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HIST 413

December 4, 2018

Susan Anderson and Mary Walker

Women in the West were usually known in this time to be the stay at home house wife that takes care of the children and cleans the house. A women's roles were set for her and she really had not much of a choice back in the day but to accept it. Men were the ones that took on the big professions such as doctors, surgeons, business men, etc. They were the ones that had to provide for the family and make sure that the family was supported financially. When it came to women taking charge in their own lives, many people looked down upon that. Women that wanted to have a bigger future had to defy the odds and not care what others might have thought of them. Women doctors were not very common during this time period and often times they did not receive much credit as a male doctor would. Susan Anderson and Mary Walker were two female doctors that had to build up their trust within the people around them and their clients. These two females had to work hard to ensure that they were respected in their fields and that they weren't treated differently because they were women. They both had different up bringing's and had very different experiences as women doctors. They have faced some of the same struggles with being some of the first women doctors in their regions.

Susan Anderson was also known as “Doc Susie”, she was born on “January 31, 1870 in Indiana. Her father was a farmer.”¹ She was always very close with her father and they had a great relationship when she was a kid. That relationship faded away when her father decided to marry another woman named Minnie. In the book *Susan Anderson: Colorado’s Doc Susie* by Lydia Griffin she states “In 1875, Susan’s parents divorced. At that time divorce was not as common as it is today. The divorce meant big changes for Susan...”². Susan had to deal most of her life without having that traditional mother figure in her life. Her mother left after the divorce and never really kept in touch after that. According to Cunningham, “one day, when Susan was five and her brother John was three, their mother left on a train and never came back.”³ Susan and her brother had to deal with this burden early on and there were really no other children around them that could relate to them in this way. Mothers didn’t leave their children very often back in these times, and especially not forever. Growing up Susan never really wanted or dreamed that she would one day become a doctor, she “learned Morse code. She wanted to be a telegrapher when she grew up.”⁴ Initially, she had no intend to go to medical school, but her dad was a admit on one of his children becoming a doctor, something he wish he had the opportunity of doing. Susan was always very good with her school work and worked very hard to do well, something that her brother John didn’t do. So that left the option of becoming a doctor to Susan, since she was the one that had the most potential to do well in life. After she attended high school and graduated along side her brother, her dreams of becoming a telegrapher were no

¹ Cunningham, Penny. *Doc Susie: Mountain Doctor*. Palmer Lake, Colorado: Filter Press, 2010. 1

² Griffin, Lydia. *Susan Anderson: Colorado’s Doc Susie*. Palmer Lake, Colorado: Filter Press. 2010. 2

³ Cunningham 1

⁴ Griffin 3

more. Griffin stated that “she no longer wished to be a telegrapher. She wanted to be a doctor.”⁵ And this is where the journey of the great Doc Susie started.

Seeing the boom of money going into Colorado due to the Gold Rush, Susan’s dad decided to pack up and move the family there for better opportunities. Once they got there, her dad didn’t want her to be surrounded by “bad-tempered men, outlaws, and corruption.”⁶ he wanted her to focus on becoming a doctor. So, she enrolled in medical school in September of 1893 at University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. She was very excited to start this new journey and to be in a new environment. According to Griffin, “when Susan started college in Ann Arbor, one in every four students was female.”⁷ Which goes to show that the medical field of becoming a doctor was mostly dominated by males, the women were always the ones doing the jobs of nurses. Once she finished medical school, she worked for a rich man as a private doctor for a while, but once he was well enough to do things on his own, she wanted to set up her own medical practice. Griffin wrote, “She returned to Colorado and set up a medical practice in Denver. Unfortunately, her practice failed. She later explained in a newspaper interview: “(the failure was) because people just didn’t believe in women doctors.”⁸ She had to find a way to get pass this gender binary that was set up during this time. She had decided for the time being to work as a nurse in Greely, Colorado taking the orders from the men doctors. Susan hated having to do what a man told her to do because, “she often knew more than they did.”⁹ At this time her health wasn’t too good, so she decided to move again from Greely, Colorado to Fraser, Colorado. During this time, “she rented a cabin and focused on nursing herself back to full

⁵ Griffin 5

⁶ Griffin 8

⁷ Griffin 8

⁸ Griffin 19

⁹ Griffin 19

health. She ate well, exercised, and rested. Her stamina increased, and in less than a year the consumption was in recession.”¹⁰ Her health became a challenge in itself to keep herself in shape on top of trying to prove herself to the people around town that a woman doctor is just as good and educated than a male doctor.

