

TATTERED TIDBITS – THE ALPINE SUN SPOT SHOPPER

August 7, 2014

Sophronia Athearn Nichols Medical Doctor and Homeopath Part I

I visited the Alpine Historical Society's Museum for the first time with the intention of possibly doing some writing for the Tattered Tidbits feature. I met Carol Morrison, the President, and she introduced me to much of the history contained within this house where Sophronia Athearn Nichols lived and conducted her medical practice 126 years ago. Sophronia was the first Medical Doctor of Alpine. Imagine my surprise to learn that she was also a Homeopath! Why so surprised? Because I too, am a Homeopath.

Those 126 years began to melt away, as I recognized a kindred spirit in Sophronia.

She was born on November 27, 1835. Andrew Jackson was President of the United States; Comet Halley made its second predicted return, the *Great Moon Hoax* begins, and homeopathy had been flourishing on our shores for 15 years.

Sophronia, called Fronie by family and friends, was the second child of six siblings. She experienced a conventional childhood and adolescence and in 1864, at the age of 29, received her teaching credentials from the Normal School, Bridgewater, MA.

Sophronia married in 1860 and though she had two healthy children from that marriage she also suffered five miscarriages. Motivated to understand and do something to help prevent this tragedy for other women she made a choice for herself that was anything but conventional; she went to medical school.

Apparently it was such an unconventional choice that her husband left her, preferring not to be associated with a woman who would choose a medical career, a field that in those days, belonged to men.

Homeopathy began over 200 years ago, developed by a German Physician named Samuel Hahnemann. Between then and now it has met with everything from full acceptance, with healing results printed in many prestigious medical journals such as *The Lancet*, *Pediatrics*, and the *British Medical Journal*, to severe skepticism and derision.

When I declared my intentions of becoming a Homeopath in the year 2000, and attending four years of school to do so, I was met with a similar array of responses. My mother was wholly supportive. My father rolled his eyes and groaned in disbelief. Sophronia's husband divorced her, but her parents and siblings championed her choice.

It was a world of rapidly changing events. In 1867 Nebraska became the 39th State to enter the Union. Two years later the Trans Continental Railroad is finally completed. The fourth cholera pandemic is raging across Central Europe and Africa. It is treated both homeopathically and with orthodox medicine. Among the remedies of choice were *Camphora*, *Veratrum Album* and *Nux Vomica*. With homeopathy mortality rates varied between 2.4 and 21.1 percent. Fifty percent or more died with conventional treatment.

It's 1873 and Sophronia is thirty nine, banks fail and the depression is beginning. Fronie begins her medical study at New England Female Medical College. Even by today's modern standards this would be considered a late start! She is determined to become a healer. Later that year she starts at Boston University School of Medicine. She graduates from there in June of 1874. There were four in her class and, not surprisingly, she was the only woman. She was restricted to treating the ills of women and children. She won the admiration of her colleagues with her thesis entitled Puerperal Convulsions. "Puerperal" pertains to childbirth, specifically the period shortly before childbirth to the last six weeks after delivery. In today's language, puerperal convulsions are known as eclampsia, or toxemia.

The five graduating students formed the Alumni Association of Boston University, School of Medicine. Its three-fold mission; to champion coeducation, homeopathy, and admission without regard to race or religion. In the early years the annual meetings were used as forums to exhort alumni to demonstrate the highest standards of medical practices as a way of blunting controversy over the efficacy of homeopathy. Homeopathy was well established, but the mutual antagonism and distrust between homeopaths and allopaths (conventional Doctors) was hindering its progress.

See next months Tattered Tidbits for Part II of *Sophronia Athearn Nichols, Medical Doctor and Homeopath*.

The quarterly potluck meeting of the Alpine Historical Society will be held a 1 p.m. on Sunday, August 17, 2014 at the Alpine Women's Club, 2156 Alpine Blvd. The guest speaker, Judy Dunning, is the founder and president of the San Diego Herb Guild which she launched in 1993. Judy's talk will focus on the herbs or herbal products that may have been used by Alpine's first physician, Dr. Sophronia Nichols. Please RSVP by calling Carol Morrison at 619-445-2544 or send an email to info@alpinehistory.org.

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