fraternal orders, schoolteachers, church leaders, temperance enthusiasts, spiritualists. Fourth of July celebrations, horse races, baseball games, Masonic festivals, and exhibitions by the Turnverein drew spectators from a wide area. Word went out that Rochester was a paradise for shows and showmen, and all sorts came—circuses, menageries, magicians, minstrel troupes, and musicians. Concerts by artists like the Black Swan, a popular Negro contralto, and Ole Bull, the Norwegian violinist, brought listeners from places as far away as Mantorville, Kasson, Owatonna, and even Winona—because, commented the Rochester reporter loftily, the residents there were "not content to endure the inconvenience incident to such small places in being deprived of first-class entertainments."<sup>2</sup>

In short, early Rochester was a flourishing district capital, both economic and social. It was therefore also a

<sup>2</sup> *Rochester Post*, May 8, 1869.

promising center for the practice of medicine, for the people were quite likely to seek their doctors where they found their supplies and their amusements.

What need had they for doctors? That is not such an idle question as it may seem, for early Rochester and its vicinity were a community of pioneers, and part of the halo of romance with which we have framed the pioneers is an impression of their vigor, endurance, and robust health. That idea is not justified by the facts available. If the early settlers were a youthful people and therefore strong, they were also prodigal of their health and strength in their struggle with frontier conditions. Overexertion and overexposure, poor sanitation and careless hygiene, ignorance and superstition, worked their customary harm, and the records the pioneers have left are full of the aches and pains, the plagues and accidents they suffered from.

Early Rochester seems to have known most of our common ills. Many diseases were not yet clearly differentiated and frontier physicians were not greatly concerned about medical nomenclature, so that it must be left to the medical men to guess what specific ailments were meant by such general diagnoses as congestion of the brain, inflammation of the bowels, heart disease, spine disease, lung complaint, and fever. But rheumatism, pleurisy, dropsy, neuralgia, pneumonia, apoplexy, dysentery, and cancer appear in the records by name. Coughs and colds and croup kept the children out of school. Measles, mumps, whooping cough, diphtheria, typhoid fever, and smallpox struck in recurrent epidemics.<sup>3</sup> What were called cholera morbus and cholera

<sup>3</sup> Newspapers are the chief source for information about the general state of health in the community. There are no official records for the 1850's and 1860's; even the reporting of deaths was a voluntary matter until a law passed in 1870 to provide for the collection of statistics required the registration of births and deaths. See Minnesota, *Session Laws*, 1870, p. 44. Until then, the obituary items in the newspapers were the only death records kept, except for census statistics covering the year preceding the enumeration. Scarlet fever, a common scourge in Minnesota at the time, seems not to have visited Rochester during these years.

infantum appeared frequently. And on one occasion yellow jaundice was so prevalent that visitors remarked about the number of saffron faces they saw on the streets.

The more malignant of the epidemic diseases worked a frightful havoc when they appeared. Diphtheria and typhoid fever in particular sometimes wiped out entire families in a few weeks. Not infrequently the deaths of two, three, or even four members of one household were reported in the same obituary column. But it seems to have been the threat of smallpox that caused the greatest panic, perhaps because it was known to be contagious. How to prevent it by vaccination was also generally known, and one writer remarked that a smallpox scare now and then was a good thing, because it sent the whole community to the doctor to be vaccinated.

Since such scares, however, smallpox or any other kind, were not good for business or immigration, sickness in Minnesota was like the ague in Indiana, "always somewhere else." Its presence in a town was usually left unreported until it was gone or until some rival town got word of it and gleefully published the damning news. Then the local editor denied the report if possible or at least tried to minimize it. Sometimes the charges and countercharges were bitter. In January, 1864, a returning soldier traveling through Rochester was taken ill at one of the hotels. After waiting three days the proprietor called a doctor, who pronounced the case smallpox. Amid great excitement the man was quickly moved to an empty log cabin a mile away, where he died a week or two later. Then the *Rochester City Post* reported the incident briefly, congratulating the city that no further cases had appeared.

