

**The Great Basin
History of Medicine
Program Presents
Dr. Ove Nedergaard,
September 17, 2003**

All are invited to a Great Basin History of Medicine Program lecture by Dr. Ove Nedergaard. The topic of the lecture, Curare, covers the history of weaponry poison (muscle paralytic drug) used in tribal weaponry in South America. The speech will be given at the Eldorado Hotel and Casino Convention Center at 6:30 PM and an Italian buffet will be served. The cost for each person is \$35, and all who are interested in the history of medicine are invited. If interested, please RSVP by September 10, 2003, to Lynda McLellan at the University of Nevada School of Medicine, Department of Pathology, 784-4068, or email mclellan@med.unr.edu.

League of Extraordinary Doctors

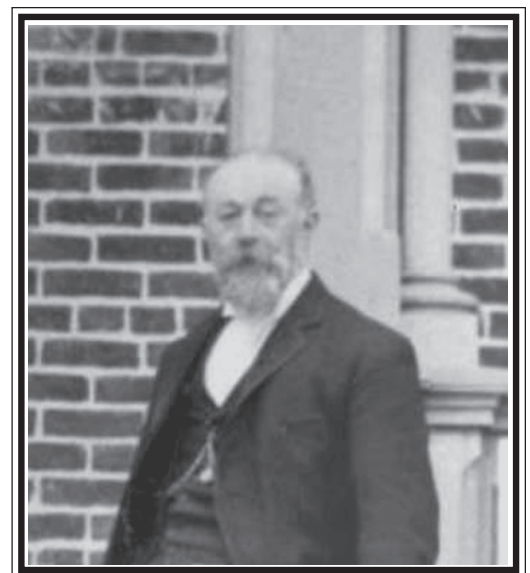
By Ryan Davis

Alson Dawson, Henry Bergstein, George Thoma, and John Lewis were extraordinary doctors, who are lost in time because they practiced one hundred years ago. In the following article, we will describe the importance of these four doctors, not only to the development of surgery in Nevada, but as leaders in medicine in the nineteenth century.

**Many Physicians in
Nevada condemned the
operation in 1888**

On March 22, 1888, these four men set the standard in Nevada for medical advancement by performing a surgical procedure, which had never been attempted in this state. This procedure,

known in the medical profession as an ovarian serous/mucinous cystadenectomy, was regarded as a dangerous operation. The first doctor in America to perform removal of this kind of an ovarian



Henry Bergstein, M.D.

tumor was Ephraim McDowell (1771-1830). He operated on his patient on a kitchen table in Kentucky in 1809.

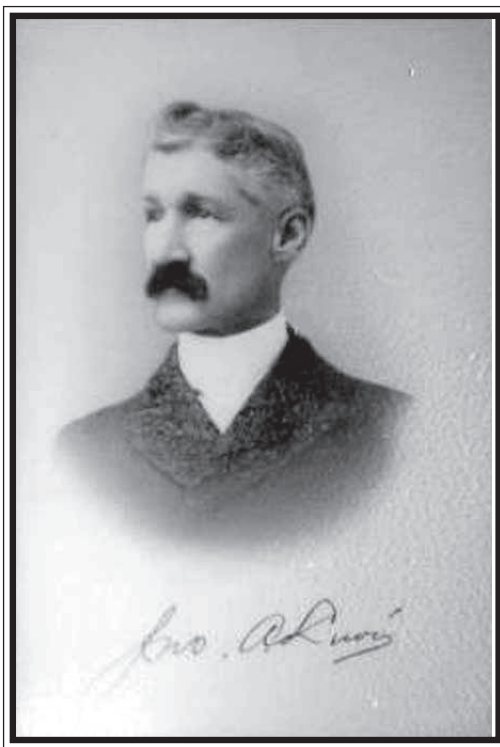
Many physicians in Nevada condemned the operation in 1888, performed by Dr. Alson Dawson and assisted by Drs. Thoma, Bergstein, and Lewis, as a disastrous venture. They believed the state simply did not have the adequate medical facilities or people with adequate training to master such a daunting challenge. In both McDowell's and the present case, the tumor was so large that pregnancy was considered. Furthermore, if the tumor was malignant or the contents of the benign cyst spilled in the abdomen, it could seed throughout the intestines and cause bowel obstruction and death.

