

Field of blood, field of the forgotten

The Potter's Field of Milwaukee County

Michael McBride, Milwaukee

A recent discovery of a forgotten pauper cemetery at the Milwaukee County Medical Center has profound and far-reaching ramifications. More than 5,000 are buried in this graveyard, compelling an investigation into the circumstances surrounding its loss. That the cemetery lies beneath county buildings without official knowledge is a disgrace. The proper dignity of a marked and undisturbed grave was denied to these former county residents because of their poverty. How this discovery is managed will reflect our commitment to both high ideals and the law. This project endeavors to reconstruct the origins of the pauper cemetery, containing a brief history of the poor in Milwaukee County, and an examination of the Almshouse, Milwaukee County's first medical institution. Finally, a postscript offers a parallel between the writings of Charles Dickens and the pauper cemetery. *Wis Med J.* 1992;91(8):x-x.

IN LATE FALL OF 1991, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* reported that a map outlining the boundaries of a 19th century pauper cemetery had been discovered at the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District Office. Close to 5,000 graves were estimated to be contained in this cemetery, which rested beneath the current Milwaukee County School of Nursing and an adjacent parking lot.¹ The magnitude of this find astonished me, raising many questions; who were these people, where did they come from, what circumstances led to their deaths, and how did their graves come to be forgotten?

The work toward creating a healthy climate for future generations begins now, and builds on the foundation of the past. The discovery of a massive pauper cemetery has profound implications for the community, and presents a wealth of potential for those serving in the field of public health and preventive medicine. If we fail to recognize and understand the issue at hand, pauper cemeteries will be our legacy to future generations.

The poor

"For ye have the poor always with you."—John 12:8

The term "potter's field" is often used interchangeably

with pauper cemetery. The origin of the term "potter's field" can be found in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, chapter 19. In the New Testament, Matthew makes reference to the potter's field in the death of Judas (Matthew 27:3-9):

When he found that Jesus had been condemned, then Judas, his betrayer, was filled with remorse and took the thirty pieces back to the chief priests and elders saying, "I have sinned. I have betrayed innocent blood." They replied, "What is that to us? That is your concern." And flinging down the silver pieces in the sanctuary he made off, and went and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the silver pieces and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury; it is blood-money." So they discussed the matter and with it bought the potter's field as a graveyard for foreigners, and this is why the field is still called the Field of Blood.

To reconstruct the origins of the pauper cemetery, we must understand the history of Milwaukee's poor. The prevailing attitudes toward poverty in the mid-1800s were based on English Poor Laws. Soon after King Henry VIII served ties with the Roman Catholic Church, he abolished the monasteries. Until that time, the monasteries served as the main source of charity for England's poor. The attitude developed that poverty was caused by laziness with the poor seen as idlers and vagabonds. Thus, laws such as the Beggars Act of 1536 called for, "Suppression of mendicancy and vagabondage by infliction of severe and often cruel punishment."²

Shortly after Henry VIII died, his daughter Elizabeth, born of Anne Boleyn, became queen. Under her reign, the biblical quote, "For ye have the poor always with you" was used as an excuse to avoid assisting the poor. The impoverished lower class majority was viewed as the natural consequence of God's law.

The English Poor Laws were passed in 1601, effectively placing the care of the poor on local municipalities. It soon became common to confine the poor to debtor's prison, workhouses, and poorhouses. Those "inmates" who were able were forced to work the treadmill or spend long hours in the fields tending crops. This was seen as a legitimate means of reducing the cost of pauperism as well as instilling a work ethic in the poor.

The American colonies adopted the English Poor Laws, illustrated by the employment of indentured servitude as a means of working off debt and gaining freedom.

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The Almshouse

"Over the hill to the poorhouse, I'm trudgin' my weary way."—Will Carlton

In 1852, Milwaukee County's Board of Supervisors purchased a farm for \$6,000 to act as a poorhouse, and named it the Almshouse. Seven miles of difficult travel separated the Almshouse from the city, but the prevailing attitude was to confine the poor away from the general population. The distance also served to isolate those with infectious disease and the insane. Initially, the existing farmhouse received nearly everyone who was poor. The farmland was worked by the inmates and a cottage industry was formed.

