

*for Carroll Reynolds
with best wishes
Tom Keys*

Dr. Henry Stanley Plummer (1874-1936) (Historical Vignette)

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WHEN I CAME to Rochester in 1934, Dr. Henry Plummer (Figure 1) was in his sixtieth year. He often would come up to the library and thus I came to know him fairly well.

At that time I knew little about the many outstanding things he had accomplished for the Mayo Clinic and about his international reputation. But occasionally he took me into his confidence, and would reminisce about his experiences. This physician who pioneered in the study and treatment of thyroid diseases was indeed a genius. He combined great engineering ability with other wonderful attributes, including profound philosophical knowledge. He was able to combine his amazing talents for the good of the institution. Perhaps the people who appreciated him the most were the Drs. Will and Charlie Mayo.

Appearance and Mannerisms

As mentioned by Clapesattle,¹ "Dr. Will Mayo himself said the hiring of Henry Plummer was the best day's work he ever did for the Clinic." Dr. Samuel F. Haines,² of the clinic's staff, himself a prominent expert in endocrinology who profited by many years of close association with Dr. Plummer, described him as follows:

"Plummer was tall, spare, and stooped. He had learned to avoid distraction so well that he seemed unapproachable. Thus it was surprising, when he had apparently completely disregarded a question, to have him answer it hours or days later. His ability to become fully absorbed in one subject was so great that he appeared to be unmindful of his associates at times when they wanted him to consider other problems, but it was well recognized by those who worked with him that this same characteristic was responsible for some of his great productiveness. He was a kind and considerate man, willing to devote unlimited time to his patients and to his students."

Because of his powerful concentration he often appeared to be absentminded. Many stories are told about him in this respect. For instance, it is said that he sold his automobile, a Cadillac, to a clinic fellow. But seeing it in the parking lot later, Dr. Plummer drove it home as usual! This obliviousness even extended to his family circle. Mrs. Plummer recalled with a smile meeting her husband face to face one day in a clinic corridor as he strode along to an appointment. His pre-occupied expression changed only slightly as he nodded with a formal bow and smile as if to say, "You're someone I must know!" Another story is a typical one. Dr. Plummer invited several of his friends to a luncheon at a hotel in Denver, Colorado, during a meeting of the American Goiter Association. When the check came, he forgot about paying the bill, so one of his friends picked up the tab—but when the waitress brought the change, Dr. Plummer pocketed it.

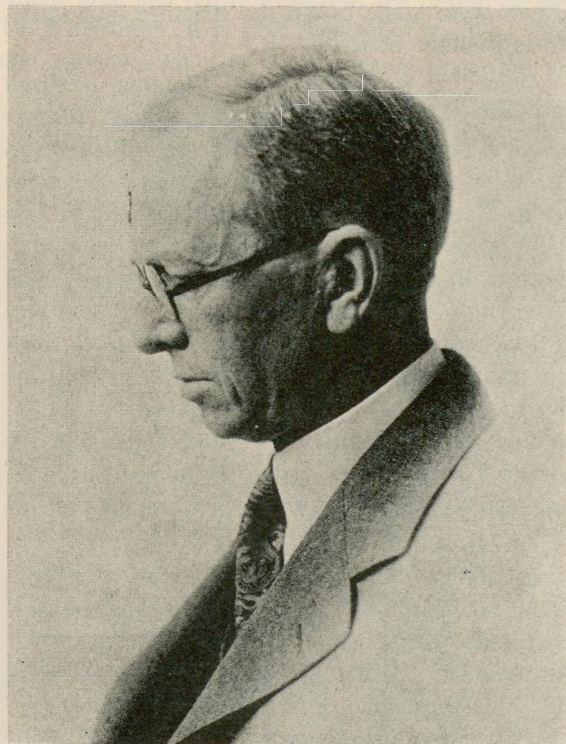


Fig. 1—Dr. H. S. Plummer in 1936.

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Unpublished chapter from the College of the Medical Book. The Memoirs of Thomas E. Keys.

See editorial, page 912.

Work on the Esophagus

Dr. Plummer's early work on the esophagus highlights his genius well. As mentioned by Fredrick A. Willius,³ he made the differential diagnosis between cardiospasm (contraction of the cardiac sphincter) and stricture due to ulceration. His pioneer work on the diagnosis of and treatment for hysterical dysphagia,⁴ esophageal stricture,⁵ and achalasia⁵ was remarkable. The many patients—especially children—who in those days suffered from esophageal stricture due to ingestion of lye or acids were of great concern to him. Frequently ulceration led to complete closure of the esophagus, and the only procedure then available to sustain life was gastrostomy. The usual attempt to dilate the esophageal stricture by forcibly passing bougies from the stomach up through the esophagus often failed. On occasion efforts might be made to cut the stricture. The patient was asked to swallow the end of a silk thread⁶ which, if it entered the stomach, could be reached via the gastrostomy opening. A piece of fishline then was attached to the silk thread and drawn up through the esophagus and out through the mouth. By pulling the fishline back and forth from both ends, efforts were made to cut the stricture, but sometimes without benefit.

