
Alice Thompson, MD (1876-1960)

Reno's Blue Blood Pathologist and American Patriot

By Anton Sohn, M.D.

No physician in Reno's history had more blue blood than Alice Lillian Thompson, who is the granddaughter of Myron C. Lake of Lake's Crossing fame and the acknowledged founder of Reno. Alice was born January 4, 1876 on the Lake Ranch south of Reno. She attended the Normal School (Teachers College) of the University of Nevada graduating in 1897 and taught school for fourteen years before attending the Oakland School of Medicine. She transferred to the College of Physicians and Surgeons, an eclectic medical school, in San Francisco and graduated in 1914, specializing in pathology and laboratory technology. Dr. Thompson interned at the San Francisco City and County Hospital before leaving the Bay Area to become laboratory chief of Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital.

True to the American patriotic spirit, she joined the war effort during World War I and directed the laboratory at Base Hospital Unit No. 47 in Beaune, France.

After the war, Dr. Thompson returned to Nevada and became its first known female pathologist. She was licensed in Reno in 1920, and became director of Saint Mary's Hospital Laboratory and the State Hygienic Laboratory—now the Nevada State Public Health Laboratory. In 1934 Dr. Thompson became the first full-time pathologist at the Washoe County Hospital—now Renown Regional Medical Center—with a salary of two hundred dollars a month. That same year the Board of Trustees authorized the hospital to refer all of its laboratory tests to the State Hygienic Laboratory for fifty dollars a month because the hospital did not have funds to

start a laboratory.

During World War II Dr. Thompson was physician for the Reno School System. She also was physician for women at the University of Nevada for over twenty years. She died December



Alice Thompson, MD (1876-1960)

3, 1960 in a Reno rest home at the age of eighty-four.

Editor's Note:

1. Photo of Dr. Alice Thompson is courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.
2. Information for this article is from the *Reno Evening Gazette*, (December 3, 1960) "Dr. Alice Thompson Pioneer Doctor Dies." and Silas E. Ross, *A Directory of Nevada Medical Practitioners Past and Present* by Silas E. Ross, 1957.

3. At least two other pathologists are known to have practiced in Nevada before or at the time of Dr. Thompson's tenure:

Dr. Oscar Percy Johnstone was born in Missouri in 1871. He graduated from Rush Medical College in Chicago in 1905, and later that year was appointed professor of pathology at the Colorado School of Medicine in Boulder. He practiced in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, before being licensed in Reno in 1911. Johnstone was associated with the State Hygienic Laboratory as a pathologist and bacteriologist. He died in Reno of arteriosclerosis November 9, 1916. Dr. Mark F. Boyd graduated from the University of Iowa Medical College in 1911 and was licensed in Nevada in 1914 and noted to be a pathologist. (More about Dr. O.P. Johnstone in our next issue.)

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History of Dermatology in Reno

By Rod Sage, M.D.

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Initially most of the medical classes were held on the UNR campus and at the Veterans Hospital. The early focus was on

the preclinical sciences (anatomy, physiology, pharmacology and biochemistry). Introductory clinical courses were offered in surgery, medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, and psychiatry, and believe it or not in dermatology. Dr. Falk and I conducted a rather compact ten-day clinical review in conjunction with the student course in skin physiology. Years later after the students had matriculated elsewhere, we learned that in many cases our offerings were their only dermatological exposure in all of their training.

With the advent of our medical program and its expansion to four years, parallel changes were evident with the growth of Reno, Nevada, and the whole country. Reno exploded from being a lively small city to a boomtown big city. In fact, Nevada showed the greatest percentage state population increase in the United States during the late twentieth century. The new school helped to blunt the predicted shortage of medical practitioners.