Admission to the Almshouse required a judge's order, documented poverty, lack of any sympathetic relatives or friends, and the signatures of two county taxpayers.

In Milwaukee County, the annual report from the superintendent of the poor frequently listed causes for pauperism which included the elderly, the handicapped, alcoholics, the sick, and those labeled as "feeble minded." Immigrants were also more likely to end up at the Almshouse, with Germans, Irish, and Poles representing the greatest percentage.

Also recorded were the occupations of the inmates, with carpenters, housewives, and laborers documented most commonly.

Those responsible for balancing the budget were mindful of the goal of institutional self-sufficiency. For many years, the county took bids from private coffin-makers, and usually accepted the lowest bid, which in this case bought the inmates 4-foot caskets.³

Nineteenth century nomenclature reflected the attitudes of the time and were written into laws and public documents. The terms "vagrant" and "tramp" were used interchangeably, and defined as those males 16 years old or older, unemployed, who loitered, "... in outhouses, open air, groceries, drinking saloons, houses of ill-repute or of bad repute, railroad depots, fire engine houses..."² Female vagrancy was usually defined as prostitution. Statistics were kept by the superintendent on the number of tramps lodged per month at the Almshouse.

The economic depressions of the 1890s and the 1930s created a new attitude toward the poor. The reality that economic and environmental factors can cause poverty left the middle class insecure, thus shifting the formerly negative prevailing attitudes away. There was an evolving sensitivity toward the disadvantaged visible in the nomenclatural changes. Where Edmund Pottier referred to the needy as the "wretched of the Earth,"⁴ Franklin Roosevelt called the poor "the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid."⁴ In fact, Wisconsin officially removed the term "pauper" from statutes in the early 1940s.

Soon after the Almshouse's establishment, it became clear that the facility was not suitable for all the inmates it was intended to house. In 1858, the county opened a separate facility for children that included a school. The *Lady Elgin*

steamship disaster of 1860, with more than 200 fatalities, resulted in a comparable number of orphans. Many of these children were sent to the Almshouse, creating a need for a larger facility which eventually developed into the Home for Dependent Children and Infants' Hospital in 1898 (Figure 2). Also in 1860, a hospital was established to separate and care for inmates with contagious diseases (Figure 3). Initially called the "Pesthouse," this institution evolved into County General Hospital and later into the present-day Milwaukee County Medical Complex.

In 1878, the Milwaukee County Insane Asylum was built (Figure 4), consisting of one facility for the chronically ill, called South Division, and another that cared for patients with acute illnesses, called North Division.

The medical staff of the Milwaukee County Hospital provided care at the Almshouse for the aged, the physically handicapped, the deformed, and chronically ill patients. The acutely ill were immediately transferred to the county hospital for treatment. Physicians on staff at the county hospital were regarded as the finest in the area. A dentist served the inmates once a week. A chief dietitian carefully managed the menu. Optical work, and artificial limbs were made and repaired for the poor.

The sprawling countryside's fertile soil offered plenty of opportunity for industry. During many years, the county farm and poorhouse reported profits from livestock and produce. The superintendent of the county farm listed an \$18,000 profit in 1919. Inventory of that year included 30 horses, 550 swine, and 197 cattle, along with the income harvested from the fields of grain, rich pastures, stock, and pens.⁵

With time, the branching of medical facilities created a community of its own, complete with fire station, police force, butcher shop, power plant, bakery, and laundry. Many of the employees and superintendents resided on the grounds.

