

Building the Palmer Enterprises, 1913-1924 - Part 1

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The spectacular growth of chiropractic profession during B.J. Palmer's ascendancy (1913-1924) is inseparable from the concurrent expansion of the Palmer School of Chiropractic (PSC) and B.J.'s many related businesses. In that era and for decades to come, Palmer, the "Developer," accurately proclaimed that his "Fountain Head," the PSC, had graduated 75% of all the chiropractors in the world. In the years immediately following World War I, when federal educational support for veterans became available and the PSC enrollment approached 3,000 students, B.J. truthfully claimed that his was the largest vocational institutional in the nation, probably in the world. Given its preeminence among chiropractic schools and B.J.'s predilection for extraordinary claims, Palmer and his Fountain Head became a major target for medical critics (Brennan, 1983).

Palmer delighted in responding to the criticisms from political medicine. He taunted them, and turned the would-be negative publicity they heaped upon him to his advantage. He had built his "science" with printer's ink, he declared, and would buy it by the train load. The "P.T. Barnum of Science" knew few limits in his capacity to spread the gospel of chiropractic and the legend of the PSC. When the *Illinois Medical Journal* branded him "the most dangerous man in Iowa OUT of a prison cell" and as an "insane...paranoiac, a man whose irresponsibility is criminal," B.J. reveled in his supposed ignominy and responded with posters depicting himself in front of prison gates (Gromala, 1984).

In this period also, B.J. completed perhaps the most scholarly work of his career, *An Invisible Government*, which offered a scathing indictment of organized medicine and its efforts to monopolize health care. "Maliciousness based on prejudice," he suggested, was at the heart of the medical trust (Palmer, 1917a, p. 16).

B.J. learned the craft of advertising from mentors such as his father and Elbert Hubbard. The latter was a writer, publisher, lecturer, craftsman and highly successful businessman from upstate New York. Hubbard was also the son of a well-regarded physician who had vigorously promoted the "germ theory" in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Lerner, 1954, pp. 667-76). Elbert Hubbard had dropped out of Harvard University and become a popular "free thinker." His literary talents brought him to national prominence, and he promoted an anti-intellectual intellectualism that caught B.J.'s fancy. "All colleges are worthless societies; they develop indolence, conceit and theoretical nonsense," declared the iconoclastic Hubbard (Lerner, 1954, p. 668). His several years as a writer for *Arena Magazine* of Boston brought him in contact with the drugless healing movement and with turn-of-the-century opposition to the spread of medical practice laws.

Hubbard established his Roycroft printing plant and furniture factory in East Aurora, New York and marketed his products nationwide. He adopted attention-grabbing attire, catchy epigrams and the "Simplified Spelling" method then promoted by Harvard University. His eccentricity caught the public's eye, and his publishing empire flourished, despite or perhaps because of the criticism it

attracted from the establishment. His lecture tours brought him to Davenport, Iowa in 1906, where he spoke at the Burton Opera House. We may speculate about whether B.J. was in attendance on that occasion. In any case, in 1908 Hubbard sought out B.J. and the PSC, which were just beginning to gain a national reputation. Hubbard was impressed with the young doctor, and the two became fast friends. B.J. adopted Hubbard's style of dress (loose-fitting blouses and large, flowing ties), long hair, publishing style, use of "reformed spelling" and mode of business practice (Gromala, 1984). The two iconoclasts frequently visited one another at their respective headquarters, and B.J. named one of the rooms in his mansion after the East Aurora guru (Palmer, c1977, p. 97).

Hubbard's death, when a German submarine torpedoed the luxury liner Lusitania in 1915, was a deeply felt loss for Palmer. But the Developer soon surpassed his teachers. The growth of the Palmer Printery, an extension of the PSC, was phenomenal. B.J. quickly cornered a large share of the market for chiropractic advertising materials. In 1916 or 1917 he purchased the patient newsletter established by his prot g and former spinographer, James F. McGinnis, DC. B.J. turned the advertiser into a very successful promotional vehicle, *The Chiropractic Educator*, a four-page monthly patient newsletter. The Educator was filled with testimonials for the young healing art, and surely angered medical orthodoxy. It was an example of B.J.'s unabashed and unreserved commitment to marketing technology and to teaching his fellow chiropractors to learn and use his methods:

ADVERTISE

"WHEN things ain't going right with you, and you can't make them gee; - when business matters look real blue, and you fear bankruptcy; - when cobwebs gather on your stock and customers are rare; - when all your assets are in hock, don't cuss and tear your hair; - just listen to our good advice and take it if you're wise; - take a course at The P.S.C. and then go advertise, - and advertise from morn to night; don't overlook a day, - and soon you'll see the world go bright, and things will come your way; - invest in good publicity, and fortune you will greet, - and in a little while you'll be 'way up on Easy street (Palmer, 1916c)."

