

# DD Palmer

## The Founder of Chiropractic: A narrative

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### A narrative

**D**aniel David Palmer (DD) was born in Port Perry, a little, isolated town in Ontario, Canada. DD related his early history in these words:

*'I was born on March 7, 1845, a few miles east of Toronto, Canada. My Ancestors were Scotch and Irish on the maternal side - English and German on the paternal side.'*

*'When my grandparents settled near the now beautiful City of Toronto, Canada, it was but one log house. That region then was known as "way out West."*

*'I came within one of never having a mama. My mother was one of twins, the other who died. The other who lived weighed only 1 ½ pounds. When a Baby I was cradled in a piece of hemlock bark'*

*... this paper gives the 19 September 1895 as the date on which Palmer became one of the first health practitioners to realise the health of a person, as the host, played a role in disease.'*

Daniel David Palmer's paternal ancestors came to this country from England and settled in New York State. His Grandfather, Stephan Palmer, emigrated to what was then Canada West, now the Province of Ontario. DD's father, Thomas Palmer, was born in 1824 in Port Perry, Ontario. Thomas Palmer was a shoemaker, later a grocer.

Thomas Palmer served his community as a school-master and post-master. He and his wife, the former Katherine McVay had three sons and three daughters. The sons, besides Daniel, were Thomas J. and Bartlett D. Palmer. The daughters were Lucinda Mariah, Hannah Jane and Catherine.

The great Civil War in the United States caused hard times in Canada, and two of the Palmer boys decided to look for greater opportunities. So when Daniel David Palmer was 20, he and his brother Thomas J, 22, left their home on April 2, 1865, and with their meagre belongings packed

in a carpet bag and two dollars borrowed from friends, crossed the border near Toronto, into the United States.

After walking for 30 days they reached Buffalo, New York, and there spent their last savings for passage to Detroit, Michigan. They slept on grain sacks by a boat pier, breakfasted on persimmons and secured temporary jobs.

Their next stop was Chicago and they got permission to ride on a military train to Davenport, Iowa.

Thomas Palmer proceeded to Medford, Oklahoma, where he became the pioneer of what was to become Oklahoma Territory's most popular newspaper, the Oklahoma Guardian. Eight months after the 21 year old DD arrived in the United States he became a school master of a one-room school-house on the prairies of Muscatine County, Iowa.

He taught 50 pupils ranging in age from 5 to 20 years during February and March of 1866. After this first teaching position, DD taught in nearby Concord Township, Louisa County, Iowa. The 7-month term with 80 pupils began January 1867.

The next year, DD taught 47 students in District Two, Jefferson Township, Louisa County, with the term ending on 17 March 1868.

By 1871 DD had become an experienced and veteran schoolmaster with 5 years of service. His next position was with 53 youths of the Intermediate Department in New Boston, Illinois, a bustling Mercer County Mississippi River port.

DD was teaching school in January and February 1871 when he married his first wife, Abba Lord. She advertised herself as:

Dr. ABBA LORD PALMER  
BOX 117, NEW BOSTON, ILL  
PSYCHOMETRIST  
CLAIRVOIANT  
PHYSICIAN  
SOUL READER  
and  
BUSINESS MEDIUM

After 6 years of teaching school. DD thought it was time to seek a more profitable occupation. School teachers were not paid well, earning about the same as a skilled farmhand. In November 1871, D.D. and his wife Abba purchased 10 acres of land in Eliza Township, Mercer County, Illinois, several miles north of New Boston. DD's first marriage to Abba Lord ended in divorce in 1873.

He named his farm Sweet Home, because there was a forest of locust trees on his farm. He took advantage of these trees and became an apiarist. He became one of the largest bee-raisers in the United States and yearly sent large shipments of honey to New York City. In 1877 he took a car-load of honey - 18,600 pounds - to New York City.

In January 1881 temperatures dropped way below freezing and by 14 April all bees were dead.

