



The Society's Founders



By Irma West, MD

ON ST. PATRICK'S DAY OF 1868, in the office of Gustavus L. Simmons, MD, at 46 J Street, 12 prominent physicians met to form a new Sacramento medical society. Three earlier medical societies had not survived — the Medico-Chirurgical Association (1850-1856), the Sacramento Medical Society (1855-1860), and the Sacramento County Pathological Society (1858-1863). These organizations had been active in promoting public health and ridding the community of medical charlatans and other unscientific and fraudulent practitioners.

However, they were unable to cope with internal strife, transient membership and the fires, floods, epidemics and other gold rush events that left the city in disarray during its first decade. By 1868, the western arm of the transcontinental railroad had reached the summit of the Sierra and Sacramento was showing signs of economic stability and growth.

Dr. Gustavus L. Simmons, a graduate of Harvard Medical School, was the guiding force of the new medical society, becoming its first secretary. He named the organization the *Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement*¹ after an organization in Boston.

Frederick Hatch, MD, from Virginia, served six terms as President and refused the seventh. He had outstanding talent as a diplomat and impeccable credentials as a community and medical leader. His stewardship led the society through contentious issues and is credited with its survival, making it the oldest continuously operating medical society in California.

A short constitution was adopted, which stated that the object of the Society was the promotion of medical science and good feeling among the members, who must be medical school graduates and adopt the *Code of Ethics* of the American Medical Association. Bimonthly meetings were held at homes or offices of members, where many original papers were presented

All 12 founding members are listed below. Notable by their absence were the most prominent of the earliest Sacramento physicians, Drs. John Morse and Thomas Logan. Both had moved to San Francisco by 1868. Dr. Logan did return to Sacramento later and joined the Society.



William Cluness, MD, 1835-1918

Dr. Cluness was one of 12 children of a farm family living near London, Ontario, Canada. From Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario, he received an AB degree in 1855, and both an MA and an MD in 1859. That year he moved to Petaluma, California, coming to Sacramento in 1863 and opening his office in the Morse Building at Second and K Streets. He enjoyed a prosperous practice for the next 30 years, specializing in obstetrics and gynecology.

Dr. Cluness was appointed to the Sacramento City Board of Health in 1867, 1883 and 1886, and to the State Board from 1880-1892. He was President of the California State Medical Society 1890-1891 and was on the staff of the *Sacramento Medical Times*, reporting regularly on public health matters, particularly sanitation and disease control. He was a member of the Committee to establish the Board of Medical Examiners.

One of his more interesting investments was 350 acres in Yolo County where he planted mulberry trees and built two large cocooneries for producing silk. After several years the project was abandoned. More profitable was his part in organizing the Pacific Life Insurance Company where he became Medical Director in 1889.

On leaving for retirement in San Francisco in 1893, the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement held a testimonial dinner for him at the Sutter Club where he received many tributes. He was described as a gentleman of the old school, pleasant, well-mannered, immaculate, and well-attired which made him an attractive figure wherever he went. It was said of him that he was one of nature's gentlemen: one of God's noblemen.

Dr. Cluness was the last survivor of the 12 founding members of the Sacramento Society. He left five children, including W. R. Cluness Jr., MD, who also practiced in Sacramento.



Joseph Frey, MD, 1818-1888

Dr. Frey came from New York City and graduated in medicine from New York University in 1841. He mined gold at Rattlesnake Bar on the American River in 1849 before moving to Sacramento to open his medical practice at Second and K Streets in 1856. In 1859 he shared an office with Dr. Harvey Harkness. From 1860 to 1862, he practiced with Dr. Samuel Thomas. Dr. Frey was President of the Sacramento Board of

Education in 1859.

Dr. Frey was the first member of the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement to present an original paper in 1869. It was entitled *What Connection Exists Between Diphtheria, Erysipelas and Scarlet Fever as Epidemics, Both as Regards the Causes of Disease, its Treatment and its Modification by Malaria?* The author suggested a close relationship among the causes of the three illnesses, which was so soundly ridiculed by the membership that Dr. Frey left the Society. He moved to Newcastle, established a 12-acre ranch, built an elegant home, and divided his time between a country practice and scientific farming. Notable were his flower garden and his prize-winning produce, particularly citrus.

Twenty years later, when infectious agents causing the diseases he wrote about were being discovered, it was apparent that Dr. Frey had been ahead of his time. He was a visionary and did not fit the mind-set of most of early medical pioneers. He was the first to report that deafness could follow continued use of quinine.

Dr. Frey was a bachelor. He is buried in Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery in the Pioneer Section where his monument is among the most elegant in the cemetery.