In the opinion of the American Medical Association (AMA), advertising was a serious professional sin. The ethical standards of the AMA forbade its members to advertise, other than to list their names, addresses and phone numbers. But B.J. had no such scruples, and decried political medicine's efforts to prevent non-AMA members (most especially chiropractors) from promoting their practices. Over and over again he reminded his readers that "It pays to advertise!" Health care, he suggested, was a commodity, and should be marketed and sold just like any other consumer item or service. Advertising was as American as apple pie, and AMA et al. had no right to interfere.

Among the most important of his many publishing ventures was the so-called "Palmer Weekly," B.J.'s personal newsletter, the Fountain Head News (FHN). Established circa 1912, the FHN was significant not for its financial rewards to the Developer (FHN was initially distributed free), but because it connected him to the field, and they to him. The PSC's monthly journal, *The Chiropractor*, increasingly functioned as the official periodical of the Universal Chiropractors' Association (UCA), and featured an ever greater number of articles written by the protective society's membership. B.J. felt the need for his own, more intimate professional forum.

The FHN offered a smorgasbord of content. Here were published Palmer's numerous editorials on every topic under the sun (whether of chiropractic relevance or not), news and photos of the burgeoning PSC campus and facilities, reviews of legal defenses and licensing campaigns, notices of

state and national professional events, advertisements for various products from the expanding Palmer enterprises, clinical vignettes, prose and poetry, cartoons, and an endless stream of letters to B.J. The Developer used the FHN to tell the tales of his various travels around the country, and reprinted newspaper accounts of his lecture tours. When he ventured by train in 1916 to San Francisco to embark on his first sea-going voyage (to Hawaii), groups of chiropractors, advised of his itinerary by the FHN, greeted B.J. and Mabel at each train stop along the way (Palmer, 1916b). Many columns were devoted to condemnation of vivisection and compulsory vaccination; sometimes whole issues reviewed medical handling of various epidemics. B.J. brought considerable humor to these topics; a piece of prose authored by Martha Hart (Hart, 1918) was typical:

The correspondence reprinted in the pages of the FHN is of special historical importance. It mattered not whether the writer expressed pro- or anti-Palmer sentiments: B.J. published it all the same. (Of course, he always got the last word in his own newsletter.) Owing to his eagerness to share both the positive and the negative feedback he received with the field, the FHN became a rich weekly chronicle of current events in the profession. Here the Developer held court, exhorted and cavorted, praised his supporters, reprimanded his opponents and detractors, and filled his readers with "spizzerintum." The "PSC boys," as he called his alumni, could stay in close touch with their leader and their alma mater, and felt some sense of security amidst the ever growing persecution from organized medicine, because B.J. was obviously on top of whatever was happening. The FHN let its readers know that the Developer was going to defend them and save them, especially if they were PSC boys and/or UCA members.

The FHN employed the new system for marking the years that B.J. devised, for example, "A.C. 28" for 1922. First introduced with the June 24, 1916 issue of the FHN (Volume 5, Number 19), the "A.C." dating of the newsletter was a parody of Christians' "Anno Domini," and marked time from 18 September 1895, the supposed date of the first adjustment. It was characteristically B.J., and reminded his audience with every issue that chiropractic was as significant as religion, and that its date of discovery was at least as important as the birth of the Nazarene. And no one should forget who bore the cross for chiropractic.

The FHN was but one component in B.J.'s ever growing publishing empire. The PSC also produced *The P.S.C. Clinical Journal*, *The Chiropractor*, and a wide range of "disease tracts" and wall charts (Palmer, 1917b), and, of course, the well known series of volumes referred to as the "green books" (Wiese & Lykins, 1986). Palmer showed no sense of exclusivity or proprietorship about advertising ideas. He welcomed innovation from his "boys" in the field, and shared novel tactics with his FHN readers. He was particularly partial to the "free clinic idea," wherein chiropractors offered their services gratis to the indigent or to children or to uniformed servicemen and veterans. Free clinical services had been used to good effect in the early efforts to attract the attention of legislators to the new discipline, and were well received by the disabled soldiers of the world war. Palmer was happy to collaborate on most any project which raised the visibility of the profession.

"Palmergrams" (Palmer, 1949, pp. 225-7; Wills, 1987, pp. 102-3) or "travelgrams" (An, 1919; Ashworth, 1920; No, 1919; Palmer, 1923) may be seen as an extension of the free clinic promotions. A Palmergram was a certificate issued by B.J. which guaranteed chiropractic care, at no charge to the patient, and reimbursement to any chiropractor who accepted the case. Circus workers were frequent recipients. The Developer's enthusiastic alumni were usually more than happy to acknowledge the publicity that Palmer had brought to them, and provided service gratis. B.J. let it be known that any doctor who objected to providing the chiropractic care without compensation could send the bill to

him, and Palmer would pay. Anyone who sent in such a bill, or any chiropractor who refused to provide care, could expect to hear about it in the FHN.

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