

ISCHUA VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE EARLY MEDICAL PROFESSION: From the Annals of Southwestern New York 1940

Southwestern New York was among the last regions of the state to be settled. Sometimes the incoming groups were of sufficient to create hamlets and men of the professions found fairly centralized demands for their services. It seems that the physician and lawyer were first, both in arriving on the scene of development and in community leadership. It is also true that the first doctors were usually jacks of all trades, but valuable accessions to the town population and they were gladly received.

Early clergymen trained by studying the Bible. Lawyers read law under someone in that profession. The doctor might be one who, after a few months schooling under the tutorship of some busy physician, acquired a "pill bag" and felt ready to perform miracles under the most difficult conditions, or at least make a living.

Early physicians found competitors in "quacks" and Indian medicine men. The medicine man relied largely on herbs native to the country and accumulated an extensive knowledge of their use. He also practiced spiritual rites, rubbing, fasting and even primitive surgery such as bone setting and making small incisions in the skin. Midwives were used by many and since the importance of sanitation was unknown at the time, toxins in the blood, tetanus and convulsions claimed the lives of many pregnant women and their babies.

The life of the pioneer physician was a difficult one. Rheumatism, malaria, smallpox, child birth, gunshot, axe and other injuries and pains demanded most of his attention. Tuberculosis and appendicitis would result in death. The smallpox vaccine was discovered in 1798, but little use was made of it until years later.

Anesthetics were not used in surgery until well into the 1850s. If an operation had to be performed, the neighbors held the victim while the doctor worked, although there were medical books published as late as 1844 giving methods of tying down a patient when an arm or leg was to be amputated. Aloes, rhubarb, tartaremetic, Peruvian bark concoctions and calomel were the early doctor's "material medica." It was good practice to salivate the patient if bleeding or purging had not killed or cured the patient. One of the old pioneers wrote that "any farmer boy who was too lazy to plow corn might procure a horse, a pair of saddle bags, a lancet and a few dollars worth of drugs and hang out a shingle proclaiming himself a doctor, a begin the practice of medicine."

The first medical associations formed in Southwestern New York did not attempt to state the qualifications of a doctor member, but later an organization did adopt a code of ethics, which recommended "total abstinence from ardent spirits by physicians, except at leisure."

Despite his lack of technical training, the pioneer physician performed miracles at times and made discoveries that proved of value to his profession and to mankind at large. Of even greater service the old-time doctor was the forerunner of the family physician who was often and family counselor, the community information bureau and sometimes the social, religious and political leader of the town. He often was the only citizen who was a regular reader of newspapers, or who owned any semblance of a library. To a considerable degree, he molded public opinion and determined the future welfare of his town. He was one of the ready men, forced to meet professional emergencies, sorely unprepared and under-equipped when viewed in the light of later days.

Submitted by: William Watkins, Machias Deputy Town Historian