An epidemic in Preston, near by, is described in the reports of the Reverend E. Newton to the American Home Missionary Association, December 31, 1863, and January 14, 1865. The Minnesota Historical Society has microfilm copies of these reports; the originals are in the Chicago Theological Seminary.

But sensational rumors spread and the Owatonna and Chatfield papers published them. In righteous anger they told how the "heathen" of Rochester had allowed the man to freeze to death through neglect and exposure, how they had let his body lie for several days until it was stiff and then had buried it by sticking it feet foremost into a swamp and tapping it on the head with a fence post driver. "Satan would despise one of his associates who would treat one of his imps thus," they said. Indignantly the Rochester papers made what denial they could. The man had not been neglected. He had been moved because the hotel was crowded and prompt action was necessary to prevent the spread of the disease, but the city fathers had hired a nurse to take care of him. Perhaps the house they moved him to was not just the place for a sick man in cold weather, but they could hardly be blamed for not anticipating the unusual cold spell that followed. Perhaps the low temperatures had accelerated his death, but as for the story of his burial, that was too absurd to need refuting. It was just a malicious attempt to spread reports prejudicial to Rochester.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the truth in this incident, instances of panic-stricken cruel neglect of those ill with smallpox and cholera were not uncommon on the Minnesota frontier.

A real smallpox epidemic came in the winter of 1868-69. Early in 1868 a public-spirited citizen of Grand Meadow, near High Forest, sent a warning to the people of Rochester. There was smallpox in his neighborhood, he said. Some of the townsmen were trying to check the pestilence by making everyone who had it stay at home. But most of the residents were Scandinavians, and they had an idea that if God intended a man to die of smallpox there was no use

<sup>4</sup> *Rochester City Post*, January 9, 16, 1864; *Rochester Republican*, January 13, 1864; *Chatfield Democrat*, January 9, 16, 23, 1864; *Owatonna Plaindealer*, January 7, 21, 1864. More than five years later rival editors were still citing this incident as an example of the ultimate in depravity. *Lanesboro Herald*, August 23, 1870.

in his trying to avoid it. So they were going about from house to house without concern and some of them were even insisting upon making an overnight visit to Rochester. The disease did not appear there, however, until late in the year. This time the city council authorized the construction of a pesthouse, a "city hospital" they called it, at a cost of fifteen hundred dollars, but the worst of the epidemic was over before the building was ready for use. Again neighboring papers spread the story, to the serious detriment of business in Rochester. The local editors did their best to still the panic with soothing items for their country readers, who had been "unnecessarily alarmed" and whose "wrong impressions" they desired to correct. They accused their rivals of deliberately encouraging the scare in order to further their own interests at the expense of Rochester's.<sup>5</sup>

The excitement did not subside until April, 1869—only to be followed by a siege of measles, whooping cough, cholera morbus, and typhoid fever. In fact, 1869 is one of the two years in the sixties that especially deserve the name of "sickly season." The other was earlier, in 1863. At the end of that year the editor pointed out that the unusual mortality of the past year, due doubtless to the unseasonable weather, had made the cemetery dear to many, and that therefore it ought to be fenced in and improved in appearance.<sup>6</sup>

Effective measures for the prevention and control of epidemics were lacking. Their coming waited upon the passing of individualism in matters of health and upon the advance of medical science to explain the methods and agents of infection. It is difficult to determine what the state of opinion about the cause of disease was in the Rochester community. Many laymen seem to have agreed, more or

<sup>5</sup> *Post*, January 2, 1868, February 6, 27, 1869, January 8, 1870; *Federal Union* (Rochester), February 20, 27, March 6, 13, 1869.

<sup>6</sup> *Republican*, January 28, August 19, November 18, 25, 1863; *City Post*, August 22, October 24, 1863.

less definitely, with the Scandinavians of Grand Meadow that pestilence was an act of God which they could do little to prevent. Others made wild guesses at more material causes. They said, for instance, that typhoid fever came from old wallpaper left hanging one layer upon another, or that the prevalence of diphtheria was due in part to the fumes given off by kerosene lamps when their owners tried to save oil by turning them low. Since at that time few learned men of medicine accepted the theory of personal infection, it could hardly have been general in Rochester; yet the instances of panic and of attempts at isolation show that the view was present in practice.

