

# Reflections of a Chiropractic Historian

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## A reflection

I have spent four decades as an observer of the chiropractic profession and almost that long writing chiropractic history. Now that I am almost retired, I realise there is a personal cost to maintaining electronic records: annual fees for storage and the continual updating and replacement of equipment can be daunting. That line up of journals and books behind me is comforting. I have my own digital index to them, but I also have notes and flags sticking out of them for ready reference. My collection of photocopies of originals is now fading in milk crates in the garage. The mimeographs have long since returned to white, the green-bar paper printouts have lost their clarity, but the carbons, the oldest of the technologies in my collection, can still be read. I am a champion of the endurance of paper records.

... Librarians are your best detectives when it comes to writing a complete history. Chiropractic needs many more writers of history. Why don't you give it a try?

The chiropractic college librarians (ClibCon) started indexing peer-reviewed chiropractic literature in 1979. The *Index to Chiropractic Literature* is now available electronically and makes accessible many items not indexed in one of the medical indexes.

The *Chiropractic Research Archives Collection* was assembled by a group at *Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College* in 1984. The compilers did a retrospective search of all the chiropractic literature available to them and produced 3x5" notecards with abstracts of everything resembling research, which they then sorted by subject matter. The multi-volume *CRAC* is still available in some chiropractic college libraries and hopefully is a candidate for digitisation.

An oral history project was also started by the chiropractic librarians and I was privileged to be one of the collectors of stories. I spent hours fascinated by many of the movers and shakers of the chiropractic profession. I recorded both formal interviews and informal ones. The formal interviews were all transcribed and are available in the *Palmer College* archival collection.

## A short 'how to ...'

My notes for the informal interviews were scribbled on cocktail napkins and placemats until I learned to carry a notepad with me. If you find yourself in an informal setting with a chiropractor or other person of interest and relevance to your story, then ask if you may take notes during the conversation. Then make a habit of taking a few minutes after the encounter to write down your recollections and clarify your scribblings.

Be sure to note date, time, and location, and the full name of whom you were with. The next day, your hasty notes will make less sense and ten years later, *'I remember talking to a chiropractor and she said . . .'* is useless in a historical account.

Librarians. Ah, yes, librarians. Visit them, call them, write them, e-mail them. Reference librarians, in particular, love the chase. They are trained detectives. Be concise and clear in what you want answered and note the avenues you have already exhausted.

The internet is invaluable as a resource and you really must come to grips with using it to your advantage. There is an increased sophistication in research capabilities with the digitisation of historic materials. No longer is an article in a newspaper missed because of the soporific effect of the microfilm reader. No longer does the researcher need to get a grant to fund a trip to *Cornell University* in Nebraska to look at the *American Bee Journal*; it has been digitised. Every day, more is being added to the great cloud of knowledge. While so much is at our fingertips, there is always the real, continual fear of something crashing. Also frustrating are those online items which seem to vanish. Keep detailed notes of your searches and of every rabbit hole you go down.

[Newspapers.com](http://Newspapers.com) has placed a wealth of contemporary information at our fingertips. But newspapers are not unbiased. They are political, social, and regional beasts. To meet deadlines, articles may have been written before an event actually occurred, especially about social events which should have been predictable. Persons perceived as newsworthy at the time are going to be scrutinised, while those who may later be noteworthy are ignored.

### Guiding questions

Two questions should guide the reading of historical materials: *'Is it possible'* and *'Is it probable?'*

Is it possible? We are all more or less bound by the time-space continuum. I build a timeline for my personal reference, checking that I have the story and its cause and effect in order in my mind. Sometimes, it yields interesting problems. As one example: In January 1944, Dave Palmer's marriage to Agnes High was finally announced in the Davenport Daily Times. *'Vows were spoken at a quiet ceremony in the First Methodist church in Reno, Nev., on Sept. 1, [1943] with Dr and Mrs WL Heath, uncle and aunt of the bridegroom as the witnesses.'* (1) It turns out this was the same day that Dr and Mrs WL Heath were reported as attending the Ryans' dinner party for Corporal Heath Quigley in Davenport. (2) One of the two stories must be inaccurate. You must become the detective and apply the question of probability and continually seek the evidence, one way or the other.

The second question, is it probable? Note how I spell Sylva Ashworth's name, 'Sylva'. One of the US Census records shows it as being spelled 'Sylvia', but the preponderance of spellings is 'Sylva'; I settled on 'Sylva' due to the weight of evidence. Another example: her daughter, the future Ruth R Cleveland, appears as Rose Ruth Ashworth on both the census and on her marriage license. It is reasonable to conclude that her given name was 'Rose Ruth', however through the triangulation of other documents and unwritten knowledge it is found she preferred 'Ruth'. Thus I, as the writer of this historical record, change my usage.

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1. Announce marriage of Pennsylvania girl and D. David Palmer. (1944 Jan 19). Daily Times, p. 8.

2. Mr and Mrs Ryan give dinner party for Corp. Quigley. (1943 Sep 1). Daily Times, p. 8.

## Be aware of bias

I call two potential biases in interpretation of historical events: 'presentism' and 'presentness.' (3) Presentism is the error of judging the past through the lens of today. One way to avoid this pitfall is to read novels of the era. The story is not important, but a good novelist will have studied the era and come up with period-appropriate nuances of daily life. This back knowledge might save on jumping to conclusions. My example is that Mabel Palmer was photographed wearing a cloche hat, a very popular style in the 1920s. It had the advantage of hiding bad hair days [Fact]. B) was an early adopter of X-ray [Fact]. The conclusion jumped to was that she was bald because of cancer caused by over-radiation.

Thus the conjecture becomes: 'A' (bald Mabel) + 'B' (BJ had an X-ray machine) = 'C' (Mabel had cancer). This is a serious error and historians are wary of such conjecture. The fact is Mabel Palmer died from a stroke twenty-plus years after the photograph was taken. Her condition then, together with other photographs of her during the 1920s 'cloche era' show a full head of hair.

Then there is 'presentness', the first person bias where an event is remembered through the lens of what is important to the person remembering it. Simply go to a family or school reunion and compare stories to see the way 'presentness' works. Each story has some truth to it, however you may think person X's story has none, because *you* always felt Person X never had any grounding in reality. The reality, if there is one, is that the *whole* story is the sum of these parts.

Ideally, the historian would find and document a number of first-person accounts of an event, compare them for similarities and consider the dissimilarities not as errors, but as anomalies. A reasonable report of such an event would report these.

## My final tip

Correctly writing history is a task perhaps more arduous than writing a report that ticks the current boxes for a 'research report,' whatever its level of complexity. To write a 'good history' requires the historian to remain grounded with simple solutions or conclusions; more often than not they might just be the right ones. Do not necessarily discard simplicity in favour of something 'elegant' or 'complex.'

History has its moments, but not as many as a good whodunit.

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First, an English teacher. Then, a librarian. And then a historian

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This paper is published in the 'historical narrative' style based on insights gained during the research and teaching processes. Dr. Callender has produced numerous historical articles and books over her career. Her capstone work, *Dr. Palmer: Chiropractor, World Traveler, Author, Lecturer, Civic Leader, Mother and Wife*, will be published by the Association for the History of Chiropractic in 2020.

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3. Somebody else originally called them this and for the life of me, I can't remember what keywords I entered to retrieve that perfect example. And I may have the labels mixed up. This is why you should keep notes!