



## **William W. Light: An Early Dentist, Chemist, Doctor**

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**



By Irma West, MD

DR. WILLIAM LIGHT was one of the first dentists to practice in Sacramento.<sup>1</sup> He was also a chemist and a physician. He served as surgeon for the Mexican Army which defeated Maximilian in the battle of Puebla of May 5, 1862. His adventures in gold mining would make a good movie.

Born in 1819 on a farm near Bethel, Ohio, William Light was a classmate and long-time friend of Ulysses S. Grant who lived nearby. At 18, he began to study medicine in Cincinnati while operating a chemical laboratory with his brother. Three years later, he studied dentistry in association with Dr. Leggett, the most prominent Cincinnati dentist of his time.

In 1849, he set out for California by way of Panama, where he joined a long line of gold seekers waiting for a ship to bring them to San Francisco. After several months, he and 361 passengers boarded the Humboldt, a barely seaworthy old whaling ship. For 102 days, passengers ate jerked beef and hardtack, and drank contaminated water from old whale oil barrels. Dr. Light spent most of his time taking care of the sick.

He proceeded to Sacramento and found employment at a local mint for \$50 a day. Soon he was lured into the gold fields, first at Weaverville and then at Shingle Springs; there he met a Spaniard who told of gold nuggets all over the ground at Dark Gulch, near Sonora. He and others arrived there to find they had fallen for the Dark Gulch Hoax, a storekeeper's ploy to sell goods to those flocking to the area.

Dr. Light returned to Sacramento in 1851 and entered a medical partnership with Drs. Ames and McKenzie at which time he prepared his popular Light's Cholera Remedy.<sup>2</sup> He married Mrs. C. M. Weber who was an artist, writer and botanist. Unfortunately, he and his wife lost all of their property in the fire of 1852. From 1852 to 1861, he returned to dentistry in partnership with Dr. Pearson.

In about 1860, he became interested in mining properties in Sonora, Mexico, where a relative owned a mine in which Dr. Light invested. He traveled to Mexico to appraise the mine and found it worthless, but the owners went ahead with development anyway. When it became apparent that Dr. Light was right, the investors decided to recover their losses by unloading the mine in San Francisco. They asked Dr. Light to prepare bogus assays which the good doctor refused.

The mine was eventually sold to unwary investors. Dr. Light's share was \$55,000. Unfortunately, the broker absconded with the money from the sale and fled to Germany.

While in Mexico, Dr. Light was caught up in the revolt against Maximilian and volunteered as surgeon for the Mexican Army. In gratitude, a soldier brought him a rock which Dr. Light determined to be rich in gold beyond his wildest dreams. A claim was filed in Sonora where the rock was found and the mine was called Dos Hermanos. Smelting equipment was installed, living quarters were erected and the doctor's brother

and nephew joined him in a very profitable operation.

There was one problem. The mine was in lawless territory with bandits and hostile Yaqui Indians.

One day a band of Yaqui Indians rode up to the mine cabin where Dr. Light and his nephew were sitting on the porch. They did not know Dr. Light's brother had been killed by the marauders while bathing in a nearby stream. Inside were two deserters from the American Army whom Dr. Light had befriended.

Before the doctor could reach his rifles just inside the door, he was seized from behind by the deserters and felt the sting of multiple bullets. His nephew was fatally wounded.

Dr. Light fought off the deserters, and managed to enter the cabin, seize a rifle, and kill them both. (The Mexican Army had done a good job teaching him how to shoot.) The Yaquis, who were in league with the deserters, set fire to the cabin. Dr. Light emerged, wiping blood from his eyes as he took aim at the Yaquis, killing five and sending the rest scattering. The cabin, with all of the mine valuables, burned to the ground. Despite many bullet wounds, the doctor recovered with the help of a hired Indian boy. He left the mine in the hands of local Mexicans and returned to Sacramento where he tried, unsuccessfully, to form a company to take over the mine.

Dr. Light spent the rest of his life practicing dentistry. He was noted for his charity for poor dental patients and for his skill as a story teller. He had pronounced views against alcohol and tobacco and was a free thinker.

He died in 1895 and is buried in the Pioneer Section of Sacramento's Old City Cemetery. His wife died while in Mexico.

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1. There were four dentists, including Dr. Light, in the 1850 Sacramento census. The others were Drs. J. Ball, D. C. Stocking and W. H. Thomas. Dr. Light arrived in 1849. But which dentist came first is unknown.
2. The owner of such medications usually kept the contents a secret. If the trade name was registered with the US Patent Office, the original ingredients might be listed, though the owner of the patent could change them at will because it was the name not the formula that was registered. The patent in patent medicine has nothing to do with the US Patent Office. It comes from the practice of English royalty of granting a patent to products they used and liked. It was their equivalent of a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval and was highly prized.

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