Perhaps the most widespread explanation for the cause of epidemics, and one more fruitful in effects than scientifically accurate, was the theory of miasmata. These were thought to be poisonous substances, effluvia, rising from stagnant water or putrid matter like an imperceptible gas, floating in the air, especially in night mists, and generating disease. This theory, old in the literature of epidemiology, seems to have become current on the American frontier as an explanation for the incidence of malaria near the marshes and low-lying river bottoms of the states bordering the Ohio and the lower Mississippi, but it was also made to account for many other diseases, both communicable and not. Minnesotans used it to explain the healthfulness of their climate: moisture being the main vehicle for these atmospheric poisons, "perturbation of the air" dispelling them, and low temperatures destroying them, Minnesota's dry, windy, and cold climate was peculiarly inhospitable to miasmata.<sup>7</sup>

An editor of the *Rochester Post*, probably J. A. Leonard, who was once a doctor, confessed to skepticism about this

<sup>7</sup>"The Climate of Minnesota," in Girart Hewitt, *Minnesota, Its Advantages to Settlers*, 29-31 (St. Paul, 1867). This article is unsigned, but a prefatory statement indicates that it was written by a physician, Dr. Thaddeus Williams of St. Paul.

miasma theory. He quoted approvingly from a correspondent who thought the pollution from filthy cellars and out-houses went down, not up; who described how it seeped down through a few feet of loose soil to the impervious limestone table and then flowed along to pour itself into nicely drilled wells, from which it was pumped up, "a clear solution of all this nastiness" to flavor the Mocha or the oyster stew.<sup>8</sup> It is too bad the name of that correspondent was not preserved, for he was a broad jump ahead of most of his neighbors.

Whatever Leonard's own ideas, he and his colleagues made good use of the miasma theory to persuade their fellow citizens to clean up Rochester. They warned unceasingly about the danger of disease arising from common "nuisances": the cows and pigs and sheep that ran loose, fouling the city thoroughfares; the pools that stood undrained in cellars or vacant lots; the piles of filth and offal that accumulated in the streets and alleys, in the pigpens and stables, around the slaughterhouses, and on the river banks.

The Rochester charter of 1858 had given the city council power to abate such nuisances and to create a board of health, but except for some little-headed ordinances against cows and pigs running at large, nothing was done until June, 1864. Then the stench from twenty dead horses dumped on the river bank without burial brought so many complaints that the council was moved to action. It named three laymen to a board of health, with orders to remove all nuisances without delay, and at the same time declared all slaughterhouses within the city limits to be nuisances. The objectionable carcasses were quickly removed, but there activity apparently stopped. A year later, after the citizens had petitioned the council for the "abatement of nuisances in the city prejudicial to health," another board was appointed, three doctors this time, but results were as con-

<sup>8</sup> *Post*, March 24, 1866.

spicuously absent as before. Finally, when rumors came that cholera was abroad in 1866, an ordinance was passed providing for a permanent board of health, its members, two doctors and one layman, to be appointed annually. A companion ordinance gave the board orders and authority to clean up the city's filth. Perhaps the activity of this board helped Rochester to escape the cholera that year. There was one death from the disease, but the victim was a passing immigrant and no further cases were reported.<sup>9</sup>

One other factor that cannot be ignored in considering the state of health in early Rochester is the fact that Minnesota was then one of America's sanatoria for tuberculars, or consumptives, as they were called. However preposterous the booster's claims for the curative powers of Minnesota's climate may seem to us now, there is no disputing the fact that many persons within the state and in the East believed those claims and acted on their belief. Invalids suffering from lung and bronchial complaints made up an appreciable element in Minnesota's population — and, it must be admitted, in her graveyards. There is ample testimony to this fact. A Boston journalist traveling through the state wrote that he was surprised at the agriculture and industry he found, because, he said, he had been "accustomed to think of Minnesota as a State peopled with men and women in the last stages of consumption." When Horace Greeley came to speak at the state fair in 1865, he wrote to the *Tribune*:  
There are hundreds here — perhaps thousands — who came to save their lives, and all insist that the climate is an antidote to pulmonary affections. . . . Many are well here who believe they would have been dead years ago had they remained at the seaboard.

