

Pioneer Medicine of Orange County

The very name pioneer suggests energy, courage, determination, hardships and adventure. From the coming of Fremont, yes, from the coming of Junipero Serra until the vigilantes cleaned up the State in the Fifties, California was a "no man's land." Danger lurked on every hill and in every valley and there was no room for weaklings.

With the discovery of gold they came rushing in from all parts of the earth; from the North and from the South, from the Orient and Occident; all creeds and tongues; the best and the worst.

All of them were not attracted by the glitter of gold. Some were drawn by the spirit of adventure that ever lures men into dangerous places. Not a few there were who sought a haven where unpleasant questions were not asked about the past life of a neighbor, and later toward the end of the period, especially to the southern part of the State, came the health seekers hoping that the clear skies and the soft breezes from the Pacific would stay the ravages of tuberculosis. Among the latter were highly educated men and women who did much to soften the rougher elements that had preceded them.

As with the other pioneers so with the physicians; many of them were adventurers, only a few were gold seekers; a small number came for their health and now and then was there one with a past. But the astonishing fact is that the most of them were well educated men, even those who came in the very earliest days. Harvard, Yale, Jefferson, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, The Royal Colleges of the United Kingdom and other well known schools were represented. Not a few of these men had academic degrees as well as medical diplomas.

During the Fifties, Sixties and early Seventies the physicians came one by one—by the overland wagon train, by the Isthmus or 'round the Horn, but when the great trans-continental railroads dug their ways over the plains and the mountains, they arrived in greater numbers, so that more than three score had settled in the lower Santa Ana Valley by 1889. Some of these, of course, were "ships that passed in the night," others had died, so only about twenty-five or thirty remained when the Orange County Medical Society was formed. Of that number, after thirty-seven years, only two are now living in the district, Dr. Boyd and the writer. There are, perhaps, three or four others elsewhere.

Among the pioneers were quite a few excellent surgeons, some of them men who had served in the Mexican and Civil Wars. They were men of ability and resource. Without the aid of hospitals and white linen nurses, poorly equipped with instruments, on the kitchen table they operated the strangulated hernia, amputated legs and arms, trephined the skull, resected bones, straightened club feet, corrected hair lips, and the like. They even invaded the abdomen, suturing gunshot and knife wounds of the intestines. At least one Caesarean was performed in the early Eighties. Diphtheria was often prevalent and they were compelled again and again to slit the windpipe and insert the silver tube. These pioneer doctors were splendid bone setters (I only recall one case of nonunion). Often they had no splints other than shingles or boards fashioned with a jack-knife. In Santa Ana two of the doctors, Lacy and Medlock, procured a full set of Day splints. These were passed around and often used as patterns by the other surgeons.

In obstetrics, too, these pioneers were able and successful. They knew their forceps well and they knew how to manage every complication of labor. Usually they worked alone, often without anaesthetics—if at night, with only the light of tallow candles or kerosene lamps—fighting eclampsia, placenta previa, post-partem hemorrhages, faulty positions and lacerations, yet saving the mothers and the babes. Of course, occasionally there was a death, most often from sepsis, but who may wonder when we recall the unsanitary surroundings.

The earliest of the pioneer doctors depended on horses and saddlebags to assist them in their work. But the saddlebags soon gave way to the light spring wagon and the top buggy, and it was usually the one horse vehicle that was used. The buck-board of the Middle West was never popular here.

The greatest hardships that beset the pioneer physician were the roads, the river and creeks, the fogs, the rain, the cold and the fleas. The roads were mere trails, winding through the mustard and the willows, dusty in the summer and muddy in the winter; difficult to travel in the daylight and a hopeless labyrinth in the dense fog of the night. The adobe mud loaded the buggy wheels and clung to the horses' feet, until the poor nags could barely make three miles an hour. Danger lurked in every ford of the creeks and the river, and people were occasionally drowned. The doctors were often marooned and they had many thrilling and hairbreadth escapes. Not until 1877 was the Santa Ana bridged—the old Southern Pacific bridge at West Orange. The second bridge to span the Santa Ana, the Fifth Street, was built in 1889. The main Street bridge across the Santiago was constructed in 1885. These bridges lessened the doctor's trials immensely. This statement may surprise many who are unaware of the fact that in preirrigation days water usually flowed in these streams throughout the year.

The pioneer farm houses were little more than shacks, often entirely destitute of comforts, where the doctor would shiver with the cold through the long night, awaiting the advent of the stork. And the fleas! There were swarms of them, every flea hungry and energetic, thoroughly tired of dog, horse and babies, and eager to sample the doctor. Adobe itch was heavenly compared to them.

The pioneer doctors did not brew their own medicine, for drug stores followed them at once in Anaheim, Orange and Santa Ana. (Incidentally, Dr. Heyermann, of whom more will be said later, was a druggist.) These doctors did not indulge in home brew, for wineries were numerous, and there was a brewery also to supply their demands. Tradition says that they improved their opportunities. It was the proud boast of one of Anaheim's most prominent pioneer physicians that he had "drunk whiskey enough in his day to fill full all the irrigation ditches in Anaheim." His friends said that he never went to bed sober.

Among the diseases of the pioneer period a few should be noticed: Typhoid fever was endemic and was responsible for many deaths. It was caused by the drinking water. Many of the ranchers depended upon cistern water for their domestic use and the cisterns were filled from the open irrigation ditches; others were supplied by surface wells contaminated with organic matter. With the advent of the deep wells typhoid rapidly diminished.

Diphtheria was deadly. How the Klebs bacilli found their way into the most remote canyons and isolated ranch houses is a mystery, but they did. In one Westminster family seven out of nine children died within ten days. It was more dreaded than smallpox until antitoxin came. In fact, we had no serious epidemic of variola, for the pioneers believed in vaccination. In 1862-1863 there was a malignant outbreak of the disease among the Indians and Mexicans in Capistrano, two hundred or more dying in a few months.

Wherever a horse is found, tetanus is almost sure to appear. The pioneers had many horses and there was a very appreciable amount of tetanus, almost invariably fatal.

In 1887 a few cases of trichinosis were noticed. About the same time a prominent veterinarian died of anthrax. Neither disease was ever prevalent.

Snake bites were not uncommon. The Gospel Swamp, Fountain Valley district, was literally alive with rattlers, but now scarcely a snake may be found there. Like the fleas, they have disappeared.

Old Timer! You had your faults and they were serious (mostly whiskey), but your work was strenuous and you did it well. Year after year, with your faithful dobbie (a monument should be erected to his memory), you followed the winding cow paths, through the mustard and the willows; traversed the treacherous barrancas, arroyos and canyons; fought the swollen, unbridged torrents of the Santiago and the Santa Ana; wallowed through the heat and dust of summer, and the rain and mire of winter. No night was so dark nor so stormy, no way so long nor so dangerous that you did not respond to the cry for help. Many an operation you performed and many a life you saved with no assistance whatever. When successful, you were faintly praised—for they expected it of you; when you lost the battle, you were blamed and maybe cursed;