Susan was a woman doctor in a male dominant field, many people knew that most doctors were men. In result of that she wasn't trusted well being a female doctor considering that that was very rare. According to Enss, “Society was more tolerant of women doctors, but she still struggled against those who simply could not accept her in this nontraditional role.”¹¹ This was mostly other male doctors in the field that didn't accept or respect her as a fellow doctor. She mostly took patients that lived in forests, ranches and lumber camps, placed where there were not high amounts of other doctors in the area. That way she could build her reputation with the people and gain her trust with them so they can then spread the word of her good work. The male doctors and other males didn't like the fact that Susan was becoming so well known and respected so, “in an attempt to drive Susan from practicing medicine, some men staged embarrassing office calls.”¹² It seemed like the men were the ones that were in particular the ones that weren't approving of Susan Anderson and her practice, but she didn't let them stop her at all. One day, a drunk tunnel worker managed to get an appointment with Susan and claimed that he had a problem with his genitals. She agreed to examine him and then when she had her back turned, he pulled his pants down and Susan proceeded to ask what the problem was, and his reply was “Nothing. But ain't it dandy?”¹³ Susan “reached for a nearby scalpel. While he was

¹⁰ Enss, Chris. *The Doctors Wore Petticoats: Women Physicians of the Old West*. Twodot: 2006. 39

¹¹ Enss 41

¹² Enss 41

¹³ Enss 42

reattaching his suspenders, she cocked her fist back and told him to get out of her office. She showed him the knife and his eyes widened. “If I ever see you again,” she warned “I’ll slit your belly with a butcher’s knife.”¹⁴ When it came to men disrespecting her and not giving her the credit that she deserved as a doctor, she never hesitated to put these men in their places and stand up for herself. She knew that she was great in what she did and that she would never doubt her abilities again, and she wasn’t going to let anyone put her down either.

Mary Walker was another women doctor that had to go through some of the same issues as Susan Anderson with being a women doctor in a time frame where men where the dominate in that field. Mary Walker was one of six children, she had 4 sisters and one brother. Her dad was a farmer and a carpenter and was very openminded. According to the book, *Civil War Doctor: The Story of Mary Walker* by Carla Joinson, “Alvah Walker (Mary’s father) was so forward-thinking for his time, in that he allowed his girls to study and pursue professional careers.”¹⁵ Back in this time women were not to pursue any type of higher education, they were to take care of the household by cooking and cleaning and raising the children. Mary’s father’s different opinion on these issues is what shaped Mary into such an independent and strong individual. Also, during this time, Joinson wrote “most women wore long skirts made of yards of heavy fabric, tight corsets that created an hourglass figure, and high-heeled shoes. However, the Walker girls shared chores on the family farm, and none were required to wear corsets...”¹⁶ Her lifestyle as a child was different than other kids during that time frame, her father allowed his girls to have bigger dreams than just being a housewife, he didn’t allow them to get suctioned into the social norms.

¹⁴ Enss 42

¹⁵ Joinson, Carla. *Civil War Doctor: The Story of Mary Walker*. Greensboro, North Carolina: Morgan Reynolds. 2007. 15

¹⁶ Joinson 15

Which ultimately helped Mary in the long run. Mary Walker was the type of woman that marched to the beat of her own drum. According to the book *Three 19th-Century Women Doctors: Elizabeth Blackwell, Mary Walker, Sarah Loguen Fraser* by Mary K LeClair, Justin D White, and Susan Keeter, “she was a crusader for human rights and equality...Mary’s undeniable determination to have equal rights under the law for all women, and to live in the way she chose, was a basic that would carry her through life.”¹⁷ This strong background and mindset is what gave Mary the confidence and courage she needed in becoming a woman doctor in a mans world.

Mary Walker’s journey to success was not easy, she had many issues regarding her gender and her field of work. During the civil war Mary had tried to offer her services to help those in need by wanting to be an assistant surgeon, but according to Joinson, “Although surgeons were desperately needed. General Finely turned down Walker’s application to serve as an assistant surgeon, saying “I cannot appoint a woman.”¹⁸ She had to deal with the same type of issues regarding men versus women as did Susan Anderson. But this little issue was not detrimental to Mary, instead she decided that she was still going to work in the hospital as another doctor’s assistant. Joinson wrote, “she walked up and down long flights of stairs to meet the ambulances, examined and recommended treatment for patients distributed medicine, and roused herself from bed at all hours to care for patients—all without pay.”¹⁹ Mary was determined to gain the respect she needed and help the people in need, and if that meant that she had to work and not get paid to prove herself than that is exactly what she would do. Eventually,

¹⁷ LeClair, Mary K. White, Justin D. Keeter, Susan. *Three 19th-Century Women Doctors: Elizabeth Blackwell, Mary Walker, Sarah Loguen Fraser*. Syracuse, New York: Hofman Press. 2007. 45.

¹⁸ Joinson 33

¹⁹ Joinson 33

Mary would go on to be employed as an assistant surgeon with the Fifty-Second Ohio Volunteers. Of course, with Mary being a women doctor, her employment didn't come easy. According to the book, *Mary Edwards Walker: The Only Female Medal of Honor Recipient* by Alison Gains, "Dr. G. Perin immediately took a disliking to her. He did not want his troops treated by Walker, whom he called a "medical monstrosity." He ordered that a medical board examine her qualifications. Thus, Walker had to endure an exam simply because Dr. Perin did not like her."²⁰ She was put through unnecessary examination and questioning all due to the fact that a male doctor that was superior to her didn't like her and didn't respect her as a woman doctor.