Despite the misfortune of his beekeeping venture DD was successful with nursery work. The operation grew to sufficient magnitude that DD was able to sell raspberry and other fruit bushes and trees all over the United States.

DD's housekeeper in New Boston was Mrs. Louvenia T Landers, a New Orleans gentlewoman and the widow of a Civil War Confederate officer. She had left her war-torn and confiscated Louisiana plantation to travel by river packet up the Mississippi River to this growing town.

DD married her in 1874, a year after she came to New Boston. She had a son named Frank. She was described as short, round, dark eyed, and dark haired, and was considered a woman of both culture and tenderness.

DD's only three children were born to him and Louvenia. Two daughters were born in New Boston, May in 1876 and Jessie in 1880.

Despite his successes he sold Sweet Home on 31 December 1881 and moved his family back to the prosperous and booming coal mining town of What Cheer, Iowa, where his parents and two brothers were still living.

In its glory days of the 1880s, What Cheer boasted a population of 8,000, with early 100 coal mines in the area. The city and county were populated by people of mostly English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish descent and boasted some 50 manufacturing plants producing everything from bicycles to wagons and clay products to wood stoves.

There were 20 saloons, two gambling houses, a brewery, a soft drink manufacturer, an opera house, three major railroad lines, and an annual visit of the Ringling Brothers' wagon show, forerunner of their circus.

DD's brother Thomas was the editor of the What Cheer newspaper, the What Cheer Patriot. DD opened a grocery store in What Cheer with his family living in the back of the store that was located next to the Post Office. The store sold all the necessities and bought and sold the local farmer's products and decided to specialise in selling fish, a food that most of the people in the area needed and found difficult to obtain since it was rather a distant point from any large lake or river.

DD entered into a contract with a man in Davenport to furnish him with fresh fish and between the grocery business and selling fish it was a pretty good livelihood for him. DD also sold goldfish for which he maintained exacting records of births, deaths, and diseases, just as he had done for his beekeeping and nursery operations on his New Boston farm.

It was from this that many of DD's antagonists and prejudiced MDs tried to discount his discovery of chiropractic by calling him '*Fish Palmer*'.

DD's only son was born in What Cheer, Iowa, on 14 September 1882. His given name was Joshua Bartlett, but he preferred to be known as Bartlett Joshua, or just BJ.

Amid all this prosperity, tragedy struck 2 years later in 1844 when Louvenia died. With three children to care for, a business to maintain, and his teaching duties to uphold, 40-year old DD married his third wife, 26 year old Martha Henning, six months later in 1885.

During the time he lived in New Boston DD became interested in spiritualism. Spiritualism as a religious concept was a form of Christianity which held that although the body dies and does not survive, the spirit of the individual lives on.

The discussions of Spiritualism's rationale and its mystery appealed to an already deeply religious and perpetually curious DD. He had always been an avid reader, especially of the bible, in which he had underlined lines and verses to such an extent the entire book was black with markings.

During the time DD returned to What Cheer and was teaching in Letts, a man by the name of Paul Caster in nearby Ottumwa died. Dr Caster had made his mark as an 'outstanding healer' and had built an extremely large practice as a magnetic healer. Blessed with a keen sense of public relations and the support of the local press, Caster was also known as a respected lecturer and constructed a large four-story brick building that was later to become Ottumwa's first public hospital.

With his voracious appetite for reading and learning, DD came into contact with this most successful healer and found his work interesting. He was very impressed with Paul Caster's procedures, magnitude of practice and the public reception Caster received. The philosophical concepts of magnetic healing were also attractive to D.D.

In many ways, this form of health treatment paralleled D.D.'s religiosity. He studied it and began a practice in Burlington, Iowa, in 1886. He opened his practice as 'D.D. Palmer, Vital Healer.'

About 1887 DD moved to Davenport where he established an office to practice Magnetic Healing in the Ryan Block on Second and Brady Streets. He leased rooms 7, 11, 12 and 13.