According to Willius,³ Dr. Plummer realized the importance of avoiding this type of surgery whenever possible. In 1906 he called attention to the use of silk thread as a guide in procedures for relief of strictures. The patient swallowed six yards of thread, one end of which was retained at the mouth. After as much thread as possible had passed into the intestine, a perforated sound was slipped over the retained end and passed through the mouth and into the esophagus; and with the thread drawn tight, the sound readily entered the stomach. Dr. Plummer designed and made the sounds himself. This form of therapy was safer and easier than gastrostomy and for many patients it was quite sufficient.

Dr. Plummer⁵ was also an advocate of the hydrostatic dilator for the treatment of esophageal obstruction and a skillful remover of foreign objects from that organ. He had at home an extensive machine shop for making fine tools and instruments. On some occasions he hurried home from the clinic to make an instrument for a specific patient in critical condition. The instrument would be plated afterward, when the imme-

diate crisis was past.

The First Clinic Building, 1912-1914

As the need arose, the Mayo Clinic added laboratories and equipment.⁷ Also when an X-ray machine was procured, Dr. Plummer was placed in charge of this new apparatus. Gradually the laboratories were organized under his supervision.

After a time it became apparent, at least to Dr. Plummer, that a specially designed building was needed to embrace the several units and to coordinate the clinic's practice of medicine. With some persuasion, he got Dr. Will to accept this idea. The first clinic building, which had been formulated in Dr. Plummer's mind for several years, was begun in 1912 and finished in 1914. The prime objective for the new building was to create an efficient system of examination for patients along with necessary laboratories and sufficient storage for case records later to be used in research. In addition, Dr. Plummer felt the importance of creating a harmonious and artistic building. To this end, he went to the famous Rookwood Pottery firm in Cincinnati, Ohio. He described to them his wish for tile to cover the walls of the main lobby and form an entire double stairway. The firm was flabbergasted by such an idea, but before leaving he had convinced them of its feasibility. Though the matching fountain has been removed, that elegant stairway still stands in what is called the 1914 Mayo Clinic Building.

At completion of the clinic building a gala party was held in the main lobby. Dr. Plummer always had an unusually close relationship with the workmen at all levels; and almost to a man the architects, artisans, and laborers who started the project with him were on hand to share in the proud accomplishment of the completed building.

Mechanical Innovations

Dr. Plummer put his mechanical ideas to work. He devised the system of colored lights to indicate the need for special consultants in the diagnostic rooms. He figured out one of the first complete intercommunication telephone systems in the United States. He designed the tube system for sending patients' histories underground from the clinic building to St. Mary's Hospital. These are but a few of his achievements.

The record system itself had been established by Dr. Plummer. Previously each physician had

maintained his own ledger of clinical data, and cross reference for purposes of practice or research was extremely inconvenient. The Mayos wanted these purposes served, and Dr. Plummer based his solution on the radical concept that the clinical data belonged not solely to whichever doctor had recorded them but to the group and should be immediately available to any member. This could be accomplished by a system in which each patient's record was a unit and all units were comprised in a single index, and Dr. Plummer set out to devise one. After much thinking for himself, as mentioned by Dr. L. T. Kurland (unpublished manuscript, 1968), he visited other medical institutions but found no help; so he turned to business and industry for assistance. The system he subsequently evolved and introduced in 1907 became a model for medical records; and even with today's computerization, it is essentially this system that is still maintained. About 1935, when some 60,000 patients were being seen each year, it was necessary to develop a detailed diagnostic and subject cross-index. Miss Mabel Root, a friend of Mrs. Plummer, became the medical record librarian and refined the indexing. When Dr. Joseph Berkson became head of the Section on Medical Statistics in 1933, he saw the value of the Plummer-Root system. Dr. Berkson introduced an automated case-retrieval process, but that is another story.

Interest in the Thyroid Gland

As suggested by Willius³ in his excellent account, Dr. Plummer's interest in patients with goiter⁸ had been aroused in childhood when he accompanied his physician father on calls. One patient seen had an exceedingly large goiter for which Dr. Will Mayo successfully operated.