<sup>9</sup> Rochester, *Charter and Ordinances, to 1881*, 21, 34, 41, 47-49 (Rochester, 1882); *City Post*, May 21, June 4, 1864, September 23, November 11, 1865; *Post*, March 10, 24, June 2, August 18, 25, 1866. As near as Rushford there were some fifteen cases of cholera in 1866, enough to send many of the inhabitants scurrying from the town until the epidemic should pass. *Post*, September 8, 1866.

One of those believers wrote with less restraint :

Minnesota all the year round is one vast hospital. All her cities and towns, and many of her farm houses, are crowded with those fleeing from the dread destroyer. . . . Ask any man you meet in Minnesota what induced him to come here. One-half, at least, will tell you it was for the health of himself or some member of his family.<sup>10</sup>

There is some reason to believe that Rochester even then was attempting to specialize as a resort for these health-seekers, but whether that or not, it got its share of those who came, for it was one of the more easily accessible spots in the state away from the crowded hotels and boardinghouses in St. Paul, which the invalids were advised to avoid. Some of the visiting consumptives stayed with resident friends or relatives, others took rooms at a hotel or boardinghouse, and a few lived in the home of the local doctor whose professional skill they trusted to aid the climate in making them whole again. An amusing bit of evidence of the presence of such persons in Rochester is the advertisements directed to them. One dry goods store, for example, called to the special attention of "Invalids" its sale of double-breasted red flannel underwear, and another promised "Consumption Cured—Saved from Death and the Doctors" to the women who wore its "Kid-Fitting Skeleton Corsets."

If the age of the pioneers was not unusually healthy, neither was it enviably safe. The pace of living may have been slower and the peril to life and limb less unnerving, but the age had its own dangers. There was, for instance, the new and imperfect kerosene lamp, which frequently exploded, throwing its blazing liquid over anyone within range. There was the hot coal stove or the open fireplace, which surprisingly often set fire to the mother's clothes as she got too close while cooking dinner or rocking the baby to sleep. On Rochester streets there was the hazard of

<sup>10</sup> The items quoted are reprinted from the *Cincinnati Commercial*, the *New York Tribune*, and the *Boston Journal*, in the *Rochester Post* of October 28, 1865, June 27, 1868, and August 7, 1869.

uncovered cellar openings which strangers or unwary home-folk stumbled into at night. And there were countless horses that kicked, or threw their riders, or upset buggies and cutters and sent the occupants to the doctor. It was an accident of this kind that gave the newspapers their first bit of copy about William J. Mayo, when he was only eight years old. The *Rochester Post* told how "Willie" Mayo's pony had bolted, throwing its rider off and breaking his arm, how the boy had remounted and ridden home, alone, to get his father's ministrations. Surely the mishap was not the rider's fault, however, for only a year later he won second place at the county fair in a trial of horsemanship for boys.

The greatest cause for concern was the many accidents with the new farm machines, for the farmers and their wives seem to have been slow to learn that moving mechanisms do not yield to human bodies. The most troublesome contrivance was the tumbling rod between the horsepower and the separator in the threshing machine. Its turning knuckles took relentless hold of any loose sleeve, billowing skirt, or flapping trouser leg that came near it. So numerous and sometimes horrible were the accidents from this source that in 1868 the state legislature passed a law requiring all owners or operators of threshing machines to enclose the tumbling rod in a wooden case. But the law was observed in the breach, even by those it was designed to protect, and threshing machine disasters multiplied.<sup>11</sup> The whirring knives of the reapers, too, were hard on feet or fingers that got in their way. In 1870 a writer from Rochester to the *Saint Paul Daily Press* added to his report of a bountiful harvest:

We hear of an unusual number of accidents occurring from malmanagement of those in charge of reapers, etc. The maimed from carelessness would crowd the largest hospitals in New York or Chicago. Dr. Cross and other surgeons are engaged night and day.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Session Laws*, 1868, p. 99; *Post*, September 10, 1870.

