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Dr. Walter Reed, 1851-1902

He Solved the Great Mosquito Mystery

(Editor's note: The following article on the life and contributions of Walter Reed is part of a continuing series of stories on the men for whom the wards of Duke Hospital are named.)

Walter Reed, to whom the Nineteenth Century owed the last of its vast array of scientific discoveries, was born in Gloucester County, Va., on Sept. 13, 1851.

His father, Lemuel Sutton Reed was a Methodist minister and a North Carolinian by birth. His mother, also from North Carolina, was Pharaba White. Both were descended from English families.

According to his first biographer, Howard A. Kelly, Walter Reed began early to manifest the force of character, self-control, passionate love of knowledge and keen sense of honor which distinguished him in later life.

Civil War

When he was 10 years old, the Civil War erupted, and in 1865, when he was 14, he was taken prisoner briefly by Union raiders who swept through the part of Virginia where the Reeds lived.

He was charged, along with several of his friends, with hiding the family livestock from the foraging Union soldiers, but was released soon afterward because he was a minor.

At 16 he entered the University of Virginia under a special dispensation. Since two of his brothers were already at the university and his father could not afford to support three sons at college, Reed applied for an early graduation. His application was denied because he was under age.

Requests Degree

He then asked the faculty if they would award him a doctor of medicine degree if he could pass the examinations. Believing the task impossible, the faculty agreed.

Bowing to these learned men, Reed is reported to have said, "Gentlemen, I hold you to your promise."

The young man began his medical studies immediately and was graduated nine months later, in the summer of 1869, standing third in his class.

At 17, he was the youngest student ever to receive a diploma from the medical school at Charlottesville.

New York

Reed then journeyed to New York where he received a second M.D. degree from Bellevue Hospital Medical College the following year and served an internship at the King's County Hospital.

After four years as a district physician to one of the poorest sections of New York and an inspector on the Brooklyn Board of Health, he decided to attempt to join the United States Army Medical Corps, telling his future wife in a letter: "As long as my success depended upon actual knowledge and experience, I managed to overcome all obstacles, but the moment that I entered upon the race of life I at once found out the disadvantages of a youthful appearance.

"It is a remarkable fact that a man's success during the first decade depends more upon his beard than his brains."

At another point, he was so depressed that the leading physician in his neighborhood in Brooklyn was "a first-class quack," despite travelling in a fine coach with several footmen, he told his brother, "I am disgusted and I should like to give up my profession."

Tough Exam

In 1874, competition for an appointment into the Army Medical Corps was intense. When Reed took his examination, there were more than 500 applications for less than 30 positions. Nevertheless, he passed exams in Latin, Greek, mathematics, history and medical subjects brilliantly, and he was accepted into the corps in 1875.

Reed was soon ordered to the Arizona territory to begin a life as garrison doctor which lasted the better part of 18 years. His wife, the former Emilie Lawrence of Murfreesboro, N.C., accompanied him on the 22-day overland journey from San Francisco to Ft. Lowell, Ariz.

Arizona was at that time an isolated part of the country where Indian attacks were still frequent. More than once, the physician and Mrs. Reed escaped death by chance, arriving either a few days too early or too late at the scenes of bloody massacres.

Rough Roads

The roads in the territory, incidentally, were almost as hazardous as the Indians. On one trip through the mountains to Ft. Apache, it took 16 mules seven hours to pull the medical supply wagon 30 feet. At another point on the same trip, he and the enlisted men in his charge were forced to drag a large tree behind the wagon to keep it from turning end-over-end while descending through rocky terrain.

As post surgeon, Reed was both respected and loved. He treated soldiers, settlers and Indians alike, seemingly without regard for his own physical comfort. Again according to his biographer Kelly, "the more humble the patient, the greater was Dr. Reed's devotion, for the impression made upon him by his experiences among the poor in his New York district was never effaced, and his heart went out to the lowly and the ignorant."

Becomes Scientist

Around 1890, the medical officer's life changed dramatically when he was transferred to Baltimore. He began his scientific work at Johns Hopkins University under the tutelage of Dr. William H. Welch, considered by many to be the "father of modern American medicine." Inspired by the discoveries of Pasteur and Koch, the 41-year-old physician studied pathology and bacteriology with a fervor which impressed even Welch.

His first original work, published in the *Johns Hopkins Hospital Report*, described an investigation of the nodules found in the livers of patients with typhoid fever. His first paper to appear in print was entitled, "The Contagiousness of Erysipelas."

In 1898, the Spanish-American War broke out, and Reed volunteered to care for sick and wounded soldiers in Cuba. Despite his record, he was turned down in favor of other doctors with more political influence.

Soldiers Suffering

At the time, many American soldiers suffered from typhoid and yellow fever. In fact, more men were lost to or incapacitated by these diseases than all the wounds suffered on the battlefield with the Spanish.

Reed felt that the losses could be cut by proper sanitary conditions, but

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HEIGH-HO AND UP SHE RISES—On Monday, heavy rains put the damper on construction of Duke North, turning the ground into a quagmire of shoe-sopping mud. Evidenced by this photograph, progress is being made, however, as steel forms of reinforced caissons show themselves above the ground. Some of these concrete columns, flared out at the bottom to a diameter of 10 feet, extend down as far as 40 feet into the earth, and all of them rest on bedrock. Foundation walls for the food service area in the central bed tower will be started in the next few days near the Eye Center.