It is important to note that the Almshouse was not similar to debtor's prisons of Victorian England. Inmates were free to leave and did so once steady employment was obtained. The Almshouse was a reflection of the standard of care given to the poor. This care evolved and improved with the passage of time. A conscious effort was made to provide a comfortable atmosphere. This excerpt from a 1924 Milwaukee County Institutions brochure describes the various accommodations offered to the inmates: "The following facilities are provided for the comfort, entertainment, and use of inmates: Baseball games played on Institutions grounds; weekly movies; radio programs; entertainments by Societies and home-talent theatrical groups; books and Milwaukee daily newspapers; a smoking room for the men where they can smoke, play cards, checkers and other games; a parlors where music and games are furnished."⁶

Conditions at the Almshouse, however, were often criticized by the local press and reformers as overcrowded, inadequate, and often inhumane. The superintendent himself reported to the county board in 1888 that the condition

of the Almshouse was a "disgrace," stating, "Utter absence of proper ventilation, overcrowding to an extent which would horrify any sanitarian, no facilities for bathing, deficiency in water closets, no provision for cleansing persons and clothing inmates and tramps, and to crown all a 'foreign population' in addition to the native, far outnumbering it and hanging on with a persistency which defies all attempts to reduce its numbers or exterminate it altogether—a veritable colony and hotbed of vermin in addition to the above is the present Almshouse."⁷

The county board apparently listened and responded to the complaints, because newspaper articles reported that annual and periodic inspections by medical personal, charitable institutions, and the board ensured.

The inmates of the Almshouse, besides working the fields and tending livestock raised carp in several of the county ponds to sell at the local market. They also participated in the manufacture of textile and wood products. One such product crafted by the poor were coffins, which were undoubtedly destined for the use of those unfortunates who died while residing at the Almshouse.⁶

In the event that an inmate died, the 1894 edition of the *Milwaukee County Rules and Regulations* lists the responsibilities of the superintendent of the Almshouse. Rule 17

states: "The Superintendent shall keep a record of all pauper burials on the County Farm, file all burial permits, and place a painted and numbered head board at each grave, which grave shall, in no case, be less than six feet deep. The burial record shall specify the name of the deceased, date and cause of death, number of burial permit, and the number of the grave in which buried. It shall be the duty of the Superintendent to see that the cemetery is kept in decent order."⁸

The superintendent for the poor was often delinquent in the care of the cemeteries. A *Milwaukee Sentinel* newspaper story in 1878 titled, "A Disgraceful Potter's Field," complained of coffins popping out of the swampland following heavy spring rains since only eighteen inches of earth covered the coffin lids.⁹

The register of burial at the Milwaukee County Poor Farm documented burials beginning in 1882, with the last entry listed in 1974. A review of the record lists approximately 8,200 burials total. Most were from the Almshouse, county hospital, or transported from area hospitals and downtown morgue. Four hundred and thirty-one persons were entered as "unknown," with a surprising number of infants and children documented. The individual age was not recorded until 1898, and cause of death was registered only beginning

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Causes of death are a reflection of 19th century medical nomenclature, including marasmus (infant lack of calories), apoplexy (stroke), inanition (adult malnutrition), typhoid, tuberculosis, morphinism (addiction to morphine), and delirium tremens (severe alcohol withdrawal). Other causes were the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918, and periodic outbreaks of smallpox, and cholera. The economic depressions of the 1890s and the 1930s were evident in the high number of suicides, homicides, and deaths due to alcoholism. Drowning deaths and railroad accidents were the most frequent trauma related deaths reported.¹⁰

In the 1880s, two proposed name changes for the Almshouse reflected the insensitivity of that time period: County Farm for Inebriates and Idiots (1883) and the Milwaukee County Retreat for Weak and Feeble Minded Persons (1885).¹¹ In 1917, the name was officially changed to the County Infirmary. The infirmary was torn down in the mid-1970s and replaced with a parking lot. The residents, staff, and overall operation of the infirmary were transferred to the former tuberculosis sanitarium, Muirdale, now known as Rehab West, functioning as a care facility for the elderly with mental illnesses. This facility was slated for destruction in June 1992.

Archaeology

"Just one last favor I'll ask of you. See that my grave is kept clean." -Bob Dylan

According to Public Law 89-665; 91-54, 95-422, and 94-458, the National Historic Preservation Act, an assessment of the archaeological potential of a location must be made before any disturbance of the premises for construction takes place. The Great Lakes Archaeological Research Center of Milwaukee is involved in the study and excavation of the Potter's Field and has reported on past reconnaissance work on the county grounds. In 1980, this firm investigated five proposed diversion structures planned by the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage Commission.

