

From Pioneer to Scientist

The Life Story
of
Greene Vardiman Black
"Father of Modern Dentistry"
And His Son
Arthur Davenport Black
Late Dean of Northwestern University Dental School

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place where their criticism could stick. All his researches were carried out with infinite care and patience in order to get the real facts and have them complete. Not infrequently he cast aside previous results and did a whole series over again.

This year, (1905), he received one of the outstanding honors of his career. This was an invitation from the "American Dental Society of Europe" to be their special guest and to deliver a course of lectures before that organization in Berlin, Germany, in August, 1906.

The reader should be reminded that dentistry and dental education in Europe were still lagging behind that in America. The best work in Europe was still done by American dentists. While it was really the best work from a professional standpoint, it was also the best from the standpoint of the class of patients it attracted. These dentists did the bulk of the work for royalty and the wealthy in all the countries. In every important European center there were American dentists. Their work had a reputation in the public mind which the native dentist, whatever his qualifications, had not been able to attain.

So in 1905 the American dentists invited "The Father of Modern Dentistry" to lecture to them at their annual meeting, with all expenses paid. This proposition was an unusual one. There were always self-important dentists of sufficient social and professional standing who were anxious to journey to Europe at their own expense for the privilege of addressing their European colleagues.

G. V. Black was never in this class. He never sought a hearing. Others had to seek him or he did not go, and now that he had a worldwide reputation it was not necessary for him to seek a hearing.

For a year prior to the event he was busy preparing material he thought suitable for such an occasion.

He was going into one of the strongholds of modern science and what he presented must measure up to the scientific reputation of Berlin. He must be ready to meet any criticism German scientists might level at him.

How unnecessary such a thought was will appear later. He would be disillusioned. He read, quoted and admired the German scientists and probably had never seriously considered how little they read, admired and quoted him. This was a German characteristic he had not taken into account. In fact, this was one of the things that was the matter with German and continental dentistry. If he realized this situation, it did not affect the preparation for his lectures. In his mind the preparation was the all-important thing.

While he was busy with his lectures, he had little or no thought for such trifles as appropriate clothing, shirts, collars, socks, passports, tickets, routes, and a hundred and one other things. He would see to it that he had an abundant supply of cigars. Such other incidentals, if they had to be considered, could be attended to by his family. They were all in a flutter. "Mamma" and the children lectured "papa" about all these details until he was tired of hearing about them. He was going to deliver a course of lectures and not to show off his clothes, collars, and neckties.

In some ways his health was a worry to his family—his insomnia, muscular cramps, and headaches—such things had to be considered. There was no member of his family who had not administered chloroform to him on account of muscular cramps and on one occasion a railroad porter had given him the chloroform on the train and he had to be laid out

in the baggage-room at his destination until he woke up. The vision of all these possibilities was in the family mind.

They forgot that both his insomnia and his cramps had been largely overcome by following the advice of a Kentucky distiller friend, who had told him that if he would take two to four ounces of good "Old Taylor Whiskey" at bed-time each night he would sleep well and have no cramps. It worked. His old friend always sent him two gallons of "Old Taylor" every year as a present. So "Old Taylor" had to be a part of the European equipment.

One of the writers (a son and a physician) who had spent a year in Europe, was drafted to go with him, and finally after many cautioning injunctions by "mamma" and his daughters, he was on his way. The voyage to Bremen, on the Grösser Kürfurst (North-German Lloyd) was a pleasant one and on July 25, 1906, we were settled at the Palast Hotel in Berlin. We first tried the Victoria Hotel but it was too noisy, too many automobile toots. Dr. Herbert Potts of Chicago and a Dr. Bogue were in our party.

We were purposely a few days ahead of the meeting date, but Dr. Black had many stereopticon slides to arrange, finishing touches to put on his lectures, and many callers. Therefore, he was quite busy. The son went to the surgical clinics which were his objective. He had been in Berlin before so that he was somewhat at home. The next day after our arrival was the first time the father was left to his own devices. One of his peculiarities was that he would have nothing to do with the financial transactions of the trip—that was his son's business—he could attend to all such matters.

So on the second day in Berlin, knowing that his son would be away all day, our dentist was supplied

with a twenty mark bill, and a restaurant across the street was pointed out where he could conveniently go for lunch. When the son returned late in the afternoon he found his father thoroughly angry—the waiter at the restaurant had “short-changed” him. He had found it was one thing to know the German language, and quite another to use it for practical purposes. He had the German money on a table in front of him studying the marks and pfennigs the waiter had given him in change. He had had a lesson in one important German characteristic and he was trying to gain a little familiarity with German money. He declared they would never “swindle” him again, and we don’t think they did.

There were numerous dinners, boat-rides, trips about town, and banquets at which he was the guest of honor. All these were thoroughly enjoyed. He had hard work to take care of all the beer and wine that flowed, but even in that he managed well. He, of course, called on his friend and colleague in dental science, Dr. W. D. Miller, and visited the laboratories with him. He saw many interesting things.

His lectures went off in a splendid way and were thoroughly appreciated. He never simply gave his hearers “the glad hand” and a lot of things from his “barrel.” It was all good sound, first-hand material, just what the American dentists wanted, for he always gave his papers the practical turn, “something they could use in their business.”

But where were those German scientists he might have to contend with? There was hardly one in sight during his whole stay. The aloofness of the German dentist and the German scientist worried him. He had wanted to see what manner of men they were, but except for the good offices of Dr.

