

Why I Write About Chiropractic History

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I don't really know what has drawn this writer to explore the history of the healing arts, but there are memories of this interest that pre-date my training in clinical psychology. There was minimal exposure to the history of psychology during my doctoral studies (mostly the legends: Sigmund Freud, John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner), but nothing of any great breadth or depth. An internship supervisor was an osteopath and psychiatrist, and this generated a preliminary exposure to the stories of Dr. Andrew T. Still. It was a few years later that I encountered Dr. Norman Gevitz's commendable work, *The D.O.'s: Osteopathic Medicine in America*.¹

I can recall my enthusiasm when I discovered chapters by Russell W. Gibbons and Walter Wardwell, PhD, in the first edition of Dr. Scott Haldeman's *Modern Developments in the Principles & Practice of Chiropractic*.² Haldeman, a DC, PhD and MD, provided historical and sociological perspectives, which held my interest far more than the biomechanical and neurophysiological sections of this early scholarly compendium. Their work reminded me of a paperback I read some years earlier by Ralph Lee Smith, *At Your Own Risk: The Case Against Chiropractic*, which was a devastating review of the profession.⁵

Born and raised in the Empire State, I was 13 years old before DCs achieved licensure in New York. As the eldest son of a World War II army nurse, I learned that chiropractors were schnooks, if not crooks, and that my siblings and I should cross to the other side of the street if we saw one coming, so as to avoid any contact with these "fake" doctors. I wasn't quite sure what the quacks looked like until adolescence, when I drove a girlfriend to an appointment with a DC - a frumpy-looking character with lots of vitamin brochures in his waiting room. In any case, the bias was substantial. Smith's paperback, which focused on the Parker Seminars, seemed to confirm all that my mother had warned us about. (It later turned out that Smith's work had been encouraged and disseminated by organized medicine - part of its campaign to "contain and eliminate" the chiropractic profession.)

Recalling one's fascination with a topic, such as my reaction to the historical views of Wardwell and Gibbons, is not the same thing as explaining why the fascination arises. Perhaps the interest has something to do with an affinity for the underdog or the curiosity aroused by the idea of a different kind of doctor. Osteopathy struck me the same way. Perhaps it's also the content and color of the "chirosaga," per se, filled as it is with tales of passion and struggle against the odds, with internal and external enemies and theory-driven disputes that have reverberated down through the decades. Who can say? These are not mutually exclusive possibilities, or exhaustive in their listing.

My interest in chiropractic history certainly has much to do with appreciating how yesterday's conflicts with political medicine are reflected in today's struggles with the allopathic Big Brother, thereby approximating a neurotic paradox. The reconciliations that might be possible today are stymied by the painful lessons of yesterday. This is not to suggest that DCs and MDs can simply "kiss and make-up," nor that allopathic hegemony is all a thing of the past. Yet there are useful lessons from the past that could aid in promoting better patient care through improved relations with other disciplines, especially mainstream medicine. Now these ideas hold my attention.

I find that the long trail of kooky, untested theories and practices promoted as scientific or even "revealed" truths hold my attention as well, and we have them in abundance in chiropractic. The attempts to explain biological phenomena by citing spiritual, even divine influence, as in Universal Intelligence, are classical detours away from scientific thinking. These detours echo through the chirocentury, from Palmer's biotheology to the present-day "Body by God." Chiropractors from the beginning have been concerned with holistic explanations of health and illness, and in this quest, often have ventured far from what is testable or conceivable in any scientific sense. It occurs to me that if there is any one primary way in which chiropractors stand out from other doctoral-level health care providers, it is their diversity of epistemologies, along with their lack of consensus about the importance of the scientific method as a means of determining what helps, what hurts and what makes no difference in patient care.

Yet today, these irrational purveyors of biological nonsense stand beside the critical thinkers and accomplished clinical investigators of the profession's second century. Some of them have maintained a commitment to holistic thinking while keeping themselves grounded in research principles and empirical testing. Chiropractic history is fascinating, if only because there is this extraordinary diversity of people and ideas that populate the profession. As the late Stanley Martin, DC, is credited with saying, "For every DC there is an equal and opposite DC!"

