Frontier Doctor, Medical Pioneer

The Life and Times of
A. T. STILL
and His Family

Charles E. Still Jr.

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In memory of Martha Still, Mary Margaret Still, Mary Elvira Still, Blanche Still Laughlin, and Anna Still

These women faced various hardships with courage and strength, which gave the Still men their courage to pioneer an idea totally new to medicine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Without the support and loyalty of these wives and mothers it would have been difficult or impossible for the osteopathic profession to be conceived, and for a school of medicine to be established, one that is now starting its second century of service.
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Unless otherwise noted, all images are courtesy of Museum of Osteopathic Medicine (MOM), Kirksville, Missouri

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In 1991, to commemorate the one-hundred-year anniversary of Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine, the founding school of osteopathy, and to honor his father’s desire to have a book on the reminiscences about Dr. Andrew Taylor Still, Charles E. Still Jr. wrote *Frontier Doctor, Medical Pioneer: The Life and Times of A. T. Still and His Family*.

For decades, this book has been a favorite of readers seeking a glimpse into the life of Dr. Still as a family man, a friend, and a neighbor, and a personal understanding of his struggles against medical ineffectiveness and his discovery of the osteopathic method.

Even though the original 1991 printing has been sold out for many years, we still receive requests for the book. And so, thanks to the support of the author’s sons, Charles Still and Gerry Still, the book is returning in a paperback edition. The family shares their pleasure of keeping these cherished stories available for another generation to enjoy.
Foreword

This is the story of the founding of a profession and of the reform movement in medicine for which it came into being. And yet, it is a family story, charmingly told, in family style. The frontline heroes of the story are men, three in particular: the author’s great-grandfather Abraham (Abram) Still, his grandfather Andrew Taylor Still, the conceiver and founder of osteopathy, and his father, Charles E. Still. It is so appropriate, however, that the author chose to dedicate the book to five women, mothers and wives who made the heroism and achievements possible. The book is based to a large extent on copious notes, writings, letters, and assorted documents placed in storage more than sixty years ago by the author’s father, and on the author’s own extensive research and personal observations as a member of the family, as a student in the school founded by his grandfather, and as a veteran practitioner of osteopathic medicine.

Author Charles E. Still Jr. asked me to write the foreword to his book because, in his words, of my “judgment and objectivity,” supposedly engendered by many years as “close observer” of the profession “from the outside.” I find it difficult, however, to be objective about this intimate personal and moving story of tragedy and triumph. Having served the osteopathic profession and its principles as teacher, researcher, and author for almost half of its entire history, I could not help but find excitement in this saga of the historic and legendary crusade of the Still family for the right to teach and put those principles into practice. Having met the author’s father, “Dr. Charley,” in the late 1940s, when he was still a member of the Missouri legislature, and having also known the author for many years
(on tennis courts and elsewhere), as well as other members of the family, I sometimes feel that I have been caught up in that crusade.

I could not help but feel pride—and a personal stake—in a profession that in such a short time and in the face of enormous obstacles and powerful opposition, progressed from one remarkable man’s idea and a one-room school, with twelve students and himself as the faculty, to a profession continually renewed by fifteen first-class medical schools, some university-affiliated and publicly funded, with a collective and superb faculty of hundreds, enrollment in the thousands, and thirty thousand physicians serving millions of patients in all fifty states, as medical officers in the armed forces and the public health service, and as members of numerous governmental agencies, councils, and boards. The Old Doctor is quoted in chapter 12 as having said in about 1897, when the profession was less than half a decade old, that it was no longer threatened from the outside. How much truer that statement is today, when the profession is almost ten decades old!

This is a most timely book as the osteopathic profession prepares for its second century. Having, in its first century, achieved such enormous success, it would be well for the profession, including its students, to recall its humble and heroic beginnings. It would do well also to remember the noble purpose for which it came into existence, that of basing the practice of medicine on the patient’s own inherent healing powers and its support. Having thrived as it has, it would be most appropriate for the profession to determine whether that purpose has also flourished. How well have the health needs that it set out to meet been met? How well are they now being met?

Since the only good reason for the existence of any profession is that it meets societal needs not met by any other, it is timely—even urgent—for the profession to determine whether the need still exists for a health-oriented profession that sees the highest function of the physician to be that of enhancing the competence of the “healthcare system” inherent in every patient and removing the impediments to its function. Given the overwhelming evidence for the increasing need for such a profession, for its preventive as well as its therapeutic...
value, it remains for the profession to examine itself for what further needs to be done to prepare for this historic role in society.

