

The Beginnings Of The Sacramento- El Dorado Medical Society

On St. Patrick's Day, 1868, in the office of Gustavus L. Simmons, MD, at 46 J Street, 12 physicians met to form yet another medical society. They came from several past medical organizations that had fallen by the wayside, victims of internal dissension and adverse civic circumstances. The number of physicians had gone from about 90 at the peak of the Gold Rush to 23 in 1868. The fires, floods and epidemics of the 1850s left the city in disarray for some time and, although the medical organizations were adamant about ridding the community of medical charlatans and unscientific practitioners, there were irreconcilable differences among them on where or how to draw the line.

In 1868, Sacramento was beginning to show signs of economic and community stability. Later that year, the western arm of the Transcontinental Railroad reached the summit of the Sierra Nevadas.

Dr. 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" after an organization in Boston. Frederick Hatch, MD, served six terms as president and refused the seventh. He possessed outstanding talent as a diplomat and had impeccable credentials as a community and medical leader. It was Dr. Hatch's stewardship that led the new medical society through contentious issues and is credited with its survival, making it the oldest continuously operating medical society in California.*

According to its constitution, the objectives were to promote medical

science and foster a good feeling among the members who were graduates of recognized medical schools and had agreed to follow the AMA's Code of Ethics.

Meetings were twice a month, often at a member's home, and each time an original paper was presented. Joseph M. Frey, MD, gave the first paper and life was never quite the same for him again. He contended there was a connection between epidemics of scarlet fever, erysipelas and diphtheria and that the only treatment was to support the powers of life in the patient until nature had time to eliminate the poison from the system. His theory was

vigorously assailed by the membership to the point where Dr. Frey resigned and semi-retired to his farm. (So much for promoting good feelings and medical science!)

On a more pleasant note, meetings at private homes did foster good feelings, particularly when members were treated to a New England dinner at Dr. Nichols' elegant home. There were marriages between children of the founders, including the daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Henry Nichols and the son of Dr. and Mrs. Ira Oatman.

The other founding members were William R. Cluness, MD; Harvey W. Harkness, MD; G. H. Hoffman, MD; Alexander B. Nixon, MD; Gregory J. Phelan, MD; Joseph F. Montgomery, MD; and George G. Tyrrell, MD.

Eight of these charter members are buried in Sacramento's Old City Cemetery and short biographies are included in a self-directed tour booklet published by this Society's Historical Committee. *Men, Memories and Medicine*, written by J. Roy Jones, MD, and published by SEDMS, includes more detailed biographies of most of the founding members, as well as additional information about the history of this Society.

* San Francisco Medical Society claims to be the first, but J. Roy Jones held Sacramento was first.



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