The patient who became the first Nevadan to undergo the procedure

Many of these men accomplished more in the field of medicine than most doctors could hope to accomplish.

was fifty year-old Louise Ancker, who resided in Washoe City. Dr. Dawson diagnosed the plight of Mrs. Ancker four months prior to surgery. He thought the cyst was benign, but by its mere size threatened the healthy function of other internal organs. Mrs. Ancker was informed of the procedure's dangers and elected to have the operation done despite its risks.

On that March day, the surgery was accomplished in one and a half



John Lewis, M.D.

hours in the old two-story Washoe Hospital building at Kirman and Mill Streets. Done with great precision and delicacy was the main reason for its success. Careful preparation went into the endeavor. Most of the instruments used were sterilized using a carbolyzed spray, and every nurse involved in the operation was required to take an antiseptic bath. Though routine as it may appear to many physicians today, these preparation techniques were all new and key to the procedure's success.

Many of these men accomplished more in the field of medicine than most doctors could hope to accomplish. Dr. Alson Dawson, besides being a prominent physician for over twenty years, was also one of the founders of the Nevada State Mental Hospital (NSMH), and was its first superintendent. Though no longer referred to by this name,

the institution is still in service today as the Northern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services on Galetti Way in Sparks. Dawson, born in New York in 1844, left no record of where he received his M.D. He was removed from his position as NSMH superintendent for an unknown reason shortly after the start of 1883. He died at the age of fifty-one from injuries sustained when his horse lost control on September 15, 1895, in Reno.

Each of Bergstein's assisting physicians served as superintendent of NSMH as well, and was a founding member of the first medical staff at Saint Mary's Hospital. Dr. Henry Bergstein, in addition to serving in the Nevada Legislature in 1875, was the father of the Nevada Medical Law of 1875, which required all doctors to present a medical license to the county recorder before they could practice in Nevada. Bergstein was one of seven members who formed the first organized medical society in Nevada in 1897. He attended Cooper Medical College (now Stanford Medical School) in 1872, and again in 1905. He died in San Francisco in 1918.

Dr. John Lewis served as president of the Nevada State Medical Society in 1909. He also served on the Nevada Board of Medical Examiners and was a member of the American Medical Association until his death in 1924.

Dr. George Thoma came to Nevada from New York after being an Assistant Surgeon in the Union Army. After settling in Eureka, Nevada, in 1867, he served in the Nevada Senate, before moving to Reno to practice in 1887. Before his death in Reno in 1907, he



George Thoma, M.D.

served as president of the Nevada State Medical Society.

Pioneers and trailblazers in the field of medicine, these men proved that Nevada had the resources to accomplish what many believed was impossible. They formed the basis of Nevada's healthcare.

The Mollie Folly

By Ryan Davis

In 1910 the *Carson City News* reported surgery by four prominent physicians, but current medical knowledge raises a doubt on their diagnosis. Like the men in the lead article, these doctors contributed to the advancement of Nevada medicine during the early twentieth century.

On December 12, 1910, Drs. George McKenzie, Reine Hartzell, Ernest Krebs, and Donald MacLean took part in the removal of sixty to seventy pounds of tissue from a prison inmate named Mollie Marrison. What was her diagnosis? Elephantiasis.

At first glance this event may not sound odd to the reader, but there are two glaring discrepancies in the medical report. "Well, for one, it is highly unlikely that a patient in 1910 could have over sixty pounds of tissue removed and survive," says Dr. John Iliescu, a retired Reno plastic surgeon, who is one of the doctors featured in the upcoming book *The Cutting Edge*. "The amount of fluid that would be lost by the patient alone would be enough to result in massive complications."

The other anomaly present is the diagnosis of elephantiasis. What makes the diagnosis odd is the area in which it was diagnosed. According to Dr. Donald MacLean, who was the resident doctor at Humboldt State Prison and the man responsible for the diagnosis, the disease was present in the woman's breasts.

Elephantiasis is a disease caused by filarial roundworms that inhabit lymph nodes, causing infection, inflammation, and swelling. This inflammatory swelling occurs mostly in the limbs of infected patients or in the scrotum of some male patients. "Since a female's lymph nodes that supply the breast are located primarily in the axillary region, it is highly unlikely that elephantiasis could ever occur in her breasts, simply because the patient's arms would become inflamed instead," states Dr. Anton Sohn, a Reno pathologist at the University of Nevada School of Medicine.