Were the osteopathic profession to respond to this book by undertaking this self-scrutiny and rededication to the reformation it began in the nineteenth century, it would have prepared well for the twenty-first century, and the author would have completed his family’s “crusade.”

Irvin M. Korr, Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor
Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine, 1975
Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine, 1990

Fort Worth, Texas

April 1991
Acknowledgments

I congratulate my father, Dr. Charley Still, for providing so much material in his notes on the life of his father, Andrew Taylor Still, and on the early history of the school and the Osteopathic profession. No other person was in a better position to chronicle the events so well. I hope that I have used his unedited notes, his collection of letters, and my recollection of our conversations to paint an accurate picture of the life and times of Andrew Taylor Still and his family.

I am especially grateful to Eleanor Ninmam-Schultz whose astute editorial work—and editor’s red pencil—helped eliminate meanderings, repetition, and caught some factual inaccuracies. Her editorial work and long hours resulted in the final manuscript.

My thanks extends to others who have assisted me in this project. Elizabeth Laughlin was the motivator, ever ready to provide pictures, genealogical material, and additional information. She also encouraged me when I needed it most. Nadine Smith, my writing instructor at Scottsdale [Arizona] Community College, helped me learn the basics of writing. She also read the unfinished manuscript and gave suggestions and encouragement. Ken Bacher, my manuscript consultant, guided me through the eighteen chapters, advising me and correcting a variety of mixed-up sentences. I thank him for his sincere interest in the project. Mark Laughlin carefully read every page when it was in the roughest condition, making constructive suggestions and offering words of encouragement.

Inspiration was gained from the following published sources: and my grandfather’s Autobiography (1897); E. R. Booth’s History of Osteopathy and Twentieth-Century Medicine (1905); Arthur G. Hildreth's
The Lengthing Shadow of Dr. Andrew Taylor Still (1938); and Georgia Walter’s “The First School of Osteopathy,” in The Kirksville Magazine.

By way of honoring my father, I have appended to chapter eighteen a tribute to “Dr. Charley” written by Dr. William Englehard in 1936 for The Journal of Osteopathy.

Finally, this project would not have been complete without the cooperation of Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine, the A. T. Still National Osteopathic Museum, and Northeast Missouri State University.
Preface

During the years I have been returning to Kirksville to attend post-graduate classes and Founder’s Day celebrations, I have talked to many former students of the college. Among them were a few who knew something about the history of their profession and the life of its founder; however, they were definitely in the minority. Most of them knew little of the life of Andrew T. Still, of his parents, or of other family members who had done so much to help the osteopathic profession during its early period of growth and the many rough times it experienced as it matured. Hardly any of the graduates knew about the contributions of friends of the profession in its early days or how the zeal and enthusiasm of the first graduates ensured both the growth and prestige of their profession.

My father, Dr. Charley, at one point planned to write a book about his father’s life and the early history of the college, and in 1924 and 1925, he gathered material for the manuscript. He had written to a large number of the college’s graduates asking them to relate their experiences at the school and their thoughts and feelings about the Old Doctor. In all, he received more than forty letters in response.

During that same time period, about once a week he would dictate a page or two of remembrances of his father, the beginning of the school, and his own experiences as the first person—other than his father—to go into the world and practice osteopathy. However, he soon became involved in so many other activities that he never got around to writing his book. As a result, some twenty years later he presented all of his material to me and my sister, Elizabeth. He asked
us if, sometime in the future, we could see that this material would be used in preparation of a book.

A little more than five years ago, after having practiced osteopathy for fifty years, I dug out the metal box in which Dad had placed the letters and his own writings. They had been stored away for more than sixty years. Unfortunately, he had taken all of his letters out of their envelopes. As a result, in many cases quite a few pages have been lost or torn, including the last pages with the signatures. Unless letters had been written on pages with letterheads, it was impossible to be sure of the names of the writers.

Since I had retired and had some time, one of my first cousins by marriage, Elizabeth Laughlin, insisted that I try to do something with this material so my father’s efforts would not be lost. After looking over the contents of the box, I would have been more than happy to forget about this project. It was truly a mess. My cousin was persistent, however, noting that I had spent the first ten and one-half years of my life living next door to my grandfather and I was therefore the logical one to write a book about his life and about the life of his family as well. Elizabeth also pointed out that I was raised next door to the hospital and less than a block from the infirmary, and that I had seen quite a bit of the growth of the school and the profession firsthand.