The Davenport City Directory of 1887 contains an advertisement that reads:

D.D. Palmer  
Cures without Medicine  
Ryan Block Building  
Publisher of the Educator

He was successful as a magnetic healer, and by 1895 he had a substantial clientele. His consultation and treatment for the deserving poor were free. Price of treatments were \$1 each in his rooms, and \$2 to \$5 at patient's residence.

In 1888 DD Palmer had promotional expenses of \$150, but his investment was paying dividends. Patients were flocking into his office from not only the Tri-Cities, (Davenport, Rock Island and Moline) but also many communities that were a day's trip away by horse and buggy. With his growing magnetic healing practice, additional rooms were leased in 1888. DD married his fourth wife, Villa Amanda Thomas of Rock Island, Illinois, who was to be a helpmate to her husband. She assisted him in his practice, taking over the role of manager and tending to patients requiring overnight care and accommodation.

He was rendering, with the magnetic system, a service in the practice of '*laying on of the hands*' while continuing to search a means of rendering a still more efficient health service. Dave Palmer, his grandson, said: '*As I was being held, sitting on my grandfather's knee, I was constantly impressed with the tremendous warmth of his hands. The fingers were large and extremely sensitive.*'

DD described his method of practising magnetic healing. He would develop a sense of being positive within his own body; sickness being negative. He would draw his hands over the area of the pain and with a sweeping motion stand aside, shaking his hands and fingers vigorously, taking away the pain as if they were drops of water.

The sun was shining on DD Palmer's life. According to a listing of his accounts, he averaged between \$3000 and \$4000 per year income at a time when a suit cost \$6 and a hotel room was \$2 a day. He wrote in his journal: '*One question was always supermost in my mind in my search for the Cause of Disease. I desired to know why one person was ailing and his associate working in the same shop at the same bench was not. This question was answered on 19 September 1895 with my first adjustment.*'

Harvey Lillard, an African-American janitor for the Ryan Building had been so deaf he couldn't hear a wagon on the street or the ticking of a watch. Upon inquiry, DD found that Harvey had, 17 years earlier, exerted himself in a cramped, stooping position. He said he felt something 'give way' in his back and then immediately became deaf.

An examination showed that a vertebra had been '*racked from its normal position*' and DD reasoned that if the vertebra were replaced his hearing would be restored. After a half hour's talk DD persuaded Mr Lillard to let him replace it.



*'I racked it into position by using the spinous process of the vertebra as a lever and soon the man could hear again.'* DD stated that 'there was nothing accidental about this, as it was accomplished with an object in view and the result expected was obtained.'

DD continued *'shortly after this relief from deafness, I had a case of heart trouble which was not improving. I examined the spine and found a displaced vertebra pressing against the nerves which innervate the heart. I adjusted the vertebra and gave immediate relief - nothing "accidental" or "crude" about this. Then I began to reason if two diseases, so dissimilar as deafness and heart trouble, came from impingement, a pressure on nerves, were not other diseases due to a similar cause?'*

DD wrote *'Thus the science (knowledge) and art (adjusting) of chiropractic were formed at that time. I then began a systematic investigation for the cause of all diseases and have been amply rewarded.'*

