

MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

DIXI CROSBY

ONE of the most beautiful sights, humanly speaking, of my college life at Dartmouth from 1862 to 1866 was to see often in the streets of Hanover, Dr. Dixi Crosby then over 60, and already ageing a little, leaning affectionately on the arm of his celebrated son, Dr. Benning Crosby, as they walked along the streets or across the college campus talking devotedly to one another. The old doctor was a short, compact, well dressed man, firm on his feet but rather ponderous in his gait. His head was large, he wore a curly reddish beard, shaggy as if never a comb had touched it, and his hair reached to his coat collar behind. His upper lip was clean shaven "so that," as he said, "no hair should obstruct his voice in his lectures to the students." His face was attractive, he talked a good deal as he walked, and the whole effect of his appearance was majestic and impressive.

As for his son "Dr. Ben" as he was called, he shall be mentioned later. Meanwhile let me again recall the wonderful friendship that existed between father and son as men and as physicians.

Just before the child of Dr. Asa and Betsy Hoit Crosby was born February 7, 1800, at Sandwich, New Hampshire, there was a friendly dispute concerning the possible sex of the infant, the father wanting a boy and the mother a girl. When it turned out to be a boy, the happy father shouted "Dixi" (Latin for "I told you so") and Dixi he was named.

He studied in the village schools, and then went into business travelling as far south as New Orleans but he failed from lack of experience. He studied then with his father, who was at the time practicing at Gilmanton and in the winters he attended the lectures at the medical school at Dartmouth where he was graduated in 1824.

Even as a medical student he had a large amount of surgical audacity, for in one instance in spite of the protests of the older but timid attending physicians, he amputated successfully the gangrenous leg of an apparently moribund patient. In another instance, he made use of an ordinary carving knife, a carpenter's saw, and a chisel to amputate a leg, high up, and was again completely successful. How much truth there is in the story of these youthful outbursts of bold and fearless surgery is actually unknown, but from considerable evidence at hand, there is no doubt that in them lay the germ of that surgical boldness which was soon to make itself known throughout the State.

Dixi Crosby practiced in Gilmanton with his father for 10 years, and finally when called to the chair of surgery in 1838 at the Dartmouth School of Medicine at Hanover, he settled in that village for the rest of his life. His practice in Hanover was large, for many patients were attracted by the high reputation of the medical school, while his personal ability spread far around for many miles.

He occupied the chair of surgery for many years then gradually retired from that in favor of his son Benning but continued as professor of obstetrics and diseases of women until 1870 when he was retired as professor emeritus until his death 3 years later.

As a lecturer he talked very plainly and to the point and had a gift of description that held the attention of his scholars. Some of his axioms were: "See with your own eyes, feel with your own fingers, use your own judgment, and do not be the disciple of any one man." "Operate, not quickly but surely, so that your work shall be for the benefit of your patients."

Among the novelties which Dr. "Dixi" suggested was one for reducing dislocation of the thumb by bending the phalanx backward, forcibly, and then by pressure from below the bone was set quickly into place. At one time he was known as "elbow Crosby" from his ingenious method of breaking up adhesions in that joint, while his brother Josiah was known as "sticking plaster Crosby" for his frequent use of that material in every case of fracture.

Although Dixi Crosby performed some famous operations for the era in which he lived, he might be called a careful rather than a brilliant operator. He said once upon a time in my hearing, "An operation, gentlemen, is soon enough done, when well enough done." He learned all the new methods of practice by frequent visits to the metropolitan hospitals; he went to Boston to see just how ether was used, and later on to study chloroform, which he preferred in his surgical practice when he could have the services of a skilled anæsthetist like his son, Benning. No statistics of his operations have been preserved, but he had the reputation of doing more surgery in his active years than any other man in New Hampshire.

He was the cynosure of all eyes at the meetings of the State Medical Society, was honored with every office within its gift, and was twice chosen president. He made a dignified presiding officer. He spoke almost invariably at the meetings, all of which he attended after his election as a member in 1826. Although on each occasion as president he may have delivered an address, no precise record of the items which he discussed has been preserved. Besides this, a careful study of the records of the State Society shows that set papers were rarely read, most of the meetings being occupied with the exhibition and discussion of the proper treatment of cases.

Among his papers, we have discovered one "On Tumors of the Pelvis" and another on "Trusses." He exhibited in 1835 the case which made his name noted

in American surgery, in which, in March of the next year, after a bloody operation and before the days of ether, he removed an enormous osteoma involving the clavicular shoulder joint and scapula, amputating all the parts involved. The operation was so completely successful that when shown to a crowd of admiring surgeons in June following, the patient who had been an emaciated skeleton of 80 pounds was seen to be "a monstrous healthy fellow, weighing over 200 pounds." This operation was first performed by Ralph Cumings, an English Naval Surgeon, in 1808, and reported by A. Copland Hutchinson in the *London Medical Gazette*, 1829 to 1830, v, 273.

No account of the life of Dr. Dixi Crosby would be complete which failed to mention his extraordinary law-suit which lasted 9 years and ended in his acquittal. It was extraordinary, because it was the first time in this country that a consulting surgeon was ever sued, and it was the first suit in which so long a period elapsed after the date of the original visit before proceedings were completed.

The case ran this way. Early in 1845 a man was covered with gravel falling in a pit, and he was taken out with a broken leg. Dr. Crosby was called as consultant and advised the use of Gibson's splints. When the splints were ready the next morning he applied them properly, as he considered, and never saw the patient again. He was finally sued because an abscess and gangrene supervened with shortening of the leg. At the first trial in 1853, 8 years later, a verdict against him was found in the amount of \$800. He carried the case to the higher court, obtained a new trial in 1854 and was acquitted.