I had been exposed to my father’s experiences and also had heard Uncle Harry Still, Aunt Blanche Laughlin, and Uncle Herman Still (who lived with us the last fifteen years of his life), discuss their early lives and the profound impact that all of the difficult years at the start of the osteopathic profession had made on all the family. I had been truly fortunate to know all the members of Andrew Still’s immediate family and to hear them give so much credit to their mother for her part in launching this new profession. I had also had the opportunity to know my Uncle George Laughlin well. He later headed the college in Kirksville. In addition, on several occasions I had the chance to spend some time with my mother’s brother, Uncle Bob Rider.

In the end, cousin Elizabeth was so persuasive that I decided to write this book on the family history, using my father’s notes. Once I had reached a firm decision to write the book about my family in
general and my grandfather in particular, I felt that I needed as much information as possible in addition to family members’ discussions and writings. Although there were already several books on Andrew Still’s life, I felt that I had better do a little digging of my own.

First I went to Jonesville, Virginia, where Andrew Still was born; then on to New Market, Tennessee, where the family lived for a while. As I followed the family’s trail through Missouri, on to Kansas, and then back to Missouri, it was necessary to dig through the archives and historical collections of the libraries at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, the University of Missouri in Columbia, and Baker University in Baldwin City, Kansas. I found additional material about Andrew’s life and times in reports from county historical societies and in the archives of the states of Kansas and Missouri. From a historical standpoint, the pre–Civil War period was one of the most exciting times in the growth of our nation, and the Still family was deeply involved in the action.

As far as the development of the profession was concerned, it was necessary to use much of my own information from discussions with my father and from his writings. I am sorry I was not able to give more space, which was so richly deserved, to the accomplishments of other family members and many pioneers of the profession.

I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to spend some time with Dr. Carl McConnell, an osteopathic writer and researcher, during the last months of his life. Although he was dying, we had several long and thought-provoking discussions.

Dr. McConnell pointed out that he was more convinced than ever that the mechanical factor, as a major causative factor in the development of disease, had been only partly explored. He felt it necessary to evaluate all factors to really understand the underlying cause of heart attacks. He said he felt there were several mechanical components that affected the arterial circulation of the blood vessels of the heart and that when they were found and evaluated we would have a better understanding of the causes of heart malfunction. He was still working on this concept at the time of his death.

Dr. McConnell was only one of many whom I have been privileged to know who still had enthusiasm and dedication to the profession and
its concepts after practicing osteopathy exclusively for forty years or more. Many felt that this dedication to the principles of their profession was the major reason for the continued growth of osteopathy as an independent school of medicine.

I hope that I have been able to present Andrew Still, his family, and the profession in an interesting and readable fashion. Andrew Still had a full, useful, and exciting life. There was considerable conflicting source material, and often there were various dates for specific events in his life. The chronology was often confusing and there are still some controversies that are unresolved. Nevertheless, I have tried to be as accurate as possible and have strived to be as objective as possible.

Having again savored the enthusiasm of osteopathy’s early years, I still feel that our potential for both service and growth lies ahead. Maybe we should take the Old Doctor’s advice: “Strap on some enthusiasm, and dig on!”

Charles E. Still Jr.

Scottsdale, Arizona

March 1991
Chapter One

Martha Still was furious. It was the second day in a row that young Andrew had come home with raw areas and bruises on his legs from a thrashing he had gotten from his teacher at the log cabin schoolhouse. What made Martha even angrier was that not only were her children being punished regularly and rather brutally but they were learning so little.

Ed and Jim, her two older sons, had also complained about the harsh treatment at school. Recently the teacher seemed to have lost control of his temper completely and the beatings were becoming even more severe.

Martha was a frontier woman, and she used a switch on her children when they needed it. But senseless whipping could not be tolerated. She had often discussed the school situation with her husband whenever he was home. She urged him to think about moving someplace where she might get her children a better education and where they might also be away from this teacher with the uncontrollable temper.

