

Corydon Palmer

The Unique Dental Society



A Historical Perspective....

by Toni A.M.

On March 10, 1913 the Youngstown Dental Society called a meeting of all the Dentists of Columbiana, Trumbull and Mahoning Counties to organize a component of the Ohio State Dental Society.

There was little question as to the choice of a name for the new society. The only question was, Would Dr. Palmer consent to the use of his name? Dr. Palmer had been known as a "foe of organized dentistry." However, when visited by a committee asking permission for the use of his name they "found this not to be the case. Dr. Palmer was, rather, a foe of some of the organizers of dentistry and this was vastly different." The Ohio Dental Journal 1964 stated further, "He had a high respect for his co-workers in the profession but had no use for the political fringe." Consent was granted!

The Corydon Palmer Dental Society formed March 10, 1913 was named in honor of one of the leading pioneers in dentistry, Dr. Corydon Spencer Palmer.

Corydon Palmer is unique in being the only dental society named for a highly inventive forerunner of dentistry.

After reading much of the history of the man, Dr. Palmer, I am sure it must give its members a fraternal feeling of pride and honor to carry this distinguished name.

Corydon Spencer Palmer was born in Vernon, Ohio on January 12, 1820. His boyhood was spent in Vernon, where he attended school. In 1836 at sixteen years of age, he became an apprentice to a silversmith in Warren, Ohio. During the four years he worked as a silversmith's apprentice, he also studied dentistry. Picking up as much knowledge as he could (the only way to learn in those days) from other dentists. One especially mentioned in this early training was Dr. E.E. Smith of Philadelphia.

In 1839 he opened his first office in Warren; the city he always loved and would inevitably return to.

From this preceptorship background, he became the foremost inventor of dental instruments, a member of the board of trustees and a teacher of operative dentistry in the Ohio College of Dental Surgery, which conferred upon him the honorary degree of D.D.S. (This is a little humorous to me, you might say he wrote the book). He was a member of the Ohio State Dental Society, the Mississippi Valley Association of Dental Surgeons, the American Dental Association and an honorary member of many other societies.

Dr. David W. Liddle (himself an interesting study) gave me a collection of information that he and Dr. Charles White assembled, along with a copy of the Ohio Dental Journal of June, 1964 which contained a history of the Corydon Palmer Dental Society and an article about Dr. Palmer entitled, "Dr. Corydon Palmer - 'Eccentric Genius'."

Dr. Liddle in a letter to the Society's secretary wrote, "We have one dentist in Warren who knew Dr. Palmer personally, Dr. Paul Fisher. When a young boy he delivered papers to Dr. Palmer and then got to know him in the later days of his life."

Dr. Palmer traveled to New York in 1843 intent upon becoming an engraver, but instead he decided to join Dr. John Burdell in the practice of dentistry. He later joined Dr. Samuel White as an advisory expert in the manufacture of steel instruments. He invented the first complete set of instruments for the manipulation of cohesive gold foil. Dr. Liddle mentioned that Dr. Palmer was known as an artist and he had once seen a beautiful set of carved silver instruments which filled a large case, made by him and owned by another doctor.

The following are interesting excerpts from a letter written by Dr. Liddle about Dr. Palmer:

"About January, 1925 when I first came to Warren, Dr. Charles White and I visited Dr. Corydon Palmer's home on Washington Avenue, Warren, Ohio. His office was in the large back yard. It was a nice looking three-room building with reception room, operatory and laboratory. We found everything almost as he had left it when he died in 1917. Dental chair was

maroon velvet and most all of the instruments were handmade. In his laboratory he had a forge like blacksmiths use. He made it himself, and it being so heavy, he had the foundation starting from the basement floor. The handmade bellows would pump up air pressure to intensify the heat. He designed and made the SS White Co. set of gold foil pluggers, which are still sold all over the world, also many operative and extracting instruments used in his day. If he did not have the proper instrument at hand, he would often leave the patient sit until he made one. Once after a period of waiting the patient heard a shot from the laboratory. Dr. Palmer announced he had just shot a rat in the back yard.

"I guess you have the story that he malleted a string of gold beads for a relative using pure gold foil." A jeweler examined these beads and said they were an expert work of art. Dr. Liddle continued, "Also, there is a story that he made the tombstone for his wife's grave out of solid rock and chiselled the inscription."

Dr. Palmer was strongly opposed to the unnecessary extracting of teeth. He was an advocate of filling teeth. He was also a pioneer in the use of tin foil for inexpensive fillings, using carbolic acid and Guller's cement in preparation for the filling. Once he stated, "...cohesive gold stands at the head of a filling material. Tin foil stands next in value."