<sup>12</sup> *Saint Paul Daily Press*, August 13, 1870.

By no means all these ills and accidents meant cases for the practicing physicians. The many miles that so often separated patient from doctor and a suspicion that doctors did more harm than good, surviving from the then-recent days of heroic dosage and copious bloodletting, had taught laymen to prescribe for themselves. Knowing what to do for the family fevers and bruises was a part of mother's job, and if the illness was too acute for her to handle she could call upon some community grandmother, wiser still in the ways of plasters and poultices. Together they sometimes performed great feats of healing. Only as a last resort, usually, did they send a messenger for the doctor.

For chronic ailments, when home remedies had failed to give relief, there was an endless supply of nostrums waiting on the druggists' shelves. Each of the innumerable balms, compounds, pills, powders, liniments, and tonics whose advertisements filled the columns of the early papers was warranted to work miracles in an incredible assortment of ills. Hamlin's Wizard Oil, for example, would cure everything from bunions to diphtheria; Dr. Poland's White Pine Compound was a sure specific for all lung complaints and kidney diseases; Dr. Smith's Electric Oil would quickly soothe a teething baby, or in only a few more applications banish the worst case of rheumatism or erysipelas.

Sometimes the proprietors were lyrical in their claims. One of them wrote: "Millions of people whose lives appeared to be at the last ebb, worn out by fever's consuming fires, by consumption's insidious advances, by racking tortments of inflammatory rheumatism, have been cured by the use of Brandreth's Pills." Another was moved to verse:

Light shall again the faded eye relume,  
And rosy health the faded cheek resume.  
The deaf shall hear, the trembling limb be strong,  
And groans of anguish mellow into song.

The less scrupulous vendors were clever in devising tricks to part the fool and his money. One such trick, fairly common, may be illustrated by the scheme of the Reverend Edward A. Wilson. (In this type the advertiser was always a minister, a returned missionary, or a Bible salesman.) In a modest card he announced that having been restored to health by a simple remedy after several years' illness from consumption, he was anxious to share his good fortune with fellow sufferers. To all who wished it and would send him their address, he would return a copy of the prescription free of charge. His only object was to spread information that would be a blessing to the sick. After the card had been running for some weeks, the Rochester editor exposed the racket. A "verdant friend" of his had sent for the prescription, but when it came he found it contained several ingredients so rare that no Rochester druggist had ever heard of them. In case this should be so, the Reverend Mr. Wilson generously offered to send the dry ingredients for three dollars and thirty cents or a bottle of the liquid for four dollars, express unpaid.<sup>13</sup>

The battle of the sixties was among the bitters. There was a host of them contending for the right to heal the dyspeptic's stomach and improve his disposition. There were Red Jacket Stomach Bitters and Wahoo Bitters, both resting their claims on Indian formulas; Swain's Bourbon Bitters, especially for the "delicate tastes" of the ladies; Hoofland's German Bitters, warranted to relieve depression of spirits for whichever side should suffer defeat in the coming election; and Dr. Walker's California Vinegar Bitters, a "true root and bark medicine," not a "vile, fancy drink" like other bitters, "sweetened and spiced to please the taste and lead the tippler on to drunkenness."

Rochester entered the lists with a contestant of its own, the Gopher State Bitters. The formula was Dr. A. T.

<sup>13</sup> *Post*, June 9, 1866.