Harvey W. Harkness, MD, 1821-1901

Dr. Harkness was one of many physicians who came to California in 1849 seeking gold. Unlike most of his colleagues, he was successful. He mined and practiced medicine at Bidwell's Bar on the Feather River before moving his practice to Sacramento in 1850.

He was born in Pelham, Massachusetts, the youngest of seven children of a poor Scotch farming family. Five of his siblings died in their youth of tuberculosis. Dr. Harkness received his medical degree from Pittsfield College after serving an apprenticeship with Drs. Barrett and Thompson in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Among his patients and friends were Sacramento's notables, including railroad magnates

Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker, Collis Huntington, and Mark Hopkins. Dr. Harkness was a trustee for the grant by Governor Stanford to establish Leland Stanford Jr. University. He probably delivered Leland Stanford, Jr. Dr. Harkness took great interest in the transcontinental railroad and was present at the laying of the last rail at Promontory, Utah, May 10, 1869.

Dr. Harkness was a member of Sacramento's first Board of Health in 1868, and presented many original scientific papers before the Society. He was Sacramento's first microscopist.

Education, finance and fungi were of great interest to Dr. Harkness. He was President of the first Sacramento Board of Education in 1853, and the elementary school named for him still stands at 2147 54th Avenue. Because of astute investments in Sacramento commercial real estate, he was able to retire at age 48 and move to the Pacific Union Club in San Francisco where he devoted full time to the study of Pacific Coast Fungi. He became President of the California Academy of Sciences 1887-1896 which published his work in its bulletins. He prepared a catalog of 2000 genera and species of fungi with a colleague, J.P. Moore, which, along with his collection of 10,000 species, attracted attention throughout the world.

Dr. Harkness' cremated remains were buried in Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery after a funeral at the Odd Fellow's Cemetery in San Francisco. His wife, Amelia Griswald Harkness, preceded him in death in 1854, less than a year after their marriage. He never remarried. He was survived by a brother and nephew. His estate was estimated at \$150 million.



Frederick Winslow Hatch, MD, 1821-1888

Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's farm at Charlottesville, Virginia, was two miles down the road from Dr. Hatch's home. As a small child he could wave to General Lafayette, James Madison and other revolutionary figures on their way to see the former President. Dr. Hatch's father was an Episcopalian minister and served as Chaplain for the US Senate for 12 years.

Dr. Hatch was an outstanding scholar. At 19 years, he received a Masters degree in classic studies from Union College at Schenectady, New York, and in 1844, at 23 years, an MD from New York University. He practiced medicine in Beloit, Wisconsin, but hoping to improve his tuberculosis moved with his family in 1853 to Sacramento. On the way they were shipwrecked and rescued near Bolinas Bay, losing all their possessions. Undaunted, Dr. Hatch established his medical practice at 56 K Street.

Few Sacramento pioneers gave more time to public service than Dr. Hatch. He was elected Superintendent of Public Schools for the City and County of Sacramento and was a member of the Board of Education, serving from 1855 to well after 1860. He was the first President of the City Board of Health and served for 22 years. He was appointed by the Governor to the State Board of Health in 1876 and served as its Secretary until his death.

With Dr. Hatch at the helm for six terms, the Society for Medical Improvement survived to become the oldest continuously operating local medical society in California. He was also a Professor at the Medical Department of the University of California at San Francisco from 1880 to 1884. He maintained a practice as long as his health permitted.

Dr. Hatch was active in the Episcopalian Church. He died of tuberculosis and is buried in Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery. He left a wife and five children. Two of his sons became physicians.

G.H. Hoffman, MD

Of the 12 founding members of the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement, the

least is known about Dr. Hoffman. He practiced during 1854-1855 on Fourth Street between K and L Street. After May 1868, his name no longer appeared in minutes of the Society or in the census.

Joseph F. Montgomery, MD, 1812-1883

Dr. Montgomery held two medical degrees: one from the Medical College of Virginia in 1832 at 21 years, and the other from the Philadelphia Medical School in 1834. He came from Virginia, moving to Mississippi where he practiced in Jackson from 1836 to 1842. Little is known of his earlier years or his whereabouts before coming to Sacramento in 1849 where he was soon testing his skills during the devastating cholera epidemic of 1850.

An outstanding leader in medical and civic affairs, Dr. Montgomery was a founding member of all four of Sacramento's earliest medical organizations. It was at a meeting of the last one, the SSMI, in 1871 that he delivered his memorable presidential essay on *Ethics of the Medical Profession*, a subject he promoted at every opportunity.