In light of these revelations, one must wonder what, indeed, was Molly Marrison's diagnosis. Was she the recipient of a radical, record breaking new procedure, or the victim of a doctor's misdiagnosis?

It isn't as if the doctors who led the procedure were a group of mad scientists. Dr. McKenzie, the lead surgeon, was, in fact, one of the leading physicians not only in Nevada but the entire Far West.

Along with being one of the founders of St. Mary's Hospital and its training school for nurses, he founded Mt. Rose Hospital (a private hospital that existed for a few years). He was president of the Nevada Medical Society at the time the surgery took place, and a member of the American Medical Association and the American College of Surgeons. He graduated from Rush Medical College in Chicago and after taking graduate courses at Bellevue Hospital in New York, he studied medicine at universities in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Dublin. According to Sister Eulalia Cramsie who assisted Dr. McKenzie as a nurse at St. Mary's, "McKenzie was an exceptional performer in those small, white-tiled surgical rooms. He was a fast worker at a time when total sterilization of the operating room was impossible. He was a wonderful surgeon."

Further research reveals no case of elephantiasis being diagnosed in a woman's breasts. Furthermore, no case of sixty to seventy pounds of tissue being successfully removed in any type of surgery was found in a review of 1910 medical journals.

What exactly was Mollie's folly? Maybe time will tell. (We will feature pictures of some of these doctors in future Bulletins.)

Two New Books To Be Released in November:
Better Medicine: The History of the University of
Nevada School of Medicine, and
The Cutting Edge: Reflections & Memories by Doctors
Medical Advances in Reno

Two new books will be available for purchase through the Greasewood Press and the University of Nevada Press this November. The first book entitled, *Better Medicine* was written by Phyllis Cudek and Dr. Anton Sohn. It recounts the trials and tribulations of the University of Nevada School of Medicine from its early struggles in the 1960s until currently. This book is unique because it gives many different perspectives relayed to the reader through the stories of the School of Medicine's six successive deans. From George Smith, the founding dean, to Steve McFarlane, the current dean,

Better Medicine covers the recognition, development, funding, legislative backing, and a host of other problems each dean struggled to conquer, and each left his mark on the School of Medicine. The book is the fourth in a series of books on the Golden Age of Medicine in Nevada and will not disappoint its readers.

The second book, which is also due out in November, is titled *The Cutting Edge*. The book is the fifth in the Golden Age of Medicine in Nevada series, and is taken from the accounts of nineteen Reno physicians: R. Cudek, anesthesiologist; T. Berndt,

cardiologist; R. Sage, dermatologist; J. M. Davis, Internist; F. E. Roberts, Internist; A. Rosenauer, neurosurgeon; R. Avery, obstetrics and gynecology; G. Magee, ophthalmologist; J. Talsma, ophthalmologist; C. McCuskey, orthopaedist; B. West, otolaryngologist; O. Bolstad, pathologist; A. Sohn, pathologist; F. Mannix, pediatrician; J. Iliescu, plastic surgeon; J. Chappel, psychiatrist; F. Boyden, radiologist; W. Hall, surgeon; and J. Reinkemeyer, urologist. The book examines the state of medicine in Reno fifty years ago and how these doctors have helped to maintain and keep Reno on the cutting edge.

A book signing will take place in December to coincide with the release of this book. Most of the nineteen doctors will be there. We will follow up with a date and place in our next issue.

GREASEWOOD TABLETTES © is a quarterly publication of the Department of Pathology, Great Basin History of Medicine Division, University of Nevada School of Medicine. Anton P. Sohn is our editor. Teresa Garrison is the associate editor. Lynda D. McLellan and Gussie Burgoyne are our production assistants. The newsletter is printed by the University of Nevada Printing Shop. **The cost of publication is paid for by a grant from Parks, Ritzlin and Sohn, Ltd.** The editor solicits any items of interest for publication. Suggestions, corrections and comments are welcome. Please feel free to write or call us. The address is Department of Pathology/350, University of Nevada School of Medicine, Reno, NV, 89557. Our telephone is (775) 784-4068. The name GREASEWOOD TABLETTES © is derived from the greasewood plant or creosote bush, a plant that was used by Native Nevadans for medicinal purposes. It is still the subject of pharmacological research today.