Its conclusion was that construction activities for the 84th Street and Wisconsin Avenue diversion structure would disturb a middle- to late-19th century pauper cemetery. Furthermore, a pipeline construction project in 1971 encountered burials just north of Wisconsin Avenue west of the 8500 block.¹²

Its findings also include a *Milwaukee Leader* newspaper article from 1932 that reported the discovery of coffins during the construction of the current nursing residence. "The nurses residence is on the site almost in the center of the 15 acre field which was set aside 70 years ago for the graves of the penniless and unknown."¹²

After tabulating the number of recorded burials in the register between 1882 and 1929, and factoring in the number of unknown burials from 1852 to 1882, well over 5,000 people may be buried in this original pauper cemetery.

The archaeological report concluded that, "...further investigations, eg, test excavations, should be conducted to determine the presence or absence of burials in the construction impact zone."

A total of four pauper cemeteries have been located (Figure 4). The most recent burials were placed in No. 3, known today as the Milwaukee County Cemetery. One manager of the county grounds stated that the poor were buried three deep at this site. Northwest from this cemetery lies a cast-iron headstone bearing the inscription "No. 89" which identifies cemetery No. 2. Potter Road, which intersects with Mayfair Road, is a vestigial reminder of the cemeteries.

The cemetery currently under excavation covers an estimated five acres. The graves were buried in an organized plan, with the head of the coffins facing west. At this time, more than 310 burials have been removed. Most of the pine coffins have decayed, preventing a complete preservation of the bodies. The poor were buried naked without any personal items enclosed. Many coffins contained two bodies, and a surprising number of skeletons have been found with severed legs or missing lower limbs. The explanation could lie in the decision to purchase coffins less than 4 feet long, necessitating amputation at the time of burial. Autopsies were performed on many. Only a handful of metallic tags, inscribed with numbers, indicate identity. A coin purse was located in one burial with what appears to be 2-cent pieces corroded together. What is believed to be a plastic comb was found in one grave.¹³

Excavation was to continue through December 1991 and resume in the spring of 1992. The time-consuming and often tedious process of removal of the bodies is costly and has been hampered by inclement weather. An average of 10 hours is invested in the removal of a single body. The remains are placed in cardboard boxes, catalogued, and stored in the basement of the Great Lakes Archaeological Research Center. Volunteer forensic pathologists are currently involved in the analysis of each specimen. A full report may not be completed until late 1993.

Ethics

"Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals." -William Gladstone

The last official burial in the original pauper cemetery occurred in 1929. Three years later, in April 1932, graves were discovered during construction of a nurses' home. A *Milwaukee Journal* front page article on April 1932 reported the discovery, describing the fate of many burials at this site.

"Discolored water poured from the black wood coffins as they were lifted from the ground. The rotted pine of the boxes collapsed in the bucket of the power shovel. Splintered wood and decayed bones were strewn alike as the boom swung to empty the bucket into trucks.

"The debris was hauled a few hundred feet west of the nurses' home, spread near the hospital for the chronic insane and crushed into the ground as the basis for a proposed landscape project.

"...The proposed site was leveled and the whole potter's field graded and seeded.

"About 200 graves were transferred at the time to a new potter's field—now called the County Cemetery ... Most of the graves removed to the new cemetery were those which had been given some attention by relatives of the deceased. Many of them had markers or small monuments."¹⁴

Not only were the graves of more than 5,000 persons forgotten, but when burials were discovered it appears the treatment of the remains was callous and undignified. County authorities neglected the cemetery. With knowledge of the cemetery's presence, county authorities approved the construction of the nurses home, permitting the aforementioned hideous disinternment.

Coincidentally, the headlines from the April 6, 1932, *Milwaukee Journal* refer to William Coffey, the superintendent of County Institution, who was largely responsible for the historical foundations of the Milwaukee County Medical Complex. He began his reign on the Board of Administrators in 1915 and continued to serve the county until his retirement in 1952. Steven Avella, a contributing author of the book *Trading Post to Metropolis*,¹⁵ describes Coffey as an administrative genius with skills and dedication that guided the course of Milwaukee County history in the development of the Medical Center. He states, "Coffey's tenure of over thirty years was characterized by a consistent stress on administrative consolidation and the expansion of services to the needs," and, "his longevity had assured the necessary stability to plan and execute a long-range vision."