Hyde's and it was manufactured and sold by Daniels and Company, grocers and druggists of Rochester. It had a notable success for a time, took a first prize at the Minnesota State Fair, and won enough reputation outside the state (if a Chicago newspaper is to be believed) to contest the market in Chicago with the celebrated and firmly established Hostetter's Bitters of Pittsburgh. Rochester was proud of its bitters, and for a long time their price of eight dollars per case was listed in the market quotations along with the prices of wheat, flour, hides, and wool.<sup>14</sup>

If the balsams and the bitters failed the sufferer, he could resort to one of the traveling physicians of sundry kinds who went from town to town, staying at each for a few days or weeks and then moving on before their powers were tried too far. They all went to Rochester, sometimes three or four of them at once. Some of them announced specialties—in diseases of the eye and ear, the heart, the lungs, or the feet—and these might be accepted as legitimate practitioners, journeyman predecessors of the modern specialist, had they not claimed so much and bragged so loudly.

More spectacular were the various healers who claimed supernatural powers. Some of these must have found the people of Rochester unresponsive, for they had been disillusioned by one of this kind. Dr. William P. Duvall, the "Natural Healer and Practical Physician of the Western Healing Institute," had come to Rochester fresh from triumphs in St. Paul and Winona. He had issued a two-page supplement to both local newspapers, telling the stories of his cures and describing his method of healing. He used neither medicines nor instruments, only the natural healing power he had been exercising for thirty years. The patient had merely to sit calmly for a few minutes and all pains and ailments would pass away. In certain specified diseases sev-

<sup>14</sup> *Federal Union*, April 18, 1868, February 27, October 2, 31, 1869; *Chicago Republican*, quoted in *Rochester Post*, August 15, 1868.

eral treatments might be necessary, but for most of them one would suffice. Dr. Duvall had been at work in Rochester only a few days before he had added some of the city's well-known residents to the list of those bearing public witness to his powers.

But from Rochester Dr. Duvall moved on to Owatonna, where after a brief courtship he married a local belle. A few weeks later, in Janesville, Wisconsin, Mrs. Duvall died. A postmortem examination revealed a lethal dose of strychnine, and investigation disclosed that all three of Dr. Duvall's former wives had died under similarly suspicious circumstances. He was tried for murder, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Then the Rochester papers, wise after the event, said he had only pretended to cure by his "senseless mummery" over the patient, that he had "fleeced a great many credulous people out of their hard-earned dollars."<sup>15</sup>

Such quacks were numerous and successful in the day of the open door in medicine. Anyone who wished could add "M.D." to his name and enter into practice; no one had legal authority to question his qualifications, for all but three of the states having restrictions on medical practice had repealed them during the first half of the nineteenth century. The reason for this was a complex of circumstances. The laity, in reaction against the puking, purging, and bleeding that had become the rule in medical practice, were ready to turn a willing ear to the doctrines of such medical sects as the homeopaths and the eclectics and such health cults as hydropathy and Grahamism, which had sprung up to contest the place of the regular profession in the popular favor. The latter was ill equipped for the struggle. Medical science had progressed far enough to discredit old systems and theories, but had not yet developed a body of tested knowl-

<sup>15</sup> Supplements to the *Federal Union* and the *Post*, October 17, 1868; *Federal Union*, January 2, 1869; *Post*, December 26, 1868, May 8, 1869.

edge and practice to take their place; and the ranks of the profession were filled with poorly trained practitioners, turned out by the proprietary medical colleges, many of them little more than "diploma mills," which had been established in the Middle West to meet the demand for doctors on a rapidly expanding frontier.

Moreover, that was the period marked by "the rise of the common man," and the democratic Americans who could see no need for the trained person in government were not likely to appreciate his worth in medicine. Add to these factors the jealous individualism that could find only selfish and mercenary motives in any demand for the regulation of medical practice, and the reason for the fate of regulatory legislation becomes clear. The upshot was a period of uncertainty and confusion, in which the only way of judging a physician was by his fruits in practice. There were about as many irregular practitioners as regular, and the boundary between the two was indefinite and shifting. Most laymen employed one as readily as the other—and the quack as readily as either.

After the Minnesota State Medical Society was reorganized in February, 1869, it gave considerable time to the question of quackery. At its first session the following resolution was adopted:

*Resolved*, By the State Medical Society assembled, That in case the Legislature now assembled, desire to protect the citizens of this State from quackery, it is the duty of this Society to co-operate with the Legislature, and lend its assistance in framing all needful laws upon the subject; and that Drs. Willey, Sheardown and Stewart, be appointed a committee as the organ of the Society, for this purpose.<sup>16</sup>

The sequel might be guessed. The legislature of 1869 passed "An act to protect the people of Minnesota from empiricism and imposition in the practice of medicine."

