Margaret Young Coleman: First female physician in Lycoming County

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It seems to be a law of nature that when you find the answer to one mystery, you uncover more mysteries to reveal. This is the case with the first woman physician who practiced in northeastern Pennsylvania - Dr. Margaret Young Coleman.

The original mystery was a question Matt Herbst, archivist at Drexel University College of Medicine, Philadelphia, posed to Mary Sieminski, project manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection. "Did Mary know why her great-grandmother was misidentified?"

Coleman was listed as the physician preceptor for Jean Sayler Brown when she graduated from Women's Medical College (now part of Drexel University). The archivist thought that Coleman might have indeed been a doctor in the Williamsport area.

Dr. Sayler Brown and her classmate Dr. Rita Church had taken the helm of the former Williamsport Hospital, now Williamsport Regional Medical Center, during its fragile, formative years and they had founded the School of Nursing. Sieminski knew of my interest in Sayler Brown and forwarded the query to me.

Coleman was an unfamiliar name. She is not mentioned in the county medical society archives. I joined Sieminski's network of history sleuths attempting to uncover a woman hidden beneath a century of time. We started with a short biography of Margaret Coleman in John Michael's "History of Lycoming County, Pennsylvania.

The piece of information we managed to gather was interesting but incomplete image of Coleman. She was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in April 1822, the second child of Mary and John Young. The family immigrated to America in June 1827.

John Young's livelihood led to multiple family moves, from Rhode Island to Maryland. Eventually the family settled on a farm in Tioga County. Despite the upheaval of moving, Margaret was well-educated. She taught in several rural schools in Lycoming and Tioga Counties, including Bloomsburg, Ralston and Block House.

Pivotal moment

A pivotal moment in her life occurred in 1849. Two of her brothers and a sister died of typhoid fever within an eight-day period. Distressed by their medical care, Coleman vowed to become a physician.

The typhoid patient with typhoid fever, headache, confusion, cramping, constipation. The treatment given to Coleman's siblings was most likely 'colonel' (mercury chloride), a laxative and anti-septic. Today we know that this standard 19th-century remedy only added to a patient's misery and did nothing to fight the infection.

Coleman's determination to become a physician also may have been spurred by two landmark events. The first was that Coleman's siblings died, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to be awarded the medical doctorate degree in the United States in 1849. A year later, Female (Womans's) Medical College in Philadelphia graduated its first class of physicians.

Dr. Joseph Longshore, a co-founder of Williamsport's Medical College, recognized that doctors trained by the female-only school were shunned by the male medical community. So in 1871 he founded Penn Medical University, based on two radical ideas: Men and women (often rival) medical criteria for admission, and all forms of treatment, including Native American remedies, would be worthy of study to determine their effectiveness. Only two remedies would not be taught: bloodletting and 'colonel.' Longshore felt they already were proven worthless.

Margaret Young, 36, earned her medical doctorate degree at Penn Medical University in 1855. She settled in Williamsport, PA, and practiced successfully for more than 40 years. Like many women physicians of the time, she specialized in the needs of female patients.

Coleman kept with her training, she used techniques from different medical conditions, including allopathic, homeopathic, hydro-therapeutic and electro-therapeutic care. She mentored Sayler Brown, who later wrote her medical school thesis on electro-therapy.

Personal life

Coleman's personal life was as unconventional as her choice of profession. On June 14, 1844, when she was 22, she married a 26-year-old German immigrant named Joseph Coleman. They settled in a number of trades over the years — as a carpenter, janitor, limnaryman and grocer.

In 1866, at age 43, Coleman gave birth to Albert. According to the 1870 census, Elizabeth, a child five years younger than Albert, also lived with the Coleman; no relationship to either Margaret or Joseph is recorded. The family lived in an Italianate mansion at 20 High St. (Later No. 466). They offered rooms to out-of-town patients who needed lodging.

By the late 1870s, the Coleman marriage was apparently failing. Margaret left town in 1877 and settled in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, a seaside resort, religious conference and early feminist enclave.

She created a spa at "Block House," offering first-class accommodations and treatments with the popular electro-thera- py baths. The 1880 census indicates that she was back in Williamsport living with her husband on High Street, but after 1860, they had separate residences.

Margaret also may have maintained a presence in Ocean Grove in the early 1890s.

Albert, Coleman attended medical school in Washington, D.C., but never completed his studies. He took over Joseph's Grocery at the corner of Sherman and Sheridan streets when his father died of lockjaw (tetanus) in July 1894. Margaret, 72, sold the home at High Street and moved in with her son.

Later they rented rooms at 812 Washington St., where Albert, 34, died in August 1900. Margaret lived there until her death on Jan. 9, 1904, at age 81.

Returning to the original question from Drexel's archives - yes, Margaret Coleman was a physician in Williamsport. But she continues to please our curiosity. We have found no pictures of her.

How did she meet and marry her husband? Was she 16 years younger? What called their marriage apart later? In 1864, most young men in Williamsport were serving in the Union Army - did Joseph pay $300 to be exempt from the draft? Who was Elizabeth, the 9-year-old child who was a part of the Coleman household on the 1870 census but disappeared in 1880? Why did Margaret abandon her practice in Ocean Grove? Are there readers who can shed some light on these mysteries? We'd love to hear from you.

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