In the 1932 *Milwaukee Journal* story, Coffey responds to a delegation of public welfare officials from the Twin Cities, who were assessing Milwaukee County's plan for assisting the poor. The "Milwaukee plan" was a nationally regarded success as a model for poor relief adopted by many large communities to cope with the tragic depression of the 1930s. In February 1932, Milwaukee assisted more than 27,000 families with poor relief. While other communities across the country were ravaged by the depression, Milwaukee's poor were well cared for, largely due to the vision of Dr Coffey.

It is possible that the stock market crash of 1929 and subsequent depression forced Coffey to triage decisions based on economic priority. The financial cost to exhume and rebury the graves of Potter's Field would have been impractical at that time. Since Dr Coffey displayed great sensitivity to the poor, it seems uncharacteristic that a massive cemetery would be forgotten.

More recently, a front page article of the *New York Times* reported the discovery of an 18th century potter's field in New York City. Excavation has delayed construction at the cost of \$6 million.¹⁶ Thus, Milwaukee County is not the only

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community faced with the management of a pauper cemetery, and how the graves of Milwaukee's Potter's Field are treated has important ethical ramifications for communities facing similar dilemmas.

If we believe in what Gladstone wrote, and aspire to become a society remembered for equality and respect for human dignity, than we are compelled to act and right this wrong. Because those buried and forgotten were poor, it is crucial to respond in a manner symbolic of our egalitarian ideals. It has been said that a society will be judged by the way it treats its poor. From most accounts, the poor in Milwaukee County were treated with dignity and respect, while still living. From Rule 17 a legal commitment was made to continue care even after death.

The poor may always be with us. Milwaukee County struggles today with an increasing number of homeless, unemployed, indigent, and needy people. In June 1991, a Milwaukee opinion survey on the reasons for poverty and homelessness found that attitudes toward the poor depended on whether respondents knew someone who was impoverished.

Repairers of the Breach, a Milwaukee newspaper for and about the poor, reported that drug and alcohol abuse and lack of a strong work ethic were reasons given for poverty by those people who lacked knowledge and contact with the poor. In contrast, those who provide services to the homeless and poor cited lack of affordable housing, lack of adequate paying jobs, dependency, and mental health problems as causes for poverty.¹⁷ The former attitude is not unlike that held by the creators of debtor's prisons and poor laws.

Today, there is no need for a potter's field or pauper cemetery. If someone dies in Milwaukee County without financial means to pay for burial, the county has contracted with local private cemeteries to assist with cost and arrangements. Milwaukee County authorized 637 funerals for the indigent in 1990.²⁰

The future

"Pave over paradise and put up a parking lot." -Joni Mitchell

The manner in which the pauper cemetery is handled will reflect on our community and our society. Immediate cremation of the remains would save the county further costs and construction could then proceed. Curation for research and study would perhaps satisfy the archaeologist, pathologist, and others committed to the advancement of science. The Potter's Field discovery, however, represents 5,000 human beings, former residents of this county, who were neglected and forgotten because of their poverty. The elderly, the sick, the orphaned, the handicapped, and immigrants were buried in that cemetery. They do not deserve to be treated as museum pieces.

Science should be allowed to glean what it can from these remains, but without losing sight of fundamental humanitar-

ian ideals. Following a reasonable period of curation and study, the remains should be reburied at the site of the present Milwaukee County Cemetery with a modest symbol to act as a memorial. Perhaps, this effort will help set a precedent for the future management of discovered cemeteries.

Postscript

"I will live in the past, the present, and the future." - Ebenezer Scrooge

At the age of 12, Charles Dickens was forced to work in a boot blacking factory to help pay his father's way out of a debtor's prison. The experience had a profound and lasting effect on Dickens and his writings reformed western society. The public health movement found its origin in the imagination of Charles Dickens. Through writings on sanitation, occupational health, and the treatment of the disadvantaged, Dickens helped to change and improve the course of history.