<sup>16</sup> Minnesota State Medical Society, *Transactions*, 1870, p. 4. This volume includes reports of the sessions held in 1869.

This made it unlawful for anyone to practice medicine in Minnesota unless he had graduated from a two-year medical course or could show a certificate of qualification from some state, district, or county medical society. But the sponsors of the bill had failed to include adequate means for its enforcement, they had not guarded sufficiently against the fake sheepskins of the diploma mills, and they had not considered how easy it would be for the irregular sects to organize medical societies and issue certificates of qualification. (The eclectic physicians, for instance, immediately gathered at Owatonna to organize the Minnesota State Eclectic Medical Society, of which Dr. N. S. Culver of Rochester was made secretary.) Either because of these defects or because of public opinion that the bill was "class legislation" for the sole benefit of the profession — a charge vigorously denied at the state society's annual meeting in 1870 — the law was considered a failure, and at the next session of the legislature the doctors worked as hard to get it repealed as they had to get it passed. They succeeded, and nothing more was done to standardize medical practice by law in Minnesota until 1883.<sup>17</sup>

The various medical sects were all represented in early Rochester, the homeopaths in particular being very popular. Their status in the community and in the profession is illustrated by the story of the Drs. Cross. Dr. Edwin C. Cross came to Rochester in 1858. He had received his training at the best of the eastern medical schools, but he announced himself as a "homeopathic and hydropathic physician and surgeon." His practice grew, so that in 1860 his brother, Dr. Elisha W. Cross, came to work with him, and the Cross brothers established what might, by a sizable

<sup>17</sup> *Session Laws*, 1869, p. 52; 1870, p. 106; *Post*, March 27, 1869; State Medical Society, *Transactions*, 1870, p. 13, 14, 18-20; Dr. John M. Armstrong, "History of Medicine in Ramsey County," in *Minnesota Medicine*, 22: 257 (April, 1939).

stretch of the imagination, be considered Rochester's first clinic. They called it the Rochester Infirmary. They had bought a store building on Broadway and furnished it with "all the appliances afforded by similar institutions in the largest cities."

Patients needing surgical treatment were invited to the infirmary, where, they were assured, they would find a full supply of surgical instruments made to order for the Drs. Cross by the best of French instrument makers. The doctors would take care of surgical cases either at the infirmary or at the patient's home, and they promised special attention to persons coming from a distance. Dr. E. C. Cross offered his personal services in cases of "the sore eyes incidental to this climate" and guaranteed "Prairie Itch cured or your money refunded." The infirmary was also a dispensary for the little white homeopathic pills, the thirty-four kinds of which could be bought individually or in ready-made assortments for family use.

But the specialty at the infirmary was baths—"Shower Baths, Full Baths, Half Baths, Sitz Baths, Douches, Plunges, and all other Baths necessary for the treatment of diseases . . . fully supplied with an abundance of *Pure Soft Water*, at any required temperature. . . . Also Vapor Baths, pure or medicated, for the treatment of diseases of the skin." There were special bathing apartments for the ladies, and the proprietors generously announced that their soft water baths were "open to the healthy public for the purposes of cleanliness, whenever they may choose to use them." During the hot summer months the local editor recommended the shower baths at the infirmary, along with the soda fountain at the drug store, as an aid in keeping cool. By 1866 the brothers had parted company professionally and the Rochester Infirmary had disappeared from notice in the papers, but Dr. E. C. Cross was advertising a "medical institute" that sounds much like the old infirmary and was

publicly defending homeopathy as a branch of medical science.<sup>18</sup>

Their advertising, if not their homeopathic and hydro-pathic practice, might stamp the Drs. Cross as irregular practitioners today, but not so then. They had the most extensive and profitable practice, probably, in all southern Minnesota; they were both appointed to medical positions with the Union forces in the Civil War; they were active members of the Olmsted County Medical Society; and they were admitted to membership in the state society in 1870.