It wasn’t that she didn’t like their home. She loved the small farm that was just a few miles from the little town of Jonesville in Lee County in southwestern Virginia. Furthermore, the Blue Ridge Mountains to the south of their log cabin were always an inspiration to her. The twisted trail that led through the mountains was impassable by wagons and later earned the name “trail of the lonesome pine,” because it could be crossed only by foot or by an expert horseman.

Martha had married Abraham Still in 1822, two years before he became a circuit riding preacher for the new and expanding Methodist Church. These new preachers on horseback, with only their Bibles
in hand, were the unique development of the church in 1783. Shortly thereafter, Methodist camp meetings developed where hundreds of worshipers would gather for several days at a time to hear preaching and sing hymns.

Martha remembered vividly how she met Abraham, or Abram, as he was called. It was at one of those camp meetings when many young men were inspired with such religious fervor and zeal that they all wanted to become circuit riding preachers.

At first, only unmarried men were accepted for this lonely and demanding assignment, but this soon changed. Because of the rigorous work, the wearying weeks of riding horseback, no assurance of a place to sleep, and no protection from the weather, many of the men became discouraged and dropped out after a few months.

But circuit riding was truly Abram's life. With no church buildings in which to preach, each mountain cabin was a place to deliver his spontaneous sermons. As lonely, as physically and mentally draining as his work was, Abram faced each day with a feeling of joy. He exulted in the fact that he could bring the word of God to so many isolated families.

Nonetheless, after six weeks on horseback and traveling from cabin to cabin, family to family, it was always a relief to have a wife and home to return to for some much needed rest. But even as he relaxed and restored his strength, he knew that soon he would be anxious to get back to his assignment again.

The Holston Conference of the Methodist Church operated in an area characterized by small farms and isolated families, often far from civilization, and deep in the mountains. Before long, circuit riding preachers brought back word that many families they visited had serious physical problems and often needed medical attention.

Quite a few of the preachers took it upon themselves to study and learn as much as they could about how to minister to the sick. Abram was one of them. He soon developed the knowledge and skill to take care of many of the physical problems and ills even as he tended to the spiritual health of the isolated families. As he continued his ministrations, he felt he was now even more useful to the church and to the people because he was serving both the body and the spirit.
He realized for some time that Martha was not happy with the school situation in Jonesville. In addition, he knew their small log cabin was hardly large enough for their growing family that now included five children. When Martha asked him seriously to see if they might move someplace where the children could get a better education—one of her primary interests for their children—he contacted the Methodist Church Conference headquarters.

He was told the church was planning to build a school at New Market, Tennessee, and he could be assigned to that project if he wished. At first he was a bit reluctant. Though he wanted to grant Martha’s wish, he didn’t really want to move away from families he had served, and he didn’t want to leave the lovely Blue Ridge Mountains. Yet, Abram was a man who liked a challenge, and this would give him a chance to add new direction to his life. It would also give his children the opportunity to gain the education Martha wanted for them. So Abram accepted this new position, knowing his family would be a lot happier.

That summer, after the children had helped in the house and all the farm chores were done, Martha loaded the family into the largest wagon the family owned. They rode to nearby Jonesville where Martha spent several hours picking up supplies for the family’s move to Tennessee.

It was usually during the summer that wagons and carts, drawn by horses and oxen, stopped in Jonesville for supplies as families traveled through the Cumberland Gap and on to the west. The youngsters—Ed, Jim, and “Drew” (Andrew’s nickname)—watched with excitement and a degree of envy as those families loaded their wagons with fresh supplies and headed on to the west. Even Barbara Jane, who was only four years old, was excited by this activity, understanding that soon they, too, would head west to find a new home.

Abram and Martha, with the five children and all their possessions loaded into two ox-drawn wagons, finally began the trip to New Market, a journey that would take nearly a month. The youngest child, Thomas, was only a year old at the time.

Along the way, Martha had plenty of time to think about her life—its past, and what she expected of the future. She remembered
stories her father told of his family’s adventures. How his father, James Moore III, and his aunt had been captured by Shawnee Indians and were later sold in Canada as slaves; how the rest of his family had been killed by the same tribe near the small Virginia community of Abb’s Valley; and how it took her grandfather, with his sister, several years to escape from their captors. (These relatives were Martha’s grandfather and great-aunt.) After her grandfather’s return to Virginia, he started a family on a small farm in Tazewell County, Virginia. Her father followed in the family tradition and also became a farmer.

