

ANDREW TAYLOR STILL

(1828-1917)

An Introduction to:

A LIFE CHRONOLOGY OF THE FIRST OSTEOPATH

by Steve Paulus, DO

Andrew Taylor Still was the man who discovered Osteopathy and developed the principles and practices of this healing art into a distinctive system of health care. He was a character from a bygone era, a 19th century reformer, visionary, philosopher, and innovator. He was primarily a self-educated man with incredible talent and a diversity of interests that helped shape his personal and professional philosophies.

For those of us who utilize Osteopathic principles and practice on a daily basis with every patient, Dr. Still has become a well-loved yet distant mythological figure occupying an elevated place removed from the near proximity of our sensible understanding and full appreciation. For the “modern” Osteopathic physician, who practices exclusively allopathically oriented Osteopathic medicine, Still is not held in high esteem or honored with respect. Still has become, for them, only a historical figure with antiquated associations and fossilized ideas.

Why then must we study, and attach importance to the life of Still nearly 100 years after his death? The answer to this question is simple. Still may have died but his ideas and philosophy live on—they are timeless. Still once said, “I do not claim to be the author of this science of Osteopathy. No human hand framed its laws; I ask no greater honor than to have discovered it.”¹ He also said, “The mechanical principles on which Osteopathy is based are as old as the universe.”² By studying the fundamental principles he uncovered, we are learning the most basic natural laws of healing. There is a great resurgence of interest in the science and art of Osteopathy. Internationally, the Osteopathic profession is growing beyond the wildest dreams of our founder. People within and outside of Osteopathy are realizing that Still discovered an incredible system of healing that, until recently, was acknowledged by only a very small number of people.

Anyone who wants to explore the true depths of the philosophy of Osteopathy must, at some point, appreciate the life and times of Andrew Taylor Still—the First Osteopath. To comprehend Osteopathy, you must have a basic knowledge of the context from which this healing system developed. E. R. Booth, DO (who wrote the History of Osteopathy in 1905) said, “To fully

understand Dr. Still it is almost absolutely necessary to have a personal acquaintance with him. It is only by coming in close touch with him that his character becomes fully revealed.”³

One purpose of a written biography is to give the reader a personal sense of knowing a historical figure. I believe, that by studying the life of the First Osteopath we can come “in close touch with him,” and truly know his character--thus better understanding his teachings. Once his enigmatic qualities, eccentricities, and sentinel life events are revealed we can have our own personal appreciation and a resonating acquaintance—not with the historical Dr. Still—but with the human being known as Drew, Andrew, or the Old Doctor.

It is more fitting to call this biography a “Life Chronology.” I have listed sentinel events in the life of Andrew Taylor Still in an outline format following sequential linear occurrences. I have found in my study of Still’s life that many of the significant dates and focal points are historically recorded in a confusing and disordered manner. In my own attempt to understand the whole of Still’s life I have prepared an organized and accessible outline of his life history. As a biographer, I have arranged the Life Chronology with an orientation toward historical priorities and my insights. I have recorded his age at each important date to help you gain a feeling of what it might be like to be 8 years old traveling with his family by covered wagon 700 miles to a new home in a faraway place; or to be 36 years old having just come back from combat duty in the Civil War and have three of your children die within two weeks, including your first born son; or to be 46 years old and receive an inspiration that changes not only your life but the lives of millions to follow; or to be 64 years old and to open a new medical school at a time when most people are ending their careers in retirement.

I ask you to put yourself in the shoes of a 21 year old man who has been married for 6 months, his wife is pregnant with their first child and the 60 acres of corn he planted (the sole means of support and sustenance for his family) has just been decimated by a hail storm. I want you to appreciate what this man went through to develop what we take for granted, i.e. Osteopathy.

As a father of two boys, I also became fascinated with the number of children he had, and how many of them died. This man suffered many great tragedies in his life. Of his twelve children, six died before the age of twelve. What would I have done, at 46 years of age, if three of my children had died within two weeks due to spinal meningitis, and a fourth child died several weeks later from pneumonia? Would this event have inspired me to reform American medicine or would I have drowned in the depths of depression, inertial and broken?

A. T. Still was a free thinker with tremendous courage and vitality. It was through his tenacity, based upon wisdom and a trust in laws of nature that he found the motivation to publicly present Osteopathy in the face of overwhelming personal tragedy, professional opposition, and public humiliation. When Still openly presented to the public the principles and practice of what would later be known as Osteopathy, he was reviled by the local medical doctors, kicked out of the Methodist church accused of being the devil incarnate, called insane by his family, and

ostracized by his friends and community. We must be thankful for the potency of his valor and resolve. Remember, Still was advocating a novel approach to the health care of sick and injured people. In the conservative, puritanical, closed minded, and prudish era of the late 1800's Still directly faced opposition to touching as a method of healing. The opposition to using even a therapeutic form of touch was pervasive, not only in the rural Midwest, but throughout all of America. Only after years practicing with integrity and clear physical boundaries was he able to convince people, by his genuine actions and positive results, that Osteopathy worked.

I introduce to you, perhaps for the first time, Andrew Taylor Still. He was much more than the founder of Osteopathy. He was the son of a Methodist minister and frontier medical doctor. He was a farmer, expert hunter, medical doctor, inventor, machinist, state legislator, soldier, patriot, Civil War veteran, abolitionist, feminist, temperance supporter, Freemason, father, husband, and dedicated family man. This was a self-taught, highly motivated, and incredibly creative man. In a "modern" society that values educational degrees and titles over wisdom and experience perhaps the thought of a 19th century self-educated country doctor founding and guiding the Osteopathic profession is untenable. I suggest that our profession could only have been founded by an individual such as Andrew Taylor Still. This was a man with deep intuitive abilities and vast life experiences. He made mistakes, and learned from them. He suffered great tragedy and persevered. He triumphed, not out of sheer will, but due to his genuine respect and trust in the laws of nature.

Dr. Still once said, "I quote no authors but God and experience."⁴

I leave you with some of his experiences . . .

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¹ Still, A. T. *Autobiography of A. T. Still*, (1908; reprint, American Academy of Osteopathy, 1981), p 320

² Still, A. T. *Osteopathy Research and Practice*, (1910, reprint, Eastland Press, 1992), p xxii

³ Booth, E. R., *History of Osteopathy*, Press of Jennings and Graham, 1905, p 24

⁴ Still, A. T. *Philosophy and Mechanical Principles of Osteopathy*, (1902, reprint, Osteopathic Enterprises, 1986), p 9