A few years after Dickens published *A Christmas Carol*, in 1843, Milwaukee County established the Almshouse. The story's theme is the prevailing attitudes of society toward the poor. Dickens describes a lonely, greedy, and uncaring man who refuses to give charity to London's poor, and instead points to the prisons, workhouses, and poor laws as his contribution to the impoverished. Scrooge is visited by three ghosts. The last, The Ghost of Christmas Future, takes him to a cemetery containing his own tombstone. Like Judas, Scrooge is filled with remorse, crying.

"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge. "But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"

Seeing the past, the present, and the future converted Scrooge, changing his attitude toward the poor, toward family, toward life. Upon waking up and realizing it was all a dream, Scrooge found he had a second chance. "I will live in the past, the present, and the future," Scrooge proclaimed. He made large financial contributions to those collecting for the poor. He re-established his family relationships. Most importantly, Scrooge helped the impoverished Cratchit family, and to the sick Tiny Tim he became, in Dickens' words, "a second father."

Dickens' challenges all to wake up and change the course of history. By returning dignity and respect to the thousands buried in Milwaukee County's neglected and forgotten pauper cemetery, it is possible to depart from the current course. By resolving to live in the past, the present, and the future, society can make a commitment to high ideals as did Scrooge. By fostering a compassionate attitude toward the poor, society can be more confident when the future passes its ultimate judgment.

Addendum

My great, great grandfather, Peter McBride, immigrated to Milwaukee the same year the Almshouse was established in

1852. He was 7 years old, poor, and one of more than 4 million Irish who left Ireland because of English oppression and the devastating Potato Famine. My grandfather, George McBride, was sent to work at Milwaukee County's Almshouse as a teenager. His father wanted the boy to see the effects of poverty and develop a strong work ethic. I am a Milwaukee County resident and medical student, and aspire to train at the medical center and eventually practice medicine in the Milwaukee area.

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A glimpse into our past

Richard D. Sautter, MD, medical editor

40 years ago

Demands for health care. The three most common complaints concerning medical practice of the day were: "inability to get doctors to make house calls, long waiting periods in the doctor's office, and scarcity of physicians in small communities." The SMS president accused "government propaganda" of creating a public impression of a physician shortage and creating "dissatisfaction with medical service." He wrote, however, that "If we are to win the fight to preserve private medical practice, we must satisfy the needs of the public."

This sounds familiar. Favoring a plan for national health insurance, President Truman formed his Commission on the Health Needs of the Nation (to which Wisconsin's Gunnar Gundersen, MD, was appointed, and from which Dr Gundersen immediately resigned). The AMA called it a "stacked" commission, "palpably political in its design." Meanwhile, Gov Warren entered the presidential arena favoring a national system of "prepaid medical care," and the AFL joined with the CIO in an attempt to line up smaller unions behind a campaign for "national compulsory health insurance."

The cold war in deep freeze. The *WMJ*, like the rest of the nation, was concerned about war with the former Soviet Union, publishing a number of civil defense articles with titles such as "Medical Aspects of Atomic War" and "Defense Against Biologic Agents Employed in Warfare." The *WMJ* also offered six "survival secrets for atomic attacks" and encouraged physicians to share them with their patients: 1) Try to get shielded (eg, if outdoors, jump in a ditch); 2) Drop to the floor or ground; 3) Bury your face in your arms; 4) Don't rush outside right after a bombing—the advice was to wait a "few minutes" for an "air burst" and "1 hour" for a "other bursts" to give the radiation a "chance to die down"; 5) Don't take chances with food or water in open containers; and 6) Don't start rumors—"In the confusion that follows a bombing, a single rumor might touch off a panic that could cost your life."

80 years ago

From a distance, the connection isn't clear. Dr Horace Brown, of Milwaukee, collected statistics from his fellow physicians to support his complaints about telephone rates and service. The completed report was submitted to the Milwaukee County Medical Society, the president of which then

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appointed a committee to present the report to the State Railroad Commission. And we thought our bureaucracies were confusing.

