

A life that spanned nearly a century of modern times was matched by a mind that traveled through millennia of history in the person

of Dr. Ralph H. Major. At his death in 1970 at the age of 86, Dr. Major was the Kansas sage of medicine, a leading physician and medical educator of the American Middle West. He was also a linguist, scholar, world traveler and internationally known medical historian.

BEGINNINGS. Clay County, Missouri, was still close to frontier country when Ralph Hermon Major was born there in 1884. When the family moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, visitors from St. Louis came to hunt bear just outside the town. The Majors were originally English settlers in Virginia who followed the pattern of westward migration.

A paternal ancestor fought in the army of the Revolution and earned a grant of land in what was then western Virginia but was to become Kentucky. Ralph's father John Major moved on to Kearney, Missouri, where he became president of the local bank, then to Arkansas where he and his brothers-in-law established a lumber company and sawmill.

In later years Dr. Major credited his father with instilling in him a love of music and an interest in foreign lands and languages. He was given violin lessons from the age of five and at 13 he turned to the piano, which

MILLENNIAL TRAVELER

MD

MEDICAL HISTORIANS: 7





Dr. Major, rear left, in a comic photograph with German student friends in 1903. A decade later in Vienna, opposite, he is fifth from right among the staff members around Clemens von Pirquet, chief of Vienna's Children's Clinic, where he was a volunteer.

he played throughout his life. In 1896 the family moved to Liberty, Missouri, where Ralph attended the William Jewell Academy, a small liberal arts college founded in 1850, where his father had also studied and of which he was a trustee.

In addition to the usual subjects Ralph studied Latin, Greek, French, German, Spanish. He graduated in 1902 at 17, the youngest bachelor of arts in the college's history, and soon afterward his father offered him a year in Europe. He stretched the year to nearly three, studying at the universities of Leipzig, Halle, Heidelberg, Munich and Dijon; he traveled throughout Europe and to Moscow and Constantinople, perfecting his languages and learning about art and music. He immersed himself in German university life, joined the student Korps, participated enthusiastically in the walking trips and the evenings of beer and singing.

Back in America he decided on a future in medicine and applied to the medical school of Johns Hopkins, where his mastery of German won him entrance despite large gaps in his scientific knowledge. In 1906 William Osler had left for Oxford, but the other three of the "famous four," William H. Welch, Howard A. Kelly and William S. Halsted, were still members of an outstanding faculty.

Major took his medical degree in 1910 and stayed on for two years as resident in the university hospital. Then he turned again to Europe in one of the last waves of Americans who for decades had gone to complete their medical studies in Germany.

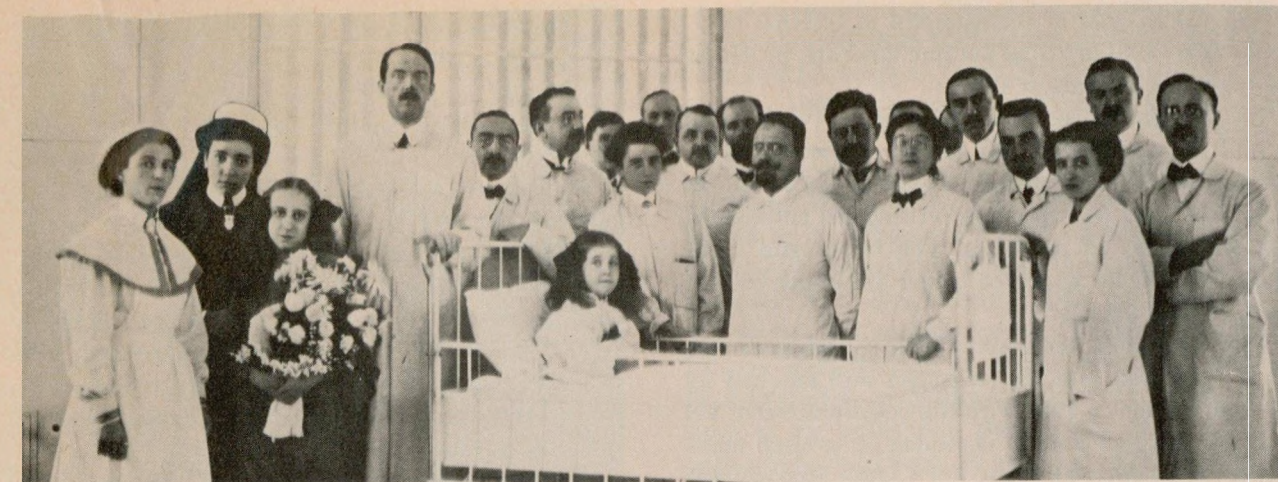
He went first to Vienna and was accepted as a volunteer staff member at the Royal-Imperial Children's Clinic by its chief, the pioneer allergist Clemens von Pirquet who had been his pediatrics professor at Johns Hopkins. He served the equivalent of an internship in the contagious disease wards, attended the internal medicine clinics, did investigative and experimental work with a number of dis-

