



Dr. Mary Cronemiller and Health Care a Century Ago



By Nan Crussell

The author is a former Sacramento Bee reporter (then Nan Nichols) who now runs her own accounting and web design business. Dr. Cronemiller was her great grand aunt.

"GIVE ME HEALTH and California is a pretty good place to make money. But give me sickness such as I have seen here and hell can't be far off," wrote a weary gold-rush pioneer in 1850. "No place can hardly be worse for a sick man than California."

Indeed, thousands of men, women and children traveled across the American continent to reach the alluring California gold country in the mid-1800s. They faced scurvy, outbreaks of contagious diseases, typhoid, cholera, mosquitoes, food shortages and even death in their search for a better life. However, upon their arrival "out west," many found not gold but sickness and few doctors or hospitals to help them. Often they had no money to pay for care when it could be found.



One young doctor determined to make a difference in that gloomy 19th Century California medical world was Mary M. Cronemiller.

Her father, Oliver Hazard Perry Cronemiller, was among those pioneer travelers who came to Sutter's Mill to look for gold and to work. In 1852, Oliver (named for his father's own military hero and fellow militiaman Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry of the War of 1812 fame) gathered his young bride, Maria, and departed the mid-west, traveling by covered wagon across the continent seeking a better life in California.¹

The Cronemillers bore their children there - William, Nathan, Emma, Mattie, Jenny and Mary - amid the gold fields along the Sacramento and Yuba Rivers. Mary, the youngest, was born in 1862.

According to Cronemiller family lore, young Mary fell in love with a physician, but for whatever reason, they did not marry. So she vowed "to become every bit as good a doctor as he was."² She became determined to provide better medical care for those in need than had been available in her father's day.

Mainstream medicine in that time often employed such measures as bloodletting and purging, the use of laxatives and enemas, and the administration of complex mixtures such as substances including opium, myrrh, and viper's flesh. These treatments often worsened symptoms and sometimes proved fatal.

Mary believed there must be a better way to treat the sick. The concept of homeopathy was rising to the forefront around this time. It was a controversial form of complementary and alternative medicine created in the late 18th century by German physician Samuel Hahnemann. It encompassed a more natural form of medical care.

Patients of homeopaths often had better outcomes than those of mainstream doctors. Homeopathic treatments, even if ineffective, would almost surely cause no harm, making the users of homeopathic medicine less likely to be killed by the medicine that was supposed to be helping them.

Hahnemann also advocated various lifestyle improvements to his patients, including exercise, diet, and cleanliness. These ideas seemed plausible to Mary and other doctors of her time, and are widely touted today.

Intrigued, she returned from California to her father's mid-west homeland and enrolled in the Hahnemann Medical College of Chicago, School of Homeopathy. She graduated in the class of 1890.

In 1891, Dr. Mary Cronemiller opened her medical practice at 815 10th Street in Sacramento. While her beginnings were in homeopathy, they eventually led her to a wide variety of general practice, delivering babies at home being a common call. She tended those from all walks of life, from Sacramento's Crocker family and the Gladding family of Lincoln to hundreds of others from Dixon to Yuba to Folsom and beyond.



She travelled by horseless carriage - an impressive sight in that time, according to her great nephew, Robert McNairn Jr. of Sacramento, whom she delivered in a homebirth on Jan. 1, 1919. "Aunty Doctor drove a black electric car that steered with a handle. She took it to the 20th and M Street Electric Garage where it would be plugged in."

The influence of Sacramento's pioneer physicians went far beyond caring for the sick and injured. In particular, Dr. Cronemiller, who practiced medicine in Sacramento from 1891 until 1919, was president of the local homeopathic group. She was active in the women's suffrage and temperance movements, but was best known for her charitable and missionary activities on behalf of the Central Methodist Church.



One of her cash receipts book from 1900 to 1905 is a treasure of Sacramento area history showing paid accounts and their prices, as well as those who traded work and embroidery for medical care. Among her heirlooms is a tiny embroidered silk slipper which she removed from an adult Chinese woman in Sacramento; the woman's bound feet, meant to be a sign of beauty and class, resulted in a life of crippling pain and debility. Dr. Cronemiller refused to put the slipper back on.

A receipt book includes the name of Marion Crocker. That could have been Marion Phyllis Crocker, whose grandfather, Clark Crocker, helped build the Central Pacific Railroad. (According to the Marin Independent Journal of December 24, 1988, Marion Phyllis Crocker died in San Francisco at age 98. During her adventurous life, she had

flown in an early flying boat, ridden a pony 102 miles in 14 hours, driven an ambulance in World War I, and later worked to create the United Nations.)

Dr. Cronemiller's newspaper obituary in October 1920 says that "Besides attending families of the poor gratis, she often sent them food and clothing. When she gave up her practice, Dr. Cronemiller destroyed books containing the accounts of scores of families financially unable to reimburse her for professional services."

While she was seen by her patients as a breath of fresh air for her kind and tender care, she may have had a more fatalistic outlook on her own world. Inside the front page of one of her receipt books, she copied this poem:

Two Crosses

by Helen M. Richardson

*We bear about a little load of care,
And call it trouble, when the heart is young;
Before Pain's anguish from our lips hath wrung
The cry that sends us to our knees in prayer.
We stagger 'neath the crushing weight of woe
and call it discipline, in after years;
When faith hath taught us, through our blinding tears,
His best beloved must crucifixion know.*



Mary Cronemiller died in 1920 at the age of 58 and is buried in the Pioneer section of the Old Sacramento City Cemetery, alongside her mother, Maria, and her father, Oliver. According to the burial records at the cemetery, about 55 doctors are interred there. Only six were women.

Her simple headstone aptly reads "She lived for others."

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1. "Descendants of Johann Martin Cronemueller" provided by Dennis Coupe and rootsweb.com. NOTE: Oliver's father, Martin Cronemiller (1794-1848) was an intimate friend of Commodore Perry, by whom he was presented with a medal for gallantry in action during his service as a colonel in the War of 1812, specifically the Battle of Lake Erie. This medal is still preserved, a valued family relic.
2. Clara McNair Nichols, Dr. Mary Cronemiller's great niece

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