



Early Medical Women



By Irma West, MD

THE FIRST GOLD RUSH immigrant woman to provide health care in Sacramento was hydrotherapist and midwife **Lavinia Waterhouse**. Born in Genoa, New York, in 1809, she became an orphan at age 14, leaving her to raise 9 younger siblings. During her marriage to Charles Waterhouse, she bore 13 children but only 3 survived childhood, including a daughter who later died during childbirth.

About 1850 the Waterhouses came overland to a ranch outside Sacramento. Shortly before her husband died in 1856, she built a house at 8th and I Street where she opened a boarding house and water cure facility offering steam baths and mineral waters. She was a busy midwife, delivering Margaret Crocker's daughter, Nellie, among others. Mrs. Waterhouse was better known for founding the Sacramento County Women's Suffrage Association and for her years of leadership in the state-wide suffrage movement. She was a poet and artist. Her writings and paintings carried the theme "Sleeping Giantess" through which she sought to awaken women as a political power. She retired to Pacific Grove where she died in 1890.

Jennie Hall was a Civil War nurse who moved to Sacramento and lived at 1218 4th St. She and her first husband came to Shiloh, Tennessee, just before the battle of April 6, 1862, and she found herself attending the wounded. She was evacuated to Keokuk, Iowa, and assigned to a U.S. General Hospital where she was a nurse/matron until her discharge. She died in 1903 and is buried in Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery.

Dr. L. J. (Jennie) Kellogg, a homeopathic physician, was Secretary for the Sacramento Board of Health in 1879-1880, during a short-lived coup when homeopathic physicians took over the Board. She was a key figure in the women's suffrage and temperance movements, serving as State Superintendent for Social Purity for the Women's Christian Temperance Union. She moved to Oakland and married a dentist.

The first two women with degrees from a recognized medical school came to Sacramento in 1884. **Mary Magill, MD**, (1855-1891) and **Elizabeth Ewing, MD**, (1839-1890) had much in common. They had been school teachers, they were married to physicians, they graduated from Women's Hospital Medical College of Chicago in 1884, and their medical careers were short.

Dr. Magill, born in Dubuque, Iowa, taught school before her marriage to Zachary Magill, MD. In 1885 she became the first woman physician member of the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement where she and the papers she presented at meetings were well received. Her first was "Thermal Fever." Others included "Cerebral Anemia" and "Cystitis in the Female." She contracted tuberculosis and died in a Napa sanitarium at age 36.

Dr. Ewing came from Pennsylvania but moved to Ohio where she trained as a teacher. In 1870 she married George Ewing, MD. Upon her graduation from medical school, the Ewings moved to Sacramento and set up a practice in surgery and gynecology. Dr. Elizabeth Ewing died in 1890 of a heart condition. She and her husband share a headstone in Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery.

Dr. Mary Chronmiller (1864-1920) was a popular homeopathic physician who practiced at 815 10th Street from 1891 to 1919 and was president of the local homeopathic group. She was active in the women's suffrage and temperance movements, but best known for her charitable and missionary activities on behalf of the Central Methodist church. Upon retirement she destroyed all records of accounts owed to her. She is buried in Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery.

Louise C. Heilbron, DO (1873-1933) was a member of a prominent pioneer family and the best known osteopath in the state. From time to time, she lived in the Heilbron mansion still standing at 8th and O streets. She was born in Sacramento, the oldest of 10 children, but moved to San Diego at age 15. She always wanted to be a doctor, but the death of her father when her youngest sibling was an infant caused her to stay close to home, so she opted to attend the California College of Osteopathy at Irvine (now U.C. School of Medicine at Irvine), graduating in 1900. Dr. Heilbron's first practice was in San Diego where she is credited with organizing the PTA and becoming a charter member of the San Diego Business and Professional Women. She moved to San Francisco just in time for the earthquake to demolish her office and home. Upon returning to Sacramento, she maintained a busy practice for over 20 years until her death following a ruptured appendix. She was co-founder of the Sacramento Soroptimist International and chair on public health matters for the California Osteopathic Association. She is buried in Sacramento's Historic City Cemetery.

The Sisters of Mercy, led by **Mother Mary Baptiste Russell**, came to Sacramento in 1857 to assist the poor and open a school. For years Sacramento physicians had been urging the sisters to open a hospital. They were willing but were not a medical order and lacked funds. Dr. Gustavus Simmons gave **Mother Superior M. Ligouri** an offer she could not refuse. In 1895 he sold the sisters his hospital, Ridge Home, for much less than its value and taught them how to run it. By 1897 the Sisters of Mercy were able to build a larger hospital at 23d and R Streets and established the first school of nursing in Sacramento. Louise Igo, RN, from San Francisco was the first instructor.

Miss Igo returned to San Francisco to receive her medical degree from the University of California School of Medicine in 1906. She came back to Sacramento to open her own hospital at 1525 L. Street. Dr. Igo married Mr. Flitcroft, a pharmacist, and they opened another hospital at 3014 M St. which closed in 1927. **Louise Igo Flitcroft, RN, MD**, also had a busy practice according to her son, Arthur, who accompanied his mother on house calls as a young child. He recalls holding the ether mask when his mother performed surgery for patients on their kitchen tables. At least one of the babies Dr. Igo delivered is now alive and well in Sacramento.

Other pioneer women health providers left little information about themselves on the public record.

- **Josephine Callahan, MD**, in 1902 was the first women in California to be elected President of a county medical society, the Sacramento Society for Medical Improvement (SSMI). For reasons unknown, she did not serve. She remained on the membership roster for several years.
- **Florence Power, MD**, appeared on the SSMI membership list in 1894.
- **Anne Wisewell Nixon, MD**, received her medical degree from Cooper Medical College (now Stanford) in 1892. She was the widow of Alexander Nixon, MD, prominent physician and surgeon for the Central Pacific Railroad Hospital in Sacramento.
- **Margaret Pepoon** was Sacramento's first women chiropodist.
- **Annie B. Wightman** provided medical electricity treatments.
- **Elizabeth Seavey, MD**, moved to Sacramento in 1910 to start a busy practice which lasted 35 years.

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4. Interview with Sara Faustman, relative of Dr. Louise Heilbron
5. Davis Winfield, Illustrated History of Sacramento County. 1890. p.90
6. Sacramento's Old City Cemetery records

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