tinguished Europeans for whom the Vienna school at that time was a magnet. One of these was Béla Schick, who on learning that the young American had recently recovered from diphtheria at once enlisted him as a guinea pig in the research that culminated in the Schick test.

From Vienna Major went on to Munich to work with the celebrated teacher of internal medicine, Friedrich Müller, whose masterly discourses on physical diagnosis inspired Major to make internal medicine his field. He was still in Europe when he was offered an instructorship in pathology at Stanford, and he had been barely a year in Palo Alto when the University of Kansas school of medicine beckoned him to a professorship in the same discipline. Except for military service during the first World War and a brief postwar period as one of the pioneer staff members of the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Dr. Major devoted the rest of his life to the Kansas medical school.

EDUCATOR. Dr. Major presented himself for his Kansas post in 1914 with some diffidence, feeling that the medical school had taken a risk in appointing a man only four years out of medical school to its chair of pathology. He learned that the risk might well be his own: he was not only chairman but the entire department, in a school only nine years old and struggling for survival on a frontier of medical education. Its clinical department was in Kansas City, Kansas, its scientific department at Lawrence and the pathology laboratory was on the top floor of the administrative building at Rosedale, where the tiny Bell Memorial Hospital with its 35 beds was also situated. It was the state's only school of medicine, and as part of the state university it depended on a legislature of which most members at the time were indifferent and some were actively opposed to the luxury of a medical school in Kansas.

Dr. Major wrote years later: "The total assets of the institution consisted of 7½ acres of land (not a bargain at any price), \$95,000 invested in three buildings, and an annual budget of \$30,000." The laboratory to which he was shown was a large light room but sadly neglected, its windows and walls coated with dust and its floor with rubbish. A once excellent pathologic anatomy collection placed there by the first department head was in disarray, with jars empty or uncovered, their contents disintegrating, the catalogue long since lost. There were no



surgical specimens, no records of surgical pathology, no blocks of tissue or stained slides for instruction. He learned that his predecessor had amiably consented to conduct classes at any hours that other teachers did not want, and he had yielded up his technician to another department; he also discouraged the hospital from calling on him for autopsies.

With two months to prepare for his first class, the new pathology professor acquired a student assistant, scrubbed the place from floor to ceiling, begged and borrowed equipment and began assembling teaching materials. One of his first acts was to make himself available for autopsies, in which he had been trained under masterly teachers at Johns Hopkins and Stanford. Surgeons also began sending him specimens and he soon had a tissue collection.

During the summer he filled an interim appointment as resident pathologist in the Johns Hopkins Hospital, where he extended his autopsy and pathology techniques and used the opportunity to beg bits of tissue from every section studied in the pathology course. His collection of teaching materials grew until he had slides for every pathologic condition he was required to teach.

In 1919, when he was leaving Kansas and pathology for Detroit and internal medicine, he took his proposed successor on a tour of the department. Dr. H. R. Wahl had conducted the excellent army laboratory school in New Haven where Major had spent his military service, and had then become pathologist in a large Cleveland hospital. To Major's gratified surprise his former captain accepted the post with the comment: "You are better equipped here than I am in Cleveland."