Dr. Palmer was known as one of the most skilled dentists in the nation. After his return to Warren, patients came from as far as New York by rail for an appointment with him. The most prominent of these were the Vanderbilts who would travel to Warren, Ohio in their special car on the Erie railroad just to have their teeth cared for by Dr. Palmer. They sent a special car to carry Dr. Palmer and his equipment to New York when they were unable to make the trip.

The following incident appeared in the June, 1964 Ohio Dental Journal:

"One of Warren's early distinguished doctors was once at a summer resort and a lady whom he had not met for 40 years came up and spoke to him. 'I know you are Dr....of Warren. I would recognize you anywhere by your beautiful teeth.' 'They are good teeth,' answered the physician, 'but strictly speaking, they are Dr. Palmer's and not mine—he made them.'"

His reason for returning to Warren from New York early in his practice was humorously given in the Journal—"A patient for whom he was inserting a large gold filling kept looking at his watch and appeared to be 'timing' the dentist. So incensed was Dr. Palmer by this that he decided to return to Warren, saying, 'No man can snap his watch on me. I shall go back to Ohio where I can take all the time I want on a patient and not be watched.'"

As for the time that should be spent with one patient—In a discussion with fellow dentists at an American Dental Association meeting he stated, "We need to understand what our patients can bear, and should be careful not to overtax their nervous force. I divide up my operations and scarcely ever work over two hours at a time on one patient. One thing we ought to understand, we must gain the confidence of our patients and be in mental harmony and sympathy with them, then it is that our work is made comparatively easy."

As with most geniuses, Dr. Palmer's patience was short with persons who wasted his time. Once a young man failed to keep an appointment set for a certain day at a certain time. Accompanied by his mother, the young man arrived at Dr. Palmer's the next Saturday. He was told to climb in the chair and open his mouth. Dr. Palmer then said, "You disappointed me last Saturday, now I should disappoint you. You can go home and wait till I send for you." The Ohio Dental Journal said the lad was probably pleased with the "parole" rather than disappointed.

Dr. Palmer was described by a colleague as "the best filler of teeth in the world."

His firsts in dentistry were many. He invented special clamps used in applying the rubber dam in difficult cases. He taught his own method of putting crowns upon roots and building up contours.

When asked about bridge work, he said, "You got me on something I wish I had never heard of," as he had seen "bridge work drag out teeth" too many times.

In his letters Dr. Liddle related a couple more stories about Dr. Palmer—

"On one of his trips to Cleveland he bought what he thought was a very nice room full of furniture. It did not please his wife, so he took it out in the back yard and burned it up." Dr. Liddle said, "It's smart to take the wife on shopping trips." He continued, "When the vulcanization of rubber was first patented back in the civil war days Dr. Palmer bought one of the first complete outfits—vulcanizer, press, flasks, clampsets. When he found out that he was paying a royalty for the process and rubber, he loaded the entire outfit into a wheelbarrow and dumped it in the Mahoning River. He did not believe in royalties for health services."

Dr. Liddle closed by mentioning another first of Dr. Palmer's, on January 1, 1974—"Dr. Ralph Phillips in his lecture last Thursday mentioned the use of carbolic acid on a plectet of cotton to soothe a sensitive cavity before filling. On page 96 our history of June, 1873 (100 years ago) mentions that Dr. Palmer used carbolic acid before putting in fillings."

The Corydon Palmer Dental Society in 1913, elected Dental inspectors to care for the schools. Later a committee was appointed to look after the charity work at the hospitals.

Also, in 1913 a resolution was passed for the care of "Indigent Patients" free of charge, distributing these as equally as possible among all members. Through the years the Corydon Palmer dentists were kept up to date on the newest scientific advances in dentistry. From two meetings a year the program was expanded to the present eight meetings a year in the interest of better dentistry.

Dr. Palmer was highly respected and admired by his colleagues for his dedication, inventiveness, artistic ability, genius and his extreme modesty. His love for fellow humans was amply returned. He was also known to be an ardent abolitionist.

In 1914 Dr. Palmer was compelled to give up the practice of dentistry and went to live with his son, Dr. Delos Palmer in New York. After 97 full productive years he died on February 17, 1917. He was returned to Warren where it had always been his wish to finally rest and was buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

The unique Dental Society continues to work to keep the standards and brings honor to the name it bears, Corydon Palmer.