
Dr. Selden A. McMeans, Nevada's Early Politician Doctor



Dr. Selden McMeans is known to Greasewood's editor because of his high profile in Nevada, where he lived until his death in Reno on July 31, 1876. The presence of the above painting of McMeans by S. A. McClellan in the Nevada Historical Society's collection was brought to our attention by a direct descendant, Walter McMeans of Sugar Land, Texas.

Selden Allen McMeans was an important civic-minded doctor who was present at the birth of Nevada, but he was also a rabble-rouser for the South during the war between the states. He was born in July 1806 near Knoxville, Tennessee, and later moved to Greenville, South Carolina, where he married and began his career in medicine. When the war with Mexico began in 1846, Dr. McMeans left his plantation to volunteer for military service. In July 1849, he was in Mexico City, but he was planning to move to California. He ultimately settled in Sacramento, where he jumped into politics.

The Democratic State Convention elected McMeans one of twelve vice-presidents in 1852, and on January 1, 1854, he was installed as Treasurer of the newly formed State of California, a post

he held for two years. In November 1855, the State Council of the American Party in California, which supported the South's position on slavery, elected Dr. McMeans president.

In the fall of 1859, the cry for secession from the Union was growing, but the cry of Silver in the Nevada Territory was louder, and McMeans moved to Virginia City. Here, he and a friend from California, Judge David Terry, organized support for the Confederacy by forming the Knights of the Golden Circle in John Newman's house, the first "permanent" structure in Virginia City.

Besides being a politician and maybe a part-time miner, McMeans practiced medicine. Drs. McMeans and Edmund Gardner Bryant (cousin of poet William Cullen Bryant and married to Mary Louise, who later married mining mogul John Mackay) treated most of the miners in town for drinking water contaminated with "arsenic," etc. Julia Bulette, a well-known Virginia City prostitute, is also alleged to have cared for the miners, but there is no historical evidence to verify this.

April 12, 1861, brought news of the South firing on Fort Sumter, its surrender, and the secession of South Carolina. McMeans sprang to action for the South and announced his plans to capture Fort Churchill and claim the territory for Jefferson Davis. The Confederate flag was raised over Newman's saloon, and Dr. McMeans organized 200 members of the Knights of the Golden Circle to defend the building. With the news of a detachment of soldiers from Fort Churchill being sent to Virginia City, Dr. McMeans and his supporters evaporated. During the

Civil War, McMeans organized the Democratic Party in Nevada and was its first chairman.

After the war, Dr. McMeans continued his political activities, and on June 22, 1872, he organized the Pacific Coast Pioneers at Virginia City. To be eligible one had to be male or a direct male descendent of a resident in one of the Pacific Coast States on January 1, 1851. The Society acquired a building and had 400 members. Dr. E. B. Harris, who is discussed in this edition of *Greasewood*, was president of the Society in 1881.

Dr. Sheldon McMeans eventually relocated his practice in Reno. He died at the age of 70 in his Reno office on July 31, 1876.

Sources: Sonoma County Historical Society's *The McMeans Family* by Connor; *The Saga of the Comstock Lode* by Lyman; and Thompson and West's *History of Nevada*.

JACK C. GILBERT, M.D.

Twenty-six Years of Devoted Service in Surprise Valley

Continued

Dr. Gilbert's first office in Cedarville was located in the hospital (Modoc Medical Center) and he practiced there until 1958. Then he moved to an office in the old Cressler-Bonner Building on Main Street. An x-ray unit was installed so that his patients could have both lab and x-ray facilities.

Dr. Gilbert was "on call" for twenty-six Modoc County Fairs. The first one was August 1955, and on one day, there was an automobile accident with serious multiple injuries and another patient with a cervical fracture.

He turned no one away

This initiated him into the work pattern that he would follow for the next twenty-five years.

September 1, 1968, ten years after the death of his first wife, he married Patricia Dagsen. Each of them had three children, so they had the formidable task of raising six teenagers.