This end-result sounds simple enough nowadays but it attracted attention throughout the entire nation, because, as we have said before, it was the first case in which a consulting surgeon had ever been sued for malpractice, and when it was over, Dr. Dixi received congratulations from the entire medical profession in this country, and many kind letters from Europe.

We may sum up the career of Dr. Crosby by saying that he was a genial, humane man, a faithful adviser, a cheerful man to have at the bedside, and in his prime he was the leading surgeon in his State. He was proud of his State. He was proud of his temperance doctrines and he did much to prevent the sale of intoxicating bitters to the boys in Dartmouth College. Well do we remember his opposition to that vile concoction known as "S. T. 1860 X," which was peddled about in the streets of Hanover in bootlegger fashion to the students when they wanted to go on a spree.

In 1827 Dr. Dixi Crosby married Miss Mary Jane Moody of Gilmanton. They had two sons, one the very celebrated Alpheus Benning Crosby, and the other who after long training to become a lawyer, studied medicine and was a first rate surgeon, Dr. Albert Crosby of Concord, New Hampshire.

It seems to us that we cannot possibly end any notice of Dr. Dixi Crosby without adding a few words concerning his very remarkable son, Benning, otherwise known as "Dr. Ben," one of the most brilliant physicians ever practicing in New Hampshire. As an operator, a lecturer on surgery, a bedside teacher, a lecturer on anatomy and public health, and as a eulogist of men who had gone before him, he seems to us to have been unique.

Dr. Ben was born at Gilmanton on Washington's Birthday, 1832, and he died in Hanover, August 9, 1877, in his forty-sixth year, a worn out man. He was graduated at Dartmouth in the Class of '53, studied at the Dartmouth Medical School with his father where he was demonstrator, and spent a year as interne at the United States Marine Hospital at Chelsea, Massachusetts, where he saw innumerable cases of fracture, frost bite, pneumonia, and syphilis. He was graduated at the Dartmouth School of Medicine in 1856, and started to practice with his father. He gradually took upon himself all of the night work, and they divided between them the long journeys around Hanover.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Dr. Ben was appointed surgeon of the First New Hampshire Regiment and in May, 1861, at Poolesville, Maryland, he personally drew the plans and superintended the building of the first complete military hospital ever constructed on the pavilion-plan.

His service in the Army did not last so long as he desired because his father needed him and his genial presence in the medical school at Hanover. Three years later, in 1866, he was a professor of surgery at Dartmouth and delivered entire courses of lectures on Surgery and operated on all cases offered to him at the University of Vermont, at the University of Michigan, at the Long Island College Hospital, at Bowdoin, and at the Bellevue Hospital and Medical School in New York. He declined an invitation to the chair of surgery in the New York School of Medicine, and on the death of Dr. Pancoast he was urged to become professor of anatomy in the Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. This crowning honor of his life he also declined because he could not leave his other engagements nor spare the time. It must, however, have been a tremendous responsibility to follow out as Dr. "Ben" did, one course after another, to operate upon so many patients at various schools, to leave them with others for after-care, and then to return to Hanover to go the rounds of the patients whom his father retained.

In addition to all these labors he delivered at the Cooper Institute a set of public health lectures, the most attractive of which were on "The Hand," and "The Foot." His most valuable medical papers were on, "Foreign bodies in the knee joint," "A successful case of ovariectomy" (done when that operation was rare), one on "Abscesses," and one on "Diabetes," all with a wealth of illustrated cases; and last of all a charming paper entitled "A Month in a Volunteer Camp."

The crowning paper of his career was his address as president of the State Society in 1877. In a brief two months after this, his work ended forever. He had survived his beloved father about four years only.

As a surgeon he was dexterous, his results were good, and this speaks more plainly than rapidity or style. He did many lithotomies, amputations at the hip, treated endless cases of necrosis, and had throughout the country the reputation of being a great surgeon.

As a public speaker he possessed the exquisite art of extemporaneous speaking to perfection. He possessed a large fund of anecdotes, could tell a story to the point, or cap another. His voice was clear and resonant, and whenever a speech was wanted for an occasion or for an anniversary, everybody said: "Ask Dr. Ben."

As a teacher, he possessed the rare gift of making friends with the students, of attracting their attention with genial anecdotes and then pushing home his important points of discussion.

Dr. Ben Crosby married in July, 1862, at Baltimore, Miss Mildred Russell Smith daughter of Dr. William Smith of Galveston, and brought her to Hanover where they built up a center of widespread beautiful and bounteous hospitality. Nor did they forget to include within it college boys living far from home and sadly in need of social correction of their youthful enthusiasm.

To this wonderful hospitality I personally owe many of the little recollections which have crept into this paper, and had I been less thoughtful of the pretty girls in the circle at Hanover, and thought more of good old "Dr. Dixi" and of dear "Dr. Ben" and his charming wife, this paper might have offered a greater list of the attracting personalities of these two genial physicians.

When Dr. Ben died, all Hanover mourned. Many physicians throughout the country were sad; young men who had listened spellbound to his lectures, others who had followed him enthusiastically from bed to bed in hospitals, older men who knew what good surgery really was, those who knew him as a friend, merely, and as a public speaker lamented his sudden, and as they all said, uncalled for departure from the scenes of his useful life.

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