Despite all of the negatively that came her way, Mary Walker was one of the only females to get a medal of honor. In the book, *Quite Contrary: Dr. Mary Edwards Walker* by Hall Marjory, she states that "in January 1866, she received the Congressional Medal of Honor for Meritorious Service...from that very moment she wore the bronze medal constantly. It was her greatest treasure, a tangible proof that she and her work had been appreciated."²¹ After all those long months to years of working with no recognition or respect from the male doctors, Mary finally got something that in her mind made up for it all! Mary always went above and beyond for her job and often times worked harder than the men in her field. According to Gains, this medal of honor "...was created during the Civil War to honor those who showed "gallantry or intrepidity, at risk of life, above and beyond the call of duty."²² She is still to this day one the only female that has received this award. It goes to show all of Mary's hard work that often times

²⁰ Gains, Allison. *Mary Edwards Walker: The Only Female of Honor Recipient*. New York: Cavendish Square. 2018. 49

²¹ Marjory, Hall. *Quite Contrary: Dr. Mary Edwards Walker*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls. 1970. 107.

²² Gains 77-78.

went unnoticed, still paid off in the end because she was the one that got recognized for this honorable award rather than a male. And also, on top of being rewarded this medal, for that time that she was working unpaid Mary received “a bit of paper worth over four hundred dollars...”²³ Which wasn’t near as much as she would have made if she was being paid but the fact that they acknowledged her work and decided to give her some money was shocking. It showed that her work did not go unappreciated entirely. With the big gender issues that were present during this era it was a very big deal for a woman to be noticed in the army as an assistant surgeon which was a male dominant field. So, through all of the problems and inconveniences that Mary had to go through in order to do what she loved and wanted, she still landed up making her mark during this era and making history!

Now when it comes to both of these two women, what they had in common was a lot of different things. The obvious answer would be that they are both women doctors in a time frame where a woman doctor was very rare to find. But the biggest thing that these two ladies had in common was their unfair treatment and lack of respect they got due to the gender inequality during this time. Susan and Mary had to work twice as hard as a male, whether it be in medical school or in the medical field itself. They were always being questioned as to whether or not they had the credentials for their jobs. Not only by the other fellow male doctors in the same practice but also by the patients that were skeptical of these new women doctors. Typically, the male always got the job as the doctor and often times these women were forced to take a job that was beneath a man, such as a nurse or a surgical assistant. It took courage and strength for Mary and Susan to break from this social norm of male dominance and do their own thing. Susan started her own practice in the mountains and made herself a name as the “mountain doctor” and Mary

²³ Marjory 99.

finally became that surgeon assistant in the military and received a medal of honor for her services that she provided. These two women didn't let the fact that they had to compete with men stop them from becoming successful in their own ways. They didn't want to live the life of a typical housewife that only had the duties of cleaning the house and taking care of the children. Both Susan and Mary were women that did not depend on a man such as a husband for anything, they worked hard for everything they had and didn't allow any man in their life to outshine them! These women had to work past the negativity and doubt that was placed upon them by men and worrisome patients in order to make it to their goals and achieve their dreams.

Susan and Mary faced the same problems when it came to gender inequality, but they definitely had different experiences when it came to the medical profession and how they were brought up. Susan was a doctor that took care of patients that resided in the mountains since there was not many other doctors out there to make issues for her. She had worked for a nurse for a while before she decided to take fate into her own hands and make her own practice. As for Mary, she had worked under many male doctors as assistants, but she finally got the opportunity to work with the soldiers in the army and taking care of their wounds, battle injuries, etc. There were so many injured soldiers that they had no choice but to allow Mary to help out. The two different upbringings that they had really played a role in how these women were and came about their success. Mary's father was always supportive on women doing bigger things than just the typical housework, he encouraged his daughters to study real world careers. Which led to Mary's career as a doctor and her willingness to prosper under any circumstance that she was given. Her fathers open ideas also helped her to not get trapped into the social norm of women's dress code and typical women thoughts, she wanted equality for women! When it came to

Susan's upbringing it also had a lot to do with her father, but he basically chose her profession for her. He was the one that sent her to medical school and basically lived his dream through her.

Although this was a time when women didn't take on careers or go to higher education schools typically, Susan Anderson and Mary Walker were two women that went against the grain. They both became doctors, knowing that it was dominated by men. Once it was all said and done these two women had to sometimes jump through hoops to prove themselves worthy as a doctor. They had to deal with the huge issue of gender inequality during this time and throughout their whole careers. But at the end of it all they both had their successes and lived their lives the way that they wanted to!

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