Recognizing the need for more office space, Dr. Gilbert's employees started a building fund in 1971, which was augmented by numerous personal as well as business donations and became the nucleus of what was later to become the Surprise Valley Medical Building Fund. Work was started on the building in 1974 and completed in June 1975. With the help of many volunteers on a weekend, the office equipment was moved into the new space and Dr. Gilbert opened for practice on the following Monday morning, July 1, 1975. Today this building, which has undergone various remodeling, is home of the busy Surprise Valley Medical Clinic.

Patients could always depend upon him. During the first ten years in Cedarville, Dr. Gilbert was only away for a brief period of two or three days when he had oral surgery in Redding. Until July 1980, he had been the only doctor in Cedarville. Many of his family outings or special occasions had to be cancelled because of an emergency.

Dr. Gilbert's habit of working at night became legend. He didn't mind working late, often until 2

a.m., as he turned no one away. His dedication came from a deep love of his work and the needs of his patients. Dr. Gilbert not only addressed the physical needs of his patients, but also took care of their mental and emotional well-being.

Many a youngster who left home for college or an older person leaving the area often called back home, sometimes collect or late at night, for reassurance from Dr. Gilbert.

When the original ten-bed Modoc Medical Center in Cedarville overflowed, the county planners approved twenty-two beds, which, at times, were still not enough. One reason for this was that the doctor's patients were not just from Modoc County; they were also from adjoining Washoe County, Nevada; Lake County, Oregon; and as far away as Winnemucca and northeastern Nevada. Besides being a very compassionate and caring individual, he was known as an exceptionally gifted diagnostician, and his advice was sought by patients and doctors, as well. If he couldn't fix the problem, he researched until he found someone who could and referred the patient to that physician.

Dr. Gilbert was always interested in the community, serving for many years as Modoc County's health physician. It was during this time in 1957 that the first pilot project for a Visiting Rural Nurse Program was initiated. This program was widely used throughout the county, including Indian reservations, and proved to be very successful. The program was recognized throughout the State of California and subsequent visiting nurse programs were patterned after it.

As part of his health physician duties, Dr. Gilbert held monthly immunization clinics in Newell, Adin, and Canby. He also developed a Civil Defense disaster plan, which was approved county-wide. Dr. Gilbert always gave freely of himself despite his busy work schedule. He provided school physical education exams free of charge, spoke at graduation ceremonies, gave Medic Alert memberships to graduating seniors, and didn't charge many needy patients for his services.

Dr. Gilbert delivered 1,014 babies, some of which were second generation, and treated as many as five generations of the same family.

He was honored by a Jack C. Gilbert, M.D. Appreciation Day, at which many of his patients and friends appeared to say, "Thank you." He was also honored in 1980 by being selected as Grand Marshal of the Modoc County Fair Parade.

Dr. Gilbert died of cancer on Christmas Day, 1980, at the young

age of sixty-one. He had died without knowing that he had been named the 1981 recipient of the prestigious Frederick K. M. Plessner Award. Dr. Gilbert knew that he was one of the three finalists, but did not live long enough to know that he was the recipient. The notification that he was a finalist for the award, from Brad Cohn, M.D., California Medical Association, read, "I am pleased to inform you that Doctor Jack C. Gilbert has been selected as one of the three finalists for consideration as the 1981 recipient of the Frederick K. M. Plessner Award. This award goes to a candidate that best exemplifies the practice and ethics of a rural country doctor." All his patients knew that.

Submitted and Edited by
Pat Barry, Fort Bidwell

Information from the *Modoc County Record*, 1/8/81

Dr. Elias B. Harris

Elias Braman Harris was born September 13, 1827, in Otsego County, New York. He attended Fairfield Academy and Geneva College where he studied medicine under Professor Frank Hamilton. In 1845, he enrolled in the two-year course in medicine at New York Medical University, one of the top medical schools in the country. After practicing in New York for two years, he eventually made his way to California by way of Panama and arrived in San Francisco in 1850.