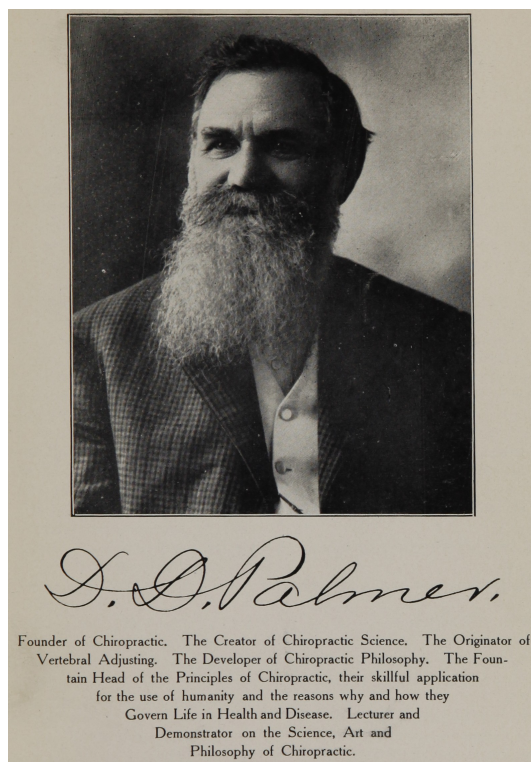
With the conviction he had indeed made a profound inroad on the mysteries of health, DD now became quite secretive. His experimentation was done in private and in almost complete obscurity. The rooms in which he worked were darkened. Heavy drapes were drawn over the windows. Observations of his palpations and adjustments were impossible to discern by others who might be in the room.

DD quickly sought a name for his new health science. With the help of a patient and friend, The Reverend Samuel Weed, a word was coined. Rev. Weed, who had studied Hebrew and Greek was something of a linguist, suggested three or four different names. Palmer looked them over and decided to use chiropractic from *cheir* which means 'hand' in Greek, and *praktos*, meaning 'done.' The 'birthdate' of the newly created word chiropractic was 14 January 1896.

As DD continued to work with chiropractic, he was extremely reluctant to share his discovery with others. But one day an event took place that changed his mind: *'Two years after the first adjustment was given I came near being killed at Clinton Junction, Illinois.'* He then determined to teach the science and art to some one as fast as it was unfolded. Leroy Baker, of Fulton, Illinois, was his first student prior to DD's school being established.

During this period DD was optimistic and excited. He rewarded himself in 1897 with what proved to be among his proudest possessions, a matched pair of Pinto ponies. A small surrey was made, and he raced up and down the streets and hills of Davenport behind his spirited team of *'Nip and Tuck.'* The combination of beautiful horses, a unique surrey, and Palmer was excellent promotion for his practice. Business continue to be good despite the encroachment of the medical establishment now dead set against 'quacks' of any kind.

DD did not practice in the morning. One account tells of 91 patients seated in the reception room waiting for 1 pm, the appointed hour for DD to start his practice. As patients would come into his office each would take a number from a hook. His charges were \$10 for the first week of treatments. If continuing services were needed, charges were \$5 a week.



In January 1898 William A MD became DD Palmer's first student of his School. The fee set by DD was \$500. On 6 January 1902 four students graduated as Doctors of Chiropractic. Among them was DD's son BJ. After graduating, BJ practiced in his father's school and infirmary.

In late 1902 DD packed his household items and left Davenport and started a new school in Santa Barbara, California. He returned to Davenport in late 1903 and he and BJ established an equal partnership that continued until May 1906.

In March of that year DD was convicted of practicing medicine without a license. He was fined \$350. DD was determined to serve out his sentence rather than pay the fine, however on 20 April Mrs Palmer paid his fine and DD was released. On 30 April he sold his half of the school for \$2,196.79 and left Davenport.

DD first went to Medford, Oklahoma, where his brother Thomas was the publisher of the local newspaper. He then went on to Portland, Oregon, where he established another school in 1908. In the spring of 1911, DD and his wife Mary settled in Los Angeles and continued to lecture, and also teach at the *Ratledge College* in Los Angeles.

Daniel David Palmer died on 20 October 1913 at his home in Los Angeles. Cause of death was typhoid fever.

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This paper is published in the 'historical narrative' style based on the extensive research Dr Peters has published over many years in which he has exhaustively cited and discussed the evidence for each claim in this paper. Readers seeking further information may refer to his thesis: *An early history of chiropractic: The Palmers and Australia*, available through all institutional libraries and for purchase from <https://www.institutechiro.com/product/rolf-peters-book/>