I wrote my first paper bearing on chiropractic history in late 1986, in time for the 1987 Conference on Chiropractic History, co-sponsored by the Northwestern College of Chiropractic and the Association for the History of Chiropractic. The manuscript focused on the career and largely futile efforts of 1925 Palmer graduate C.O. Watkins, DC, to interest the profession in a clinical research foundation for practice and for national organization.⁴ As a consequence of this historical investigation, I grew increasingly familiar with the *Journal of the National Chiropractic Association* (JNCA). Here, I found a wealth of information served up on a monthly basis for more than 30 years. The JNCA opened a veritable window into the past. In it could be found the politics of the profession from 1930 to 1963. This included the major personalities of the world's largest membership society of chiropractors; the introduction, development and promotion of various brand name techniques and gizmos; news from many of the chiropractic colleges; and communiqués from the agencies of the National Chiropractic Association (NCA) that sought to regulate the schools.

I read through the JNCA's decades rather selectively at first, and then again more thoroughly, as the significance of this running record became more apparent.^{3,4} In looking back, it seems as though the JNCA became a skeletal framework upon which other information about the profession could be "plugged in." This backbone of chiropractic history often led to new and previously unknown characters and issues. And the windows opened not only served as a portal to chirohistory, but also to American, even international, history (e.g., the Great Depression and World War II, along with its aftermath).

My introduction to chirohistory coincided, roughly, with the birth of desktop computers. My first Macintosh, purchased in 1989, became a repository, as I extracted and stored information from the JNCA and other sources. In the years since, the names and faces of the NCA members, leaders and those they interacted with have become familiar - so much so that they're now old friends. Although the overwhelming majority have long since gone to their reward, many before I was born, their thoughts, struggles, accomplishments and visages live on - now in digital, as well as paper, formats.

Why do I write about chiropractic history? In part, because I can. So much information has been collected that it oozes from me, and I want to share it. Yet, there is also a sense of need to help the

life work of generations to endure. Their work means something more than the brittle pages left forgotten in the corner of the library. And although we are mortal, something of the spirit endures, so long as one is remembered. In the case of the chiropractic profession, we stand on the shoulders of pioneers who believed deeply in their cause and stood their ground in the face of considerable persecution. I write, in part, because I admire them, because I am amused, because there is something to be learned, and because this profession's ancestors were hearty souls whose spirits merit remembrance and have something of value to teach all of us.

As well, I just like to write.

References

1. Gevitz N. *The D.O.'s: Osteopathic Medicine in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.
2. Haldeman S, Ed. *Modern Developments in the Principles and Practice of Chiropractic*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1980.
3. Hicks CA, Keating JC. *An Author Index of the Journal of the National Chiropractic Association, 1933-1963*. Bloomington, Minn.: Northwestern College of Chiropractic, 1988.
4. Keating JC. Claude O. Watkins: pioneer advocate for clinical scientific chiropractic. *Chiropr Hist*, Dec 1987;7(2):11-5.
5. Smith RL. *At Your Own Risk: The Case Against Chiropractic*. New York: Trident Press, 1969.

Author's note: If your interest in chirohistory has been stimulated, then consider joining the Association for the History of Chiropractic (AHC). Founded in 1980 at Spears Hospital in Denver, the AHC is a nonprofit, membership organization whose goal is the discovery, dissemination and preservation of the saga of chiropractic. The AHC held its first annual Conference on Chiropractic History at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., in 1981, and has held similar conferences each year since at various chiropractic colleges or in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Association of Chiropractic Colleges. This month (May 2007), the AHC Conference on Chiropractic History will be held in Portugal and in association with the meeting of the World Federation of Chiropractic. Details about the upcoming conference can be obtained from Dr. Glenda Wiese, AHC executive director, or by way of the AHC Web site: www.historyofchiropractic.org.

The AHC publishes a scholarly journal, *Chiropractic History*, in which chiropractors and interested observers contribute their expertise by telling and interpreting the rich lore of the profession. The journal is published twice a year. *Chiropractic History* is distributed to all members of the AHC as a membership benefit. Membership in the AHC can be obtained by sending your name, address and check for \$75 (\$30/year for students) to:

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