



CHIROPRACTIC (GENERAL)

The Palmers and the Port Perry Myths

Joseph Keating Jr., PhD

Port Perry, Ontario, that almost mythical locale way up north (perhaps not far from Santa's workshop?) where D.D. Palmer spent his youth, has been the focus of much mistaken history. Generations of chiropractors have learned that it was in Port Perry that the father of chiropractic was born, and Palmer's biographer continued this mistake.³ It was here that a false nativity site was dedicated, along with a monument to this innovator in health care. How this error crept into the saga of chiropractic is not clear, but the efforts of several investigators have helped to set the record straight and provide partial explanation for the growth of the myths.

Research conducted by Herbert J. Vear, DC, has established that the founder was born in Pickering, a town located just west of Toronto.^{9,10}



On Aug. 17, 1961, David D. Palmer, DC, and daughters visited the memorial to his grandfather dedicated by the National Chiropractic Association in 1946.

Dr. Vear's search of various archives and databases yielded an account not dissimilar from several that Old Dad Chiro himself had offered. Writing in the December 1908 issue of *The Chiropractor Adjuster*, a magazine published by his D.D. Palmer College of Chiropractic in Portland, Oregon, Palmer related the following:

BIOGRAPHICAL

D.D. Palmer was born near Toronto, Canada, March 6, 1845. He attended a country school from the age of four years till eleven; his father failing in business, he being the elder of six children, had to help provide for them, therefore, he had but little time for schooling. His father allowed him his earnings before and after working hours to clothe himself, buy books, pay library fees, etc. At the age of 21 he had acquired a practical education.⁶

A few years later, D.D. repeated the assertion that his birthplace was proximate to Toronto, although a different birthdate was given:

"I was born on March 7, 1845, a few miles east of Toronto, Canada. My ancestors were Scotch and Irish on my maternal and English and German on my paternal side. When my grandparents settled near the now beautiful city of Toronto, there was but one log house, the beginning of that great city. That region was then known as 'away out west'."⁷

Parenthetically, this alternate birthdate, March 6 1845, would reappear on Palmer's death certificate.⁷ Of greater interest here, however, is the point that Pickering is a few miles east of Toronto; Port Perry is "50 miles northeast from the center of Toronto."¹⁰ This is a 30-60 minute drive by automobile today, but would have been a six-hour trek or more by horse and buggy in Palmer's era.⁵



**D.D. Palmer's mother and sisters,
perhaps in the 1880s.**



D.D. Palmer's father and brothers; D.D. is seated on the left, his father is seated on the right.

The area in Pickering where D.D. Palmer was born was known as Brown's Corner, and later as Audley, and it was here, rather than in Port Perry, that his father, Thomas, served as postmaster. John Black, the "brutish schoolmaster" for D.D. and his siblings, has been located in census records for 1851 and 1861 in Audley, not Port Perry.^{9,10} D.D.'s parents apparently relocated the family to the hamlet on the banks of Lake Scugog (where the Palmer Memorial stands today), perhaps as early as 1855,² and in time for the census conducted in 1861.⁹ The family departed Ontario for the Mississippi River Valley in 1865, at the end of America's Civil War.

Sometime during the next seven decades, some confusion was introduced. By the time the National Chiropractic Association (NCA; forerunner of today's American Chiropractic Association) held its convention in Toronto in 1938, visited Port Perry and decided to erect a monument to the founder, the mistaken notion that Palmer had been born in Port Perry had taken hold.



Crowd at Palmer Park in Port Perry, 1938.

Interviewed circa 1938, Mrs. M.K. Allison and Mrs. Naomi Coburn related that they had attended

school with D.D. Palmer in Port Perry, and they identified 214 Mary Street as the location of the Palmer home.



"A Partial View of Lake Scugog and Park Property"; from the NCA's *The Chiropractic Journal* for August 1938.

Unfortunately, both had passed away by the time D.D.'s grandson, David D. Palmer, DC, visited Port Perry following his assumption of duties as president of the Palmer School of Chiropractic.

Paul Arculus, historian and author,¹ has investigated Port Perry's history extensively, and reports that two sites in the village were identified as the "Palmer birthplace." One of these was 15238 Old Simcoe Road (site of the currently misidentified Palmer home); the other was 214 Mary Street. Neither was the birthplace of the founder, but perhaps one of these was indeed the Palmer family home in Port Perry. Based on his extensive research, Mr. Arculus relates:



"A partial view of the some 1500 chiropractors and townspeople who participated in the Dedication of Palmer Memorial Park at Port Perry, Canada, during the National Convention in Toronto"; from the NCA's *The Chiropractic Journal* for September 1938.