For the two dermatologists who held the fort for so long (1958-71) changes were underway. A half dozen new skin specialists came to town in the 1970s—Doctors Standlee, McCarty, Billstein, Gardner, Rueckl, and Clemmensen. In the 1980s we welcomed Doctors Torok and Burdick. The 1990s saw more new faces, but in the current century the floodgates opened. By 2010 twenty-eight dermatologists are available to serve the 300,000 area residents and an equal number persons in contiguous and mainly rural Nevada and California counties. In keeping with the formation of group practice, Doctors Kiene and Blackhart in Reno now have an office with seven partners

and a modern new building. Dr. Clemmensen in Carson City has followed suit with a four-member group and a substantial building. In addition, several smaller coalitions have formed.

In the last ten years we have witnessed the coming and going of several itinerant skin doctors who rented space in rural communities such as Winnemucca, Fallon, Elko, and Yerington. For their monthly visits they would allegedly cram dozens of patients onto the schedule, charge what were said to be outrageous fees then scurry back to their home base in southern California. Their commitment to the local community and patients was almost nil. Fortunately, as more dermatologists have arrived, these services are now provided on a permanent basis from Reno and the days of the medical nomads have ended.

The American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) is the heart of our specialty, boasting 16,000 members at this time compared to 1,500 in the 1960s. The AAD sponsors its annual convention each spring in various cities with a premier teaching program and a notable attendance from abroad. This is the one national meeting, which its members feel obliged to attend.

In recent years all of medicine has benefited from the tremendous surge of research leading to the development of innovative treatment techniques. A broadly expensive therapeutic arsenal abetted by pharmaceutical contributions and development of creative instrumentation is part of this modernization. There are notable advancements in skin surgical methods such as Mohs Microsurgery to evaluate margins of skin tumors and laser surgery technology.

Corticosteroids are also evolving to offer more effective treatment methods. With the advent of the topical and systemic retinoids (Accutane et al) we have found a favorable treatment for the severe and disfiguring variants of acne, and certain other skin problems. New immune altering chemical agents related to Tumor Necrosis Factor (TNF) inhibitor type drugs nurture hope for eventual cure of some of the most difficult skin diseases. Antibacterial therapies are in a perpetual state of refinement, and we hope are keeping at least one jump ahead of the antibiotic resistant microorganisms. Also specific cosmetic modalities such as Botox are widely available.

At the latest count the Reno area has twenty-eight specialists (board certified or board eligible dermatologists). The increased number of specialists has led to the increased availability of many procedures, many being cosmetic in nature such as liposuction, scar removal of all kinds often related to acne, hair transplants, wrinkle ablation, and laser treatment of tattoos and birthmarks. This phenomenon is related to the increased competition amongst dermatologists and the marked demand for more cosmetic procedures, aided by an expansion of residency training programs. Of major significance is the fact that cosmetic surgery is usually payment in advance of service. Insurance coverage for these procedures is minimal, and the frequent hassles with carriers by both the doctor and the patient are eliminated.

An inspection of the practice of dermatology in Reno in the past fifty years reflects changes in American medicine in general. We have seen the numbers of dermatologists expanded 5-10 fold. We daily witness a broad range of advances in our ability to diagnose and treat skin problems. We note the availability of well-trained skin specialists now

serving full time in areas previously without such care. All in all, the outlook is excellent for dermatology and all of medicine to come to terms with the many significant problems that mankind faces in a changing world.

Numbing the Skin and its Contents on the Comstock

By Richard G. Pugh

Alfred Doten was a prolific recorder of life in Virginia City for over five decades. His diary not only captured the essence of a colorful era in early Nevada but also recorded helping doctors when they needed anesthesia for their patients.

In his three-volume diary of 2,300 pages Doten recorded his daily activities, freelance writing for the Territorial Enterprise newspaper, assistance in medical procedures, and activities of hardrock miners. His canine companion Keyzer accompanied him in his travels and adventures during the frenetic gold-rush period.