While Major was in Detroit the climate for medical education in Kansas improved: a new governor, by a canny announcement that without a suitable new site the school should perhaps be abolished, succeeded in mobilizing even its critics to the de-

fense. Funds were collected, bonds voted, a new site was bought and the legislature passed an appropriation of \$400,000 for an institution that had received only \$75,000 in building appropriations in the 14 years since its foundation.

Shortly afterward, Major was invited to return as professor and chairman of the department of internal medicine. He accepted with one proviso, that the department should have its own clinical laboratory headed by a fellow Johns Hopkins graduate and friend who was serving in that position in Detroit. The colleague he brought with him to Kansas, Dr. Russell L. Haden, began in the new laboratory the blood researches that later won him widespread fame in hematology.

Within a year after his return Dr. Major's alertness to new developments in medicine brought to the Kansas school a share in the glory of Banting and Best's discovery of insulin. Hearing rumors of the work of the two Canadians, he wrote to friends in Toronto and procured for Kansas a promise of some of the small amount being prepared by the Lilly drug company for clinical testing. Early in 1923 the news spread that two patients in the medical school hospital had been successfully brought out of diabetic coma. As diabetes sufferers crowded at the doors for admission, the wonder was that the small, old-fashioned Kansas university hospital had been chosen to test the lifesaving new material rather than one of the fine modern institutions of the Missouri metropolis across the state line. In the first reports on insulin, in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* for June 2, 1923, one of the three articles was from the University of Kansas school of medicine and bore Ralph Major's name.

AUTHOR. For nearly 40 years Dr. Major continued to hold the chair of internal medicine, until in 1950 he left that department for the chair of history of medicine in which he was already a professor. He

continued to hold a professorship in internal medicine from 1951 until he became emeritus professor of both departments in 1954.

By the time he returned to Kansas in 1921 he was a husband and father, and in the serene setting of an established home and professional life he began almost at once to express in writing his enthusiasm for all aspects of medicine. Ten books and more than 200 articles appeared under his name over a span of four decades.

His long-lived textbook *Physical Diagnosis* has been translated into six languages and reached its seventh edition in 1968 with the collaboration of his protégé and successor as chairman of internal medicine, Dr. Mahlon H. Delp. For *Classic Descriptions of Disease*, which went into its third edition 12 years after it first appeared, he did most of his own translations from the Greek, Latin and European originals. His two volume *History of Medicine*, crowning his career on his retirement from active teaching in 1954, was published simultaneously in the United States, Britain and the Commonwealth and stands today as one of the classics in its field.

HISTORIAN. From the first the history of medicine was Dr. Major's happiest preoccupation. In 1927, little more than five years after his return to Kansas, he published an article on one of the Johns Hopkins giants he had known, Dr. Halsted; this was followed by a study of William Beaumont, the modest frontier physician whose historic experiment with a gastric fistula made him one of the fathers of American physiology. Dr. Major's interest in people led him to create a gallery of lively portraits of medical men.

He also wrote historical studies of techniques such as testing blood pressure and the use of the stomach tube, on medical education, on medical problems such as lead poisoning. He wrote on great documents of the past such as the Ebers Papyrus, on the medical sites of Cos and Padua, on the ethnic medicine of the ancient Etruscans and the American Indians. He delighted in seeing with his own eyes the ancient scenes in the annals of medicine.

In his first book, *The Doctor Explains*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1931, Dr. Major showed himself in his other role, not as historian but as practicing physician, and wrote not for his colleagues but for patients. He explained for lay readers the patient's experience in terms of its medical functions, describing examination and tests and how they point to diagnosis and treatment. He told the stories of great medical discoveries, recounted the development of some of medicine's basic diagnostic instruments and techniques, interpreted in simple terms the physiology and chemistry of the more common disorders. Dr. Major's work was called one of the

Dr Major is praised for his History of Medicine by historian Charles O'Malley, and chats with Mrs. Major in 1968 at Kansas University Medical Center's History of Medicine Reading Room.

most complete books of its kind ever written.