Following in his father's footsteps, young Henry received his medical degree from Northwestern University in 1898; and he practiced with his father at Racine, Minnesota, not far from Rochester. He joined the Mayo Clinic in 1901 as a member of the permanent staff. About this time Dr. Charles Mayo became interested in the thyroid gland, and from that time for many years operated on the thyroid. Dr. Plummer and Dr. Charlie worked together and wrote a small monograph on the subject which is a classic.⁹ Dr. Charlie and Dr. Plummer were responsible for hiring Dr. Edward C. Kendall to head the Section of Biochemistry in 1914 and Dr. Kendall became the

discoverer of thyroxin.

But to return to our story. Dr. Plummer made outstanding discoveries in the treatment of thyroid disorders. "His studies on the effect of iodine in the preoperative treatment of exophthalmic goiter . . . led to an immediate reduction of the operative mortality in this disease . . ."¹⁰

The 1928 Building

Dr. Plummer's medical and scientific achievements have been chronicled by Haines, W. J. Mayo, Willius, and others. The achievement which is his monument is the 1928 Mayo Clinic Building, now called the Plummer Building (Figure 2).

Hardly had the 1914 building been completed when it became evident that more extensive space for facilities would be needed. From that time until the completion of the Plummer Building in 1928, much of Dr. Plummer's time and energy were directed toward this project. A building committee was appointed; but it seldom met, as for practical purposes Dr. Plummer was the committee. He met often with the architects, especially Tom Ellerbe and later Edgar W. Buenger. Much time and effort went into the design of the 1928 building. It is said that when the time had come to excavate, Dr. Will became uncertain as



Fig. 2—The Plummer Building of the Mayo Clinic, completed in 1928.

to the wisdom of undertaking this large project. He consulted with Dr. Plummer about this; but when Dr. Will left the room, Dr. Plummer telephoned the contractor, Mr. Garfield Schwartz: "Get up early and have your men dig a big hole and start the new building."

When Dr. Will saw the excavation he said, "Henry, I guess we might as well go ahead; there is no stopping you, anyway!" And it is said that Dr. Mayo never regretted the decision to go ahead.

This building, which is a work of art, contains features that cannot be replicated. Frank Lloyd Wright said that the clinic library's reading room, first occupied in 1929, was "attractive and commodious"—strong words from Mr. Wright, who was not often complimentary about the work of other architects.

Dr. Plummer anticipated that the library would expand upward and downward. He had an elevator shaft made from the 11th to the 16th floors. When the library was remodeled in 1955, all that was necessary was to add the cab and other equipment. Plummer Hall (on the 14th floor) was converted from a lecture hall to library use in 1968 with little effort, thanks to Dr. Plummer's thinking in 1927 or earlier.

The Browsing Room

Dr. Plummer conceived of the idea of a Browsing Room Library at the clinic for the use of the physicians. He personally selected some 800 non-medical books, including classics of English and American literature, travel, gardening, exploration, antiquities, and other books covering man's scope of knowledge. He thought that medical men should know of other fields besides medicine. Even if they looked only at the backs of the books, they might learn something. If they devoted a half an hour a day to this nonmedical reading, they would improve their cultural understanding. He realized that men of medicine had little time in medical school and in later training years for this type of reading.

Dr. Plummer also gave me another reason for the Browsing Room. When a fellow or staff member is doing a research project, he tends to get stymied—that is, he runs out of ideas. Dr. Plummer thought that if such a person would come to the Browsing Room and read or browse, he might "click" on how to proceed with his research project.

Artistic Features

Dr. Henry Plummer's fine hand was in every-

thing connected with the Plummer Building. This included the ceilings of the several large waiting rooms. He found an Italian firm, Brioschi and Sons, in St. Paul who were experts in the art of painting artistic ceilings. Mr. Brioschi also designed some of the modeling when he was a patient in the Kahler Hospital with exophthalmic goiter. All of that work is attractive. The elegant ceiling of the 12th-floor Reading Room was executed by Jean K. Kaufmann, now of Fennville, Michigan. Mr. Kaufmann, who received his training in Germany, was also responsible for the ceiling in the old Board of Governor's room. Around the frieze and on the beams of the Reading Room's ceiling are the names of illustrious men and women in medicine and the allied sciences, chosen by Dr. Plummer from his wide reading.

This splendid building is a work of art in Moorish-Gothic style. The finest craftsmen were employed to mould and cast the ornamental bronzes, to sculpture decorations of imported marbles for the interior and exterior, and to paint designs throughout. The building is truly a monument to Dr. Plummer's artistic knowledge and ability, and his responsibility for it is commemorated by a carving set into its outer wall at the first-floor level (Figure 3).