He settled briefly in Calaveras

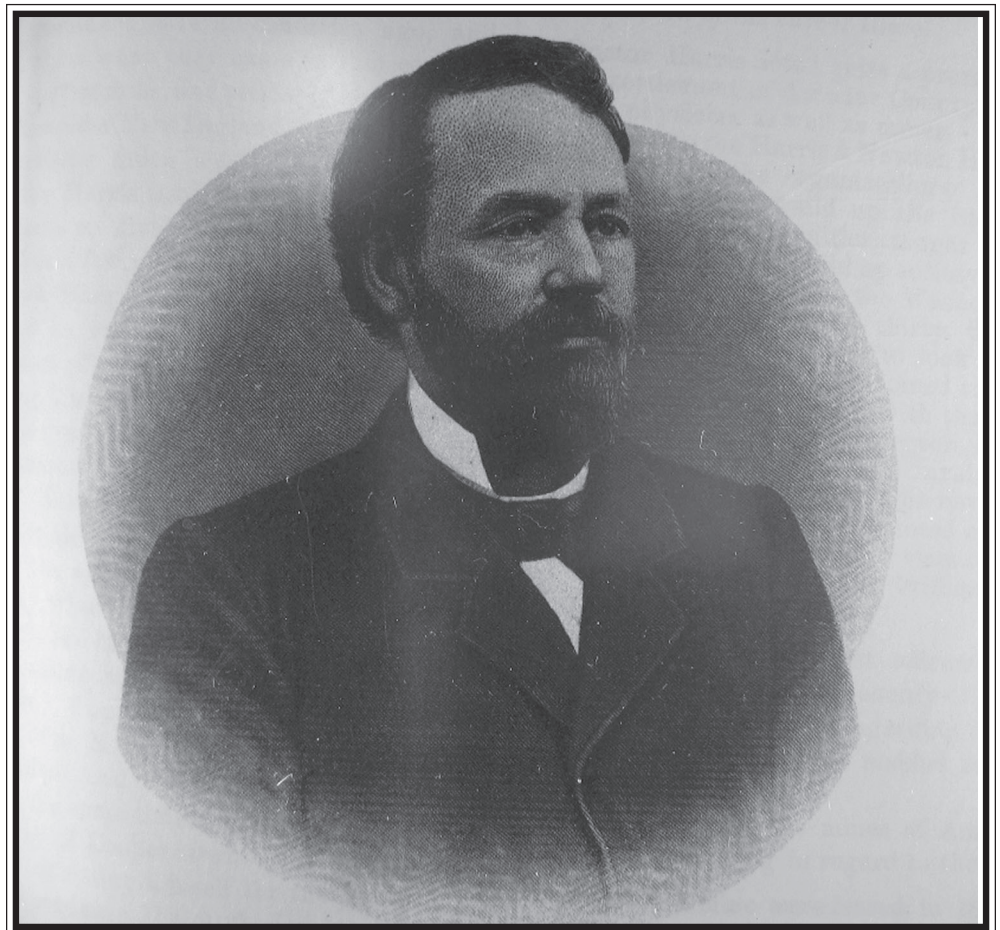
County, which is now known for its vineyards and Mark Twain's humorous story about jumping frogs. Disgusted with frontier justice and witnessing a lynching, he stayed only a few months before moving to Ione in Amador County. There, he became involved in politics, opened a hotel, and leased a mine, the Oneida Mill and Mine. Dr. Harris is credited with building the first Nevada Territory steam quartz mill in 1860.

When the Civil War broke out, he returned East and joined the Union Army as a surgeon with

the rank of Major. After the war, he married and returned to Virginia City where he practiced from 1875 until 1881. He also had a practice in Sacramento.

He died in San Francisco, California, on August 7, 1900.

Sources: Thompson and West's *History of Nevada* (photo); and Bancroft's *History of Nevada, 1540-1888*



**Right: Dr. Elias B. Harris
(1827-1900)**

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