In 1853 Dr. Montgomery was City Physician and became resident physician at the County Hospital from 1856 to 1861. He was appointed to the City Board of Health in 1862, 1868 and 1882, to the State Board of Health in 1870 and to the State Board of Medical Examiners in 1876. He was elected as a city school trustee in 1869 and again in 1874.

Although he gave firm and progressive leadership in medical and public health matters and was active in the Episcopalian church, Dr. Montgomery left little information about himself. He was a bachelor described as very modest and reserved. He left no portraits of himself. Even his grave marker in the Old Masonic Section of Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery is inconspicuous compared to most of his medical contemporaries.



Henry L. Nichols, MD, 1823-1915

Dr. Nichols came by ship through Panama from Augusta, Maine, to Sacramento in 1853 to join his uncle, Allen Lambard, who owned the Sacramento Iron Works and the Lambard Flour Mill. Dr. Nichols' father, an attorney, had been Maine's Secretary of State. In 1845 Dr. Nichols graduated from Maine Medical School, Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, after which he completed post graduate studies at Philadelphia Medical College. His Sacramento office was at Second and I Streets.

Few physicians were as active in community service and in politics as Dr. Nichols. He was a conservative Democrat and brought his party to prominence; he was elected to the Board of Supervisors and served as mayor of Sacramento in 1858. He was Secretary of State for California in 1867-71 when the State Capitol building was completed. He climbed to the top of the dome to place the golden ball into position. While in this office, the location was selected for the University of California at Berkeley. He held other public offices too numerous to mention, including State Prison Director, Director of the State Library, City Health Officer, Emergency Hospital Surgeon, Secretary of the State Board of Health and Secretary of the Sacramento Board of Health. Sanitation was his great concern. His essay "Water Supply of Sacramento" sparked the changes necessary for safe drinking water for Sacramento. His practice spanned 62 years.

Dr. Nichols was president of the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement in 1885. His daughter wrote about the dinner meetings of the Society held at the Nichols' home. She would help the servants serve an elegant New England dinner supervised by her mother, a celebrated cook.

Dr. Nichols was President of the Board of Trustees for the Unitarian Society of Sacramento 1868-1915 and is considered its founder.

Dr. Nichols is buried in Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery. He lived 91 years, the longest of the pioneer physicians of Sacramento.



Alexander B. Nixon, MD, 1820-1889

Three years after his graduation from Ohio Medical College in Cincinnati, Dr. Nixon traveled overland in 1849 from his home in Hamilton, Ohio, to Coloma, California, in search of gold. His medical practice in Sacramento began in 1852 after returning to Ohio to pick up his family. He was active in medical, civic, political and religious organizations, serving as Sacramento's state Senator from 1862-1863

Tall, impeccably dressed with a Prince Albert coat, tall hat and carrying a gold handled cane, Dr. Nixon could be seen in downtown Sacramento walking toward 13th and D Streets to the Central Pacific Railroad Hospital where he was chief surgeon from 1869 to 1885. His cane is on exhibit in the Medical History Museum of the Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society.

History was made by Dr. Nixon when he was President of the California State Medical Society in 1875. Five women physicians led by Euthanasia Meade, MD, applied for membership. The vote to admit them was a tie and Dr. Nixon cast the deciding vote to make them the first female members.

Dr. Nixon was President of the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement in 1875. He was State Commissioner of Lunacy for 22 years. During the Civil War, he was a United States examining physician for the Board of Enrollment. He was instrumental in popularizing the Republican Party in Sacramento, although in later years he supported the Prohibition Party and ran for mayor on that ticket. For many years he served on the Board of the Unitarian Society.

Dr. Nixon is buried in the Pioneer Section of Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery. He was survived by three sons, a daughter, and his second wife, Anne Wisewell, who in 1892 obtained her MD from Cooper Medical College (now Stanford School of Medicine) in San Francisco.



Ira E. Oatman, MD, 1819-1888

Gold lured Dr. Oatman to Sacramento in 1849. He returned to Illinois for his family in 1853 before establishing his Sacramento practice at 264 J Street. He was born in Indiana near New Albany and received his medical degree from Rush Medical College in Chicago before practicing there and in Dundee, Illinois.

Dr. Oatman was a charter member of the Sacramento Medical Society of 1856, serving as Vice President in 1857. He was active in the first California State Medical Society and was Vice President in 1858. He presented many essays before the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement on the then-popular miasma theory as a cause of disease. His practice was primarily obstetrics, gynecology and internal medicine. He was a member of the Gynecological Society of Boston and was appointed to the Section on Obstetrics of the Ninth International Congress.