Doten was particularly adept at painting a picture of the daily successes and excesses of flamboyant miners that resulted in violence necessitating a physician and anesthesia. He helped and frequently was called by local physicians to assist in surgical procedures by administering the preferred anesthesia chloroform. Records from Doten's diary indicate that he was one of the first "lay anesthesiologists" in Nevada.

He recorded numerous

gunfights in Virginia City and related the various ways in which disputes were settled. He wrote about a man who was struck with a miner's pick after a violent argument and nearly died. Virginia City justice was swift in that case as the assaulting man was summarily struck with the same pick for punishment.

Then, there was a case in 1864 where one of the townspeople was seriously injured, not in a gunfight or mine injury, but while exercising in a local gymnasium. Doten assisted Dr. Frederick Hiller, a homeopathic physician, in setting the patient's leg. On another occasion, Doten was called to assist the doctor in treating a man who was injured when his gun exploded while rabbit shooting. Two middle fingers were amputated while Doten administered the chloroform, and afterwards he wrote, "The gun was over-loaded and had not been shot for three weeks."

Doten later joined Dr. Heller in amputating the "preputium" (prepuce) of a miner living in the nearby community of Dutch Flats. Infection of the foreskin was not uncommon in the nineteenth century and was treated by circumcision. On another day in September 1866 Doten and Keyser traveled to Summit Mill to assist Dr. C. C. Green in treating a head injury patient. The patient was "hit by a stone playfully thrown by a friend." Even though he was called to administer the anesthetic none was given. The man underwent surgery "suffering much pain, taking it like a major." but Doten received \$5 for being available. Life during the Comstock Lode era was often perilous never dull.

In addition to his medical duties, Doten participated in

many of the 'cultural' activities of Virginia City such as performances at Piper's Opera House. He once attended a lecture by Mark Twain. "It was one and a half hours long, but I heard it all and it was mighty good" he noted. When not recording the daily temperature and weather swings in Virginia City, assisting physician, recording the ins and outs of daily life, and tending to his mining interests, Doten enjoyed "drinking cocktails and cruising about town" with his friends, Keyzer and Dan DeQuille, editor of the *Territorial Enterprise*.

Editor's note:

The information in this article is taken from The Journals of Alfred Doten 1849-1903.

Also of interest is the fact that alcohol was frequently used for anesthesia. In 1874 Dr. George Kober, who was an US

Army surgeon at Fort McDermit on the Oregon and Nevada border, mentioned that he used two ounces of whiskey for anesthesia to amputate a soldier's finger. (One and a half ounces is the amount of liquid in a bartender's shot glass.)

More on Reno's University of Michigan Connection

By Robert Daugherty, M.D.

In our last issue Dr. Robert Daugherty paid tribute to Dr. Tappan's life as a Michigan trained surgeon who practiced for many years in Reno with Dr. Ken Mclean, Nevada's premier Michigan trained surgeon. He described the end of Dr. Tappan's career as the end of the Michigan legacy and asked if anyone knew of other Michigan trained surgeons in the state. Reno's Dr. Jerry Zebrack responded: "I enjoyed your article on the Nevada legacy. There was, however, a larger contingency from Michigan. Dr. Maclean recruited Dr. [Peter] Rowe

who was an internal medicine resident with him at Michigan, and in turn, Dr. [Steve] Phalen and Dr. David Thompson were recruited by Dr. Rowe and Dr. Tappan. The latter two were internal medicine residents at Michigan. Thus, there were five excellent physicians in Reno in the 1960s all from Michigan. The only one surviving at this time is Dr. David Thompson. I enjoyed my medical interaction with all of them very much. They were excellent. Please recognize them."

Editor's Note:

Dr. Peter Rowe graduated from Western Reserve Medical School in 1939 and was licensed in Nevada in November 1948.

Dr. J. Stephen Phalen graduated from the University of Minnesota Medical School in 1946 and was licensed in Nevada in May 1952.

Dr. David S. Thompson graduated from the University of Michigan Medical School in 1948 and became a Nevada licensed physician in June 1954.