

For rarely are sons similar to their fathers; most are worse, and a few are better than their fathers.
—Homer; The Iliad, Bk. XXIV

William Henry Wishard (1816-1913)

The Urologist's Father or A Physician of the Old School

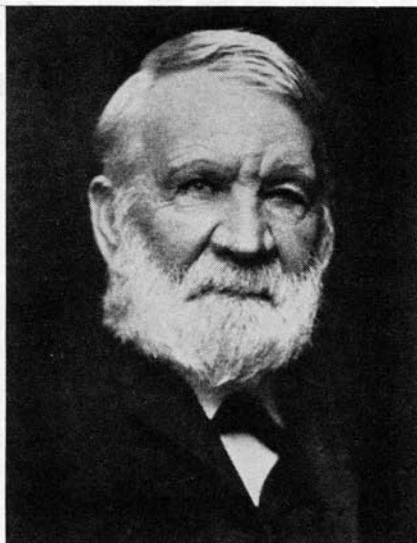
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EXTRAORDINARY are the accomplishments of William Niles Wishard, Sr., of Indianapolis, the pioneer urologist, second president of the American Urological Association and the man for whom Indianapolis General Hospital has recently been named, yet the purpose of this essay is to trace the life and times of his father, who preceded him in service to the medical profession, and his patients.

My personal interest in William Henry Wishard stems partly from the fact that he received his M.D. from the Indiana Medical College at LaPorte in 1849 and my own urologic practice is in LaPorte. Also, I have, through research into his professional life, become convinced that he was a unique and good man.

It is fitting that some knowledge of this medical progenitor should continue to be promulgated in our own age. A corollary that arises in tracing the life of William Henry is the realization that a remarkably short span of time encompassed the land-clearing stage of American population of the Northwest territory and the staid Victorian civilization that was perhaps epitomized by the life of William Niles Wishard, Sr.

The father, William Henry Wishard, was born in Kentucky in 1816 and his family left for the non-slave state of Indiana in 1825, settling 10 miles south of Indianapolis in a forested area which was infested each autumn with malaria from the swamps of the White River. By 1879, just 54 years later, his son was elected superintendent of the Indianapolis City Hospital, a



William Henry Wishard
1816-1913

post he retained for five years.

The Wishards were making a name in those days, both father and son, because William Henry had been elected coroner of Marion County in the campaign of 1876 and held office until 1884. He had originally set up practice in Greenwood but spent 13 years after 1864 in practice at Southport and his election to coroner permitted a fortuitous change to the larger city of Indianapolis, where the children could obtain better educational opportunities.

His medical education began in 1838 when he entered the office of Benjamin S. Noble of Greenwood. Dr. Noble's brother had been governor of Indiana. He used Dr. Noble's books, which were few, and he purchased a "Practice of Medicine," "Materia Medica" and "Dis-

eases of Children." In order to secure skeletons for anatomical study, he resurrected the bodies of an Indian couple who had died violent deaths after imbibing, as he says "fire water . . . to the full extent of their capacity . . . (Later) accompanied by a friend, and equipped with two sacks and a spade, I . . . soon had two skeletons in a reasonable good state of preservation." However, he was almost indicted at the next session of the grand jury in Johnson County "for bringing about a premature resurrection of two Indians . . . (but) there was an insurmountable obstacle . . . as the names of the resurrected Indians could not be obtained." So he was let off on a technicality.

After two years of apprenticeship, he was given a junior partnership and eventually relocated in family practice in Southport. Unlike many of the physicians of those early years, he tried to get any formal education that was available and took the four-month series of courses at the Medical College of Ohio at Cincinnati in 1845. Again, he matriculated at the Indiana Medical College at LaPorte for the 1848-1849 term. The requirements for graduation then were successful completion of two courses of lectures, citizenship, good moral character and a thesis. Dr. Wishard fulfilled these requisites and was duly graduated M.D. on Feb. 22, 1849. He was 33 years old—not a callow youth by any measure. Actually, it was the same year that he and 83 other Indiana physicians

founded the Indiana Medical Association—an organization of which he would be the oldest living founder after the turn of the century.

It's difficult today to realize the travail which parents endured in the days when childhood diseases pursued a frequently lethal course. Altogether, the Wishards had eight children but the first four died before the age of five. The story is told of little Agnes who walked a half mile at 2 a.m. to a neighbor to bring help to her mother who was suddenly taken ill. The child herself died shortly thereafter, as did so many. When Wishard was in school at LaPorte he wrote back to his wife at Indianapolis and to their child Mary. Again, that child was taken from them. Finally, whether it was due to the progress of civilization on the northwest frontier or mere providential good luck, their last four children lived through the early years to productive adult life.

William Niles Wishard was named for his father's beloved professor at LaPorte, Judge William B. Niles. One son became a Presbyterian minister and one daughter, Elizabeth, wrote the biography of her father from which much of this essay is taken.

An interesting sidelight on the morals and mores of the age comes through in an address which Wishard made to the Indiana State Medical Society (Association) on the occasion of his presidency of that organization on May 1, 1889. He said:

The good old dame of olden times would point you to her 10 or a dozen promising sons and daughters, the pride of her heart and the hope of her old age. We now have presented to us too often, one son or daughter with a poodle dog . . . Gentleman, you know what I mean. . . .