An early reformer. Dr Ralph Elmergreen, of Milwaukee, was writing in the *WMJ* of surgical treatment of vaginal ptosis when he noted that medical science was not always applied equally between the genders: "To those of us that have spent some time in the dissection of the female perineum, the textbooks on anatomy offer but little comfort. We look in vain toward Gray, Holden, or even Piersol, for a full and correct description of the structures and anatomic architecture of the female perineum. Thus Gray fills several pages in describing the male bladder, but he dismisses the female bladder with one short paragraph."

Taking stock of human stock. A Madison physician delivered a paper at the SMS annual meeting, and later had it published in the *WMJ*, in which he decried the weakness of the public will to apply the "science of eugenics" to "build up a vigorous enlightened citizenship." He wrote that the "essentials of proper mating" were "health and beauty and vitality, moral worth and mental integrity," and that he favored the forced sterilization of the insane, epileptics, and "drunkards," but complained that such legal action did not reach to alcoholics, "street walkers' who pass for respectable women," petty thieves, imbeciles, or paranoiacs. He blamed public sentiment for "the absurd fetish of 'personal liberty' for the fact "that the eugenics of horses, hogs, and chickens" were taught in universities "while the eugenics of man is passed over..." Not too much later, across the Atlantic, we saw the handiwork of those who would build a master race.

120 years ago

The mystery of medicine. In an effort to explore environmental factors in disease prevalence, the SMS formed a committee, the members of which were to "collect all the facts attainable in his region, respecting the general conformation of the country, the character of the soil, and of the water, the amount of rainfall, with notes of Barometrical and

Thermometrical observations, Electrical Phenomena, and prevailing diseases ... to which his district has been most subject." The diseases and methods of exploration may have changed, but the search-and the mystery-continues today.

The frustration of medicine. The mystery of medicine caused a great deal of frustration for the physicians of the time: they understood that they knew little of what caused disease; they were unable to find the cures they so desperately wanted to provide; and they were frustrated at how slowly their art was becoming a science. Consider the remarks of SMS President H.P. Strong, MD, of 1871: "Our ancestors, our fathers, knew a great deal. Do we know positively a great deal more? Much of what is styled progress is nothing but gyration, resembling the progress of the dog that follows its own tail. It is questionable whether we treat diseases so very much better than did Boerhaave and Sydenham, as we sometimes imagine. Medicine is slowly advancing, and will probably yet arrive at that state when it may with propriety be considered science.... Men, learned in all things else, are fools in medicine."

Medical non-education. In 1871, medical students in Italy studies 6 years, in Germany 5 years, in France 4 years, in the United States 12 to 15 weeks. Dr O.W. Wight, of Oconomowoc, wrote "Moreover, the preliminary study, the necessary preparation, is (in these other countries) nearly equivalent to graduation at an American college. With us, no preparation is required. Any ignoramus can begin the study of the great healing art. Only two courses of lectures, varying in length from twelve to fifteen weeks, are demanded of the candidate for professional honors.... With such slender and precarious preparation a young man can be admitted to one of the most responsible stations in life." Dr Wight described the American physician's apprenticeship as 3 years of currying the doctor's horse, splitting the doctor's wood, collecting the doctor's bills, and even babysitting for the doctor's wife. "The whole system," he wrote, "is vicious." Little wonder then, that the science of American medicine progressed so slowly.¹³⁰¹⁴

WISPAC to interview political candidates

THE WISPAC BOARD OF DIRECTORS met July 29 to welcome new board members and continue discussing endorsements for the 1992 general election. Announcement of new board members is pending approval by the SMS Board of Directors.

Over the course of the next two months, WISPAC members will be interviewing candidates for open legislative seats to learn more about their positions on health care issues. This year, in addition to the usual open seats, several vacancies have resulted from legislative redistricting. WISPAC members intend to complete interviews and make endorsement recommendations by the end of August.

During this election year, physicians are strongly encouraged to become more active in the political arena. For information on WISPAC, call Mike Kirby at 1-800-362-9080 or in Madison (608) 257-6781.¹³⁰¹⁴