Undoubtedly, Martha’s great concern for her children to get an education was inspired by the fact that she had been unable to get a formal education herself since the only available school at that time was for men only. She learned to read, however, and spent much of her time reading when not helping with family chores. This prompted her to resolve that, whatever else happened, she would see that her children had every opportunity to attend a school.

Even with the slowness of the trip in the wagons behind the plodding oxen, Martha’s spirits soared. Her dream of a good education for her children, she believed, would now be fulfilled. When they arrived at their destination and she saw the family’s new home in New Market, Martha was truly happy. There was a well-kept front yard and a small vegetable garden. Best of all, it was a frame house with several rooms. As she helped unload the wagons, she felt that at last her family would have the opportunities that she had so wished for it: a nice home with a good school nearby.

Abram had also done a lot of thinking during this trip to his new assignment. The Conference leaders had told him he was to help build and develop the new school and he would also be allowed to preach. He could not help but assume that preaching down in the lowlands might be a bit different from his work with the mountain families in their lonely cabins.

Although he had some doubts about this assignment, he was glad that he would be near Knoxville where, he had heard, there were really fine doctors. He decided that if the opportunity came
he would gain additional medical knowledge. One thing he hadn’t thought much about was that many of these farms had slaves. He knew his father, Boaz, owned a large farm near Asheville in Buncombe County, North Carolina, and had blacks help on the farm; but at his young age, he hadn’t thought of them as slaves.

Most of the farms in the mountain area where Abram had first been stationed were too small to use more help, and at no time had the slavery issue been a problem for him or for many other circuit riding preachers serving that area. He knew that none of his friends or associates owned slaves, and most of them were opposed to the idea, but here on the flatland nearly all the farmers with considerable property owned slaves and many treated them with little or no consideration—some in a very inhumane, even cruel, manner.

So Abram had much to ponder as he began his new position. Would he be able to accept the different treatment of human beings simply because of the color of their skin? Other preachers seemed to be comfortable with such a situation, but not Abram. He began to doubt whether he could live with himself if he didn’t speak up against slavery.

During the ten years he had served as a circuit rider in the mountains of southwestern Virginia he had established such a fixed lifestyle that he found it quite difficult to make what was a dramatic and radical change in his work and daily routine. When he heard that one of his younger brothers, Elijah, was now serving as a circuit riding preacher to the mountain families in Tazewell County, one of the most mountainous regions in the whole state of Virginia, Abram felt a twinge of envy. He missed all those lovely mornings when he watched the sun burn the mist off of his beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains. Now they seemed so far away.

There were other changes in Abram’s work that he had not anticipated. He wasn’t preaching as often as he had in the past, nor was it to isolated families. He found that the small churches and their congregations expected a much different type of presentation. They wanted a properly prepared sermon, but Abram was used to speaking extemporaneously.
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Frontier Doctor, Medical Pioneer is an intimate look at the life of Andrew Taylor Still, the founder of osteopathic medicine. Still mistrusted the drugs that were routinely used during the nineteenth century, but his use of hands-on manipulation led to severe and very public criticism. After years of repeated success in treating patients, the validity of his methods was finally acknowledged.

Author Charles E. Still Jr., grandson of Andrew, uses family stories and records to chronicle Still’s life, including his family life on the frontier and his role in the anti-slavery movement, as well as his work to establish osteopathy as a legitimate form of medicine that could be carried on by future generations. Frontier Doctor, Medical Pioneer provides a fascinating inside look into the origins of modern osteopathic medicine.

Charles Still Jr. describes his grandfather’s ingenuity in creating an entirely new system of medical practice and his tenacity in overcoming the multiple obstacles that his fledgling osteopathic profession faced in the early years. This book skillfully guides the reader through the life of an itinerant frontier physician who become one of the greatest medical pioneers of his era.

—Thomas A. Quinn, DO, Clinical Professor, LECOM Bradenton, author of The Feminine Touch: Women in Osteopathic Medicine

When asked by museum patrons to suggest additional reading on the founder of osteopathic medicine, I tell them we are fortunate to have a good selection of books from those who knew Dr. A. T. Still. But based on years of feedback, Frontier Doctor, Medical Pioneer is my choice. All audiences enjoy the light, uncomplicated tone and feel of Frontier Doctor, told with details only a family member would know.

—Jason Haxton, MA, DO (hon.), Director, Museum of Osteopathic Medicine