In the same address he advocated judicious use of bleeding but decried general spilling of blood therapeutically. He said:

It was not unusual for many persons to be bled every spring (referring to the early 1800s in Indiana). They had the superstitious belief that their blood was too thick, and that the old blood had to be drawn off to give room for a new and better article.



William Niles Wishard, Sr.
1851-1941

But he also said:

Blood letting was an indispensable remedial agent, and when wisely used by an intelligent physician was a power for good and saved many valuable lives. . . . In the first stages of pleurisy and pneumonia it was the sheet anchor. . . .

It is ironic that the early physicians had practically nothing of real pharmaceutical value but quinine with which to treat their feverish patients and they were highly revered, while the physician of today can do so much and perhaps is held in ill repute. But in the 1800s good health was apparently not thought of as a "right" but as a "gift" from a Beneficent Providence. Who is to say they were wrong? Perhaps even now the microbes are regrouping their forces and all our vaunted antibiotics and vaccinations will be impotent. It is said today that mankind has conquered smallpox, but only time will prove that contention. It is a fact that when the population was afflicted with these scourges and the doctors could only console, the doctor was well loved. A paradox of human behavior.

Wishard was overage when Governor Morton of Indiana asked him to take a commission in the Union Army in 1862. However, he volunteered to accompany the Indiana regiments as a civilian doctor and was at Vicksburg when it capitulated to "Unconditional Surrender" Grant. He was within earshot when

Grant received first word that the Confederates would surrender. Thereafter, Wishard was instrumental in having the Indiana wounded returned up the Mississippi to their homes, rather than mouldering in Army hospitals and cantonments. His stand in this controversial matter of transporting wounded home was finally affirmed by President Lincoln himself. After the Union troops occupied Vicksburg, a Confederate soldier said to Wishard "I want to shake the hand of a man who bears a charmed life." As a surgeon dressed in white he went to the regimental hospital each morning and presented a good target. Wishard said "That explains why I have heard so many bullets whizzing past my ears." He captained a riverboat of wounded back to the Ohio River and then resumed his practice at home.

His son, William Niles Wishard, Sr., was superintendent of the Indianapolis City Hospital from June 1879 to January 1886 and presided at the advancement of that institution from an asylum for destitute and dying poor to a modern hospital with all the appurtenances appropriate for the 1880s.

When Will (as his sister-biographer calls him) decided, after seeing the ravages of urological disease in the denizens of the City Hospital, to specialize in genitourinary diseases, his father opposed it. But the son persisted and became the premier urologist of the Midwest. The story of his long and fruitful leadership in his chosen specialty is another story altogether.* An anecdotal aside which Dr. Frank Bicknell of Detroit relates today is that Will Wishard said the populace of Indianapolis called him a "gent's urinary surgeon" when he first set up as a genitourinary surgeon.

How did the early specialists convince their peers that they could do

*He was the first to do prostatectomy through a combined abdominal and perineal incision in 1891 and described his use of the cautery on the prostate and bladder through a perineal incision in 1892.

the job better? It must be remembered that they blazed the trail which all of us so easily follow today.

However, returning to Will's father—the senior Wishard was well educated for his time and, along with lectures at Cincinnati and LaPorte, he went back to the former school in 1851. He gave a chloroform anesthetic at that time.

This agent was used in LaPorte and is reported as early as 1847 in the *LaPorte County Whig*. It was new to Indianapolis and the family of a young man with a dislocated shoulder was against its use. However, Wishard prevailed by asking the patient, who was of age, if he would consent. When regaining consciousness he was loud and agitated. The crowd said he "had taken leave of his senses" but he shortly gave a testimonial in favor of the anesthetic.

The old timers in medicine didn't lack courage—there were few malpractice suits but then there could be instant retribution. It seems that tar and feathers have gone out of fashion and it is just as well. There was a violent group of people outside the surgery of Ephraim McDowell of Danville, Ky., when he performed the first successful ovariectomy in 1826. Would knowledge

He was a man: take him for all and all, I shall not look upon his like again.—Hamlet.

of these primeval conditions make our modern malpractice insurance payments an easier pill to swallow?

Once Wishard was called to see a child with severe facial cutaneous infections which the mother was covering with goose grease. She persisted in spite of the doctor's adjuration against such treatment. Finally, he asked her if the grease was from a goose or a gander and at what time of the month the bird was killed. She had no idea, of course, and Wishard contended that the medicament was, therefore, ineffectual and prescribed periodic cleansing of the child's face. The healing was then satisfactory. This incident epitomizes the superstitious barriers which impeded good medical care in the old days.

And so, after 60 years in practice, William Henry Wishard died on Dec. 9, 1913. Shortly afterward millions were to die in the trenches in France and elsewhere during the Great War. The world which he knew with its simple rules and aspirations was to be no more. A copy

of the privately printed biography of William Henry Wishard is in the possession of the Indiana State Medical Association. On the flyleaf Will, his son, has written:

"The man I knew best and the best man I knew"—dated October 10, 1936. On this note the story of the pioneer physician can end.

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