These ladies may be Mrs. Allison and Mrs. Coburn, classmates of D.D. Palmer in Port Perry.

In 1961, Daniel David Palmer's grandson, David Palmer, decided to visit Port Perry and purchase the Palmer birthplace for the chiropractors as a museum. He interviewed a number of people regarding their memories of the Palmer family. Unfortunately, Mrs. Allis had died in 1941 at the age of 90 and Mrs. Coburn had died a year later. Dr. Palmer did interview members of the Raines family whose parents had owned the Old Simcoe Road property. Thomas Raines and his wife Rachel bought the home in 1918. Thomas Raines died in 1946 and the property was passed to Velma Raines. Velma Raines sold the property to John Ballard in June 1961.

When interviewed in 1961, Jessie and Louis Bond, close friends of Rachel Raines, stated that they remembered Rachel telling them on many occasions that Daniel David Palmer had been born in the Old Simcoe Road house. On this evidence and the absence of land registry records for the time of Palmer's residence here, the Old Simcoe Road property was purchased by the Palmer College of Chiropractic of Davenport, Iowa for \$5,500 in November 1961.²

Mr. Arculus reviewed tax records available in the Scugog Shores Museum and discovered that D.D.'s father, Thomas Palmer, had paid tax on "Lot 79 in Port Perry in 1855,"² and further determined that Lot 79 is 214 Mary Street. The elder Palmer continued to pay property tax on the Mary Street residence until 1865, when the family departed Canada.

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The cover of the NCA's *National Chiropractic Journal* for September 1946 featured the recently dedicated Palmer Memorial in Port Perry, Ontario.

Chiropractors Do Honour to Their Founder.

Appreciative Visitors Enjoy Themselves Thoroughly.

Wednesday, August 14th, 1925, was a great day in the history of the Chiropractic Association of America, the occasion of the unveiling of the monument to D. D. Palmer, the Founder of Chiropractic.

The unveiling ceremony was carried out by Hon. Mr. Michener, Provincial Secretary for the Province of Ontario. The Dedication Service was conducted by Rev. E. Crosby Hunter, of Winnipeg.

The portrait bust (in bronze) was designed and executed by the noted sculptor, Emmanuel Stein.

The bust occupies a simple stone shaft, and is located on the north-west corner of Palmer Memorial Park, which faces Lake Sturgeon. The base of the Memorial bears the inscription:

"I have never considered it beneath my dignity
to relieve human suffering." D. D. Palmer

Dr. David David Palmer was born March 7th, 1825, and died October 20, 1913.



The House in which Dr. D. Palmer lived as a boy. (D. D. Palmer 1825-1913)

Newspaper clipping from Port Perry in 1946 identified this house at 214 Mary Street as the former Palmer home.



214 Mary St., Port Perry, circa 1938; possible the home of the Palmer family in the early 1860s.

Paul Arculus has further determined that the property on Simcoe Road was owned by a George Palmer in 1860, an individual who is not known to be related to D.D. Palmer's family. In any case, it seems likely that this record of ownership is the source of the mistaken identification of the Simcoe Road property as the site of D.D.'s family residence. Mr. Arculus reminds us also that the statue of D.D. Palmer in Port Perry mistakenly indicates that the father of chiropractic was born in Port Perry, and recommends efforts to correct this error.

So what? Who cares if the father of chiropractic was born in Pickering or Port Perry? What difference does it make if a teenage D.D. Palmer lived on Simcoe Road or Mary Street in Port Perry? Isn't this all historical trivia, the stuff of mental exercise for pointy-headed scholars? Well, yes, but ... these are also a few of the great many myths in chiropractic, such as the date of the first adjustment, or the notion that osteopaths were only interested in circulation and not in the nervous system, or that Palmer went to his grave believing that nerves were pinched between spinal bones, or that he died from injuries rendered by his son.⁴

Like any profession, chiropractic has its wonders and its warts. Its history is a rich and complex tapestry that provides an important component in the profession's sense of identity and purpose, a lens for looking at ourselves and for making better choices for the future based on a clearer understanding

of what the profession has come through. There truly are bright spots and dark areas in the chiropractic saga, and they have channeled and molded the profession through the years. Accurate history or mistaken legends - what's your preference?

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Editor's note: In Dr. Keating's previous column ("Silver Anniversary of the Association for the History of Chiropractic!" April 23 DC), the photos of Dr. A. Earl Homewood and Dr. John B. Wolfe (pg 18) were mistakenly reversed. We apologize for any confusion stemming from this error. The photos now appear with their appropriate captions online (www.chiroweb.com/archives/23/09/12.html).

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