Hobbies

In spite of working prodigiously on both his medical practice and the designing of the clinic building, Dr. Plummer found time for a whole

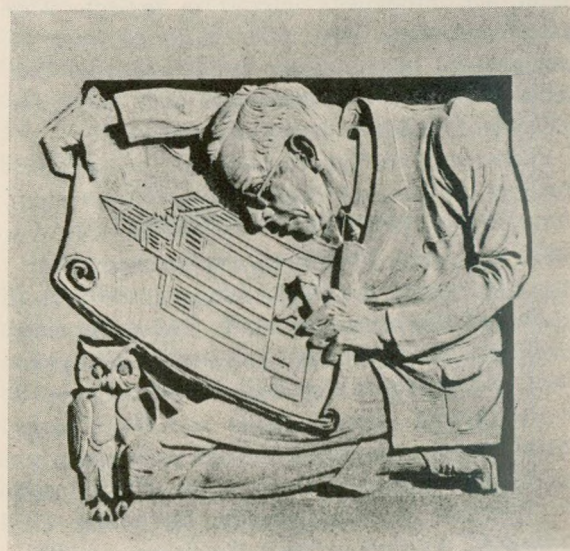


Fig. 3—Stone inset at southwest corner of the Plummer Building, commemorating Dr. Plummer's design of it.

gamut of hobbies. In his early days at the clinic, before he married Daisy Berkman, who was a niece of Drs. Will and Charlie, he led numerous camping trips to lakes near Rochester, organizing the whole outing, providing tents for the young men, and setting up all sorts of recreational facilities, including temporary tennis courts. Somewhat of a gourmand himself, he even planned the food.

Later, for family use, Dr. Plummer had custom-built camping equipment. He must have been one of Abercrombie and Fitch's best customers, for on visits to New York he collected every available comfort for their trips. The wilderness had no adequate accommodations in those days, but with their deluxe camping equipment, the Plummers enjoyed touring the national parks and beauty spots of the northern and western parts of the country and stopping to hunt and fish in some of the choice areas.

Always lovers of nature, the Plummers in the early days of their marriage owned a country home on Lake Shady at Oronoco with Dr. and Mrs. E. Starr Judd. Mrs. Judd also was a niece of the senior Mayos.

The Plummer Cruiser

Soon after giving the Oronoco cottage to the YWCA, Dr. Plummer purchased a small cruiser which was kept at Wabasha on the Mississippi River. From then on, often with guests, the Plummers spent summer weekends on the river. On a trip to New York in the spring of 1936, he bought a larger boat. That summer Dr. and Mrs. Plummer initiated the new craft by personally guiding it through inland waters from New York City to Wabasha, Minnesota. A log kept by Mrs. Plummer tells the interesting story of their passing the Statue of Liberty, going up the Hudson and through the Great Lakes, their experiences on the Marine railways of Canada, with rough waters through beautiful Georgian Bay, the stench of the Chicago River, the trip through the Illinois River and canals to the Mississippi, and home base at Wabasha.

The Plummer Home

Earlier, Dr. Plummer had spent countless hours designing the English Tudor mansion built on a hill which was then outside the city limits, south of Rochester (Figure 4). Plans for the extensive

References 1-10 will be found on page 963.

lawns and flower gardens surrounding the house received much of his attention. In the years when the house was in construction, he studied exhaustively all the books he could gather on the English garden. The resultant landscaping conformed perfectly with the English home, and both Dr. and Mrs. Plummer devoted much time and attention throughout their busy lives to keeping the grounds beautiful.



Fig. 4—Home designed by Dr. Plummer for himself and Mrs. Plummer, which was completed in 1924.

Dr. Plummer Designs a Desk

In 1935 I became reference librarian. On one of his visits to the library, I asked Dr. Plummer if it would be possible for me to have a desk in the Reading Room. He liked the idea and designed a kneehole desk for me, taking into account my proportions. Made by Linden's Glass Company in Chicago from a fine grade of whole matched walnut, in keeping with the other furniture, it is a beautiful piece and is still in the same room.

After Dr. Plummer's death I frequently visited Mrs. Plummer in their beautiful home. Many of Dr. Plummer's books were still in his library. On one occasion I asked Mrs. Plummer whether Dr. Plummer's Baskerville Bible, the elephant folio (1763), was still in his personal library. She said it was, and asked if I would like to have it for the Browsing Room.

I answered, "Yes, we would be delighted to have it."

Mrs. Plummer said, "I'll send my man out with it tomorrow!"

I said, "I'll be your man and take it to the Browsing Room today!"

Acknowledgment

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