Classic Descriptions of Disease appeared the following year and was applauded on both sides of the Atlantic as an admirable compilation of nearly 400 original accounts of disease, from the Ebers Papyrus on diabetes and Hippocrates on mumps to such 20th century documents as Dr. Leo Buerger's description of the disease named for him (thromboangiitis obliterans). Selections were made from literary as well as medical sources: he included Thucydides on the plague of Athens, Boccaccio's account of the black death in Florence, Daniel Defoe on the plague of 1665 in London. Major's own translations were acclaimed in the *Times Literary Supplement* of London as "eminently readable" and the book was recommended by other critics for reading, reference and as a text in medical schools.

Disease and Destiny was published in 1936 with a preface by his friend and fellow medical historian at Kansas, Dr. Logan Clendening. In a style addressed both to physicians and the general public he traced the course of diseases and their influence on great events and personalities in human history, including in his thesis not only the infections and epidemics such as plague, typhus, smallpox and syphilis but also diseases particularly associated with roy-



alty, either as therapist or victim, such as scrofula and hemophilia.

In *Faiths That Healed* (1940) Dr. Major examined history in terms of disease and religious faith, with chapters on the medieval dancing mania, the Children's Crusade, witchcraft in Salem, the shrine at Lourdes, Christian Science. In *Fatal Partners: War and Pestilence* (1941) he traced the relationship of war, disease and medicine through history, and the roles played by physicians and nurses in caring for both soldiers and civilians in times of war.

After his retirement Dr. Major turned to reminiscences and produced a memoir of his father's and his own boyhood in Arkansas and Missouri. *Memories*



of a *Vanished Era* in 1967 was a recollection of his studies and travels in Europe before the first World War and his years at Johns Hopkins; *Old Ties and New* in 1968 recounted his travels in Europe and the Orient.

At the urging of his colleagues he wrote his warm anecdotal *Account of the University of Kansas School of Medicine*, the school whose growth from frontier hardships to a modern medical center was the core of his life. When in 1970 his portrait was unveiled in the medical center's Logan Clendening Library and Museum of the History of Medicine, he delivered as his address an account of the treasures in the collection, the nucleus of which was gathered by his friend, an ardent medical bibliophile as well as historian, and was bequeathed to the school of medicine on Dr. Clendening's death in 1945.

The department of medicine which he headed for 40 years presented Dr. Major on his retirement with the symbolic goldheaded cane and established the Ralph H. Major lectures that are delivered annually by a distinguished medical educator. Recognition abroad made him one of the few American members of the Royal Society of Medicine in London and the International Academy of the History of Medicine. He was also the first physician in his city elected to the Association of American Physicians and one of the early members of the American Climatological and Clinical Association.

Among his honors were the Kansas City Academy of Medicine's annual prize in 1925 for the best scientific work of the year, for his studies of arterial hypertension; an honorary Doctor of Laws degree (LL.D) from William Jewell College in 1933; a Doctor of Letters degree from the University of Cincinnati in 1952.

Dr. Major recovered from the first serious threat to his generally good health, a cancer of the colon in 1963. He was stricken in 1965 by the death of his wife of nearly half a century, Margaret Jackson Major; a longtime friend, Mrs. Wanda Egbert Graham, became his second wife in 1967. In March, 1970 Dr. Major suffered a basilar artery thrombosis and died eight months later on October 15. His elder son Ralph H. Major, Jr. went into business but his second son Dr. John J. Major followed his father into education and is now dean of the University of Cincinnati graduate school. His daughter Virginia married and lives in Dallas, Texas; there are ten grandchildren.

SUMMING UP. By his successor in the chair of medical history and philosophy at Kansas, Dr. Robert P. Hudson: "He involved students, colleagues and practitioners in the excitement of medical history."