After serving on the Sacramento Board of Health for six years, Drs. Oatman and Cluness were expelled in 1879 by the mayor and newly-elected board of trustees to make room for two homeopathic physicians. Mayor Taylor had been persuaded by Dr. George Dixon, a leader in the homeopathic movement, to open official medical positions to homeopaths. All remaining physicians on the Board resigned in furious indignation and were replaced by homeopathic physicians.

This "coup" lasted over a year before "regular" physicians regained all the appointments.

Dr. Oatman was State Commissioner of Insanity for five years, and served the military as assistant surgeon for the Fourth Infantry Regiment and as examining physician for

pensioners.

Dr. Oatman is buried in Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery. He was survived by three sons and a daughter. His portrait hung in the California Room of the State library for many years.



Gregory J. Phelan, MD, 1822-1902

Dr. Phelan was Sacramento's first ophthalmologist. He was born in New York and received his medical Degree in 1847 from the University Medical College of New York. He established his Sacramento practice in 1849 and was active in founding its early medical organizations: the Medico-Chirurgical Association of 1850, the Sacramento Medical Society of 1855, the State Medical Society in 1856 and 1870, and the

Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement in 1868.

He was physician for the Cholera Hospital in 1850, and County physician as well as Superintendent of the County Hospital from 1863-1870. He served on the Board of Education in 1858 and was Director of the Sacramento California Pioneers.

Dr. Phelan left Sacramento for Europe in 1870, returning briefly in 1876 before moving to San Francisco where he died, to be interred in Santa Clara. He was survived by three daughters and three sons; two of the sons were physicians.



Gustavus L. Simmons, MD, 1832-1910

Dr. Simmons was 17 when he left his home in Hingham, Massachusetts, in 1849. After a nine-month voyage around Cape Horn, he arrived in Sacramento to assist his brother-in-law, Dr. Henry May, at the Old Boston Drug store at 48 J Street. He worked as a pharmacist and "irregular" physician until 1854 when he boarded the steamer, Yankee Blade, for Boston. With 800 aboard the ship struck a reef and sunk off

Point Arguello. Dr. Simmons lost his possessions but was rescued. His books washed ashore and at least one was returned to him years later. He boarded another ship for Boston and in two years was the first from California to receive an MD from the Medical Department of Harvard University. On his return to Sacramento he began 50 years as a beloved family practitioner.

He made many contributions to the community, among them the Italian stone pine trees in Capitol Park. As a tree expert, he and Mr. B.B. Redding from the Park Commission traveled to Italy, selected the saplings and tended them on the long voyage home. They were planted around the park where Dr. Simmons could supervise their progress from his home across the street, where the State Library now stands.

Dr. Simmons made it possible for the Sisters of Mercy to start what is now Mercy Hospital. He sold his hospital, Ridge Home, to the Sisters at a bargain price, lent them the money to pay for it and refused the last payment. He also taught the sisters how to run a hospital.

Throughout his life Dr. Simmons was active in medical, educational and civic affairs. He was appointed to the City Board of Health in 1868 and served several terms. He was elected to the City Board of Education in 1858 and was its first secretary. He was state Commissioner of Lunacy for 20 years and served as Brigade Surgeon for the National Guard. He was President of the California State Medical Society 1894-95 and President of the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement 1878-79.

Dr. Simmons is buried in the Pioneer Section of Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery following the largest and most expensive funeral of the time. It cost \$595. He was survived by his wife and two sons, both graduates of Harvard Medical School.

**George G. Tyrrell, MD, 1831-1895**

Dr. Tyrrell was born in Dublin, Ireland, and received his medical education there at the Carmichael School of Medicine. He obtained additional diplomas from the Royal College of Surgeons in 1856 and from the Kings and Queens College of Physicians in 1859, including one in midwifery.

His career began as a physician for ships carrying immigrants to America. After a few voyages, he decided to remain in the United States, starting a practice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He moved to Grass Valley in 1861 and to Sacramento in 1868 where he practiced for 20 years.

Dr. Tyrrell was elected President of the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement in 1880. He was President of the California State Medical Society in 1881 after serving as Secretary. The Governor appointed him Surgeon General of California with the rank of Colonel.

In 1884, Dr. Tyrrell succeeded Dr. Hatch as the third Secretary of the State Board of Health. He pursued the Legislature aggressively to act on his proposals for sanitation programs, burial permits, vital statistics registration and small pox vaccination. When he was ignored, he used the press to castigate the Legislature and gain public support for his recommendations. As a result, he was not reappointed in 1891, but his proposals were eventually adopted.

Dr. Tyrrell was survived by three daughters and two sons who were physicians.

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1. Although the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement remains its official name, additional titles were adopted when neighboring societies joined. It became the Sacramento-El Dorado Medical Society in the mid-seventies and the Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society when the Yolo County Society joined in 2001.

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