Miller and Dr. Jenkins he would not have had a look at one. As he said, they made themselves "scarcer than hen's teeth."

The explanation was not far to seek. It was one of the by-laws of The American Dental Society of Europe that only those who had graduated from an American dental school could be members. There were few German dentists with American degrees. That was "gall and wormwood" to the German dentist. No self-respecting German dentist ever stultified himself in any such way. Did not German science dominate the world (except in France)? Did not the American physicians flock to Berlin (more likely to Vienna) to put the finishing touches on their scientific education? The Germans were an arrogant lot. No mere American could teach them anything. They were not impressed with the theory that science knew no geographic boundaries—it only flourished in Germany. So our dentist was disappointed and disgusted. He had hoped to measure swords with some German scientists, but he found it difficult even to get a look at one or two. But the worst was yet to come.

The National German Dental Society was holding its annual meeting in Dresden the next week and Dr. Jenkins, who had been practicing dentistry in Dresden for thirty years, invited G. V. Black to go to Dresden with him and to attend the meeting of the German society. First, they had difficulty in getting in to the meeting and, second, they received no recognition whatever. If the tables had been reversed and a prominent German dentist had attended a meeting in America, he would at once have received recognition and been asked to speak.

The German attitude was quite different. There was great rivalry and even hatred between these

two societies. The whole attitude toward the dental and medical professions was different. Dr. Jenkins told us of an experience he had a few years before. He was called to attend a German princess, at a distance, who was just at time of confinement but required some attention from her dentist. Dr. Jenkins was there several days. The German physician, who was to confine her, was also waiting there several days. The German physician ate his meals in the servant's quarters, but Dr. Jenkins had his meals with the family, because he was an American. In fact, they knew better than to ask him to have his meals in the servant's quarters. So much for American royalty.

One reason for the unfortunate rivalry between the German and American dentists, in addition to the fact that the Americans "ran away" with the best business, was that many of the German dentists were poorly qualified. There were no properly organized dental schools in Germany or in Europe as a whole. This seemed strange in countries that had made such outstanding advances in science.

Father was quite shocked at these things and could not understand them. As an American he had expected a man to be received on his merit; not so in Germany. He was also disturbed at a dinner when the American dentists felt it necessary to stand and toast the Kaiser (not present of course) with a glass of wine, and after that they were at liberty to toast their own president of the United States.

He was quite right in his estimate of the Germans. They had done much excellent work in abstract science, but had given little attention to its practical application. A recent book by Victor Heiser (*An American Doctor's Odyssey*, p. 411) says of the Japanese:

"Curiously enough, dentistry was not held in high regard, because their German teachers had not believed in focal infection. The Japanese medical profession itself had the worst teeth I have ever seen."

Dr. Heiser comments at some length on the failure of the Germans to develop the practical application of scientific discoveries and says that in Japan

"German influence in government circles was on the wane, and there seemed to be hope that the authorities would subscribe to the concept of applying knowledge to prevent disease and realize that Germany had not progressed so far as Americans in this respect. As an indication of the change, it was also astounding to see to what extent English was coming into general use, and how rapidly German was declining" (1916 and 1924).

This illustrates why Dr. Black was never satisfied with the German method. He had to put every scientific discovery to practical test in his laboratory, otherwise he felt that the new facts had not been of real and lasting value.

After all, his visit in Berlin was a great success. He was banqueted and toasted to the full. His seventieth birthday occurred during this meeting. When this came to the attention of the committee, the most was made of it. Every speaker referred to it; he received many flowers and many callers to congratulate him. All this made a nice break in the formality of the occasion.

After the meeting in Berlin we went up to Hamburg for a day or two for a visit with a dentist friend, Dr. William Griswold, and then went down to Köln where we visited three American dentists living there—Dr. H. G. Merrill, Dr. Hugo G. Fisher, and Dr. J. W. Gale. They gave Dr. Black a complimentary dinner, no German dentists expected. You see the blame for antagonism is not all on one side.

From Köln we took a boat and went up the beautiful and historic Rhine as far as Mainz. Dr. Merrill accompanied us.

After saying our farewells to Dr. Merrill we went to Heidelberg and Bern and on into Switzerland for five days, then on to Paris. In Paris Dr. Black received some attention from American dentists he had met in Berlin.

He also visited some dental schools. However, it was an unfortunate time of year to visit such schools. It was vacation time and many of the men were away, so that his visits in Paris and London were unsatisfactory except as sightseeing trips. We were back in New York by the middle of September and then soon at home in Chicago. As a whole the trip was a success. He had climbed another round of his ladder. He was glad to be at home and at his dental school again.

His enjoyable trip to Europe and his preparation of lectures for the American dentists was not allowed to interfere with his regular routine of papers. Twenty (see appendix) were prepared, delivered, or published. His Illinois State Dental Society was not neglected. Five papers and discussions appear in its transactions. He found time to prepare "Impressions of the Condition of Dental Education and Dental Practice in Europe" for the *Northwestern Dental Journal*. The trip to Europe was in the summer and did not interfere with his deanship. It took the place of his summer vacation on the lakes.

During the later years of his life, his summer trips to Lake Michigan had many interferences. Several summers were spent in Colorado, one at least to study mottled teeth. Another summer he and his son Arthur went to Alaska. He always enjoyed talking of this trip. Everything was new to him and dif-