The careful public impersonality of present-day doctors was not maintained in the 1860's. Most reputable physicians limited their paid advertising to a simple business card stating their system of practice and their office address, but they all told the editor about their accident cases or unusual operations. Few issues of the Rochester papers in the late 1860's were without one or more accident stories in which the name of the attending physician was given, along with a brief statement of the treatment or operation necessary and the patient's condition. Unfortunately for the historian, this custom of "reporting cases to secular journals" was frowned upon by the medical societies and so gradually died out. These newspaper notices provide good evidence of Rochester's position as a center for the practice of medicine and surgery, for cases were reported from all over Olmsted County and from across the lines in Dodge, Fillmore, and Steele counties. Sometimes the Rochester doctor had been called in consultation, or to perform an operation the local doctor did not feel equal to. But often the patient himself had sent a messenger directly to Rochester to bring the doctor whose success he had read about in the paper, or had heard about, perhaps from some neighbor or some friend in town the last time he was there.

<sup>18</sup> *Rochester Free Press*, October 13, November 18, 1858; *City Post*, February 11, May 26, June 30, July 21, December 22, 1860; *Post*, February 3, 10, 1866.

There is not time to discuss the methods of medicine and surgery then, and there probably is no need, for so much has been written lately about the horse-and-buggy doctor, his kitchen surgery, and preantiseptic methods. The Rochester doctors were of their time in that respect. They operated under whatever makeshift arrangements could be devised in the patient's home or in a room of some city boarding-house. They usually used an anesthetic, but not always. Their surgery was still largely of the emergency sort, a weapon of necessity not of choice, a way of staving off death not of securing health. A few of them might on rare occasions perform a tonsillectomy, remove a cancerous sore, or tap a tumor; but most of them limited their operations to reducing dislocations, trephining for fractures, setting bones, and amputating mangled or gangrenous members. Especially the last. They resorted to amputation so often that persons with missing extremities must have been commonplace in the community.

A number of these Rochester men were professionally alert and exerted themselves to keep up with the new developments in medical and surgical science. At least three of them spent a winter in New York attending lectures and clinics; several were active in the state medical association; and they tried having a society of their own. The birth year of the Olmsted County Medical Society is usually given as 1882, but there was an earlier organization than that. It was formed in 1868 with half a dozen Rochester doctors as members. After its first session, at which the principal business was the adoption of a common bill of prices, activity lapsed until the spring of 1869. Then the society was very active for several months, holding sessions every two weeks at which papers were read and discussed. To one familiar with the programs of present-day medical meetings, the topics of those papers may seem queer. Dr. William W. Mayo read the first two, on the "Progressive Creation

of Life." A few weeks later Dr. E. C. Cross contributed one on the "Origin and Distribution of the Human Race," and at the next session Dr. Mayo read Professor Huxley's lecture on the "Physical Basis of Life." One is tempted to guess that those medical brethren were debating evolution, then the newest thing in scientific theories. There was also a paper on "Electricity and Lightning Rods" and one on "Inventions," the latter by John H. Whitney, a Rochester inventor who had been made an honorary member of the society. He was reported to have described an "entirely feasible appliance for aerial navigation." There were papers on medical topics too, one by Dr. Hector Galloway on the "Philosophy of Disease," in which he made the interesting prediction that medical science would someday discover ways to cure all diseases but cancer.<sup>19</sup>

This story of health and medicine has an intrinsic appeal, both for those who are interested in the history of Rochester and for those who are curious about the ways of life in an earlier day. But it has significance too, for it suggests what the next decades were to make clear, that early Rochester was a potential medical center and that it may therefore have contributed in some measure to the seeming paradox of Rochester today.

HELEN CLAPESATTLE

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS  
MINNEAPOLIS

<sup>19</sup> *Post*, April 4, 25, 1868, January 16, 30, February 13, 27, March 13, 27, April 10, 24, June 5, 19, 1869; *Federal Union*, September 18, 1869.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).