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MARION SIMS AND THE ORIGIN OF MODERN  
GYNECOLOGY\*

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New York

Gynecology as an independent specialty had no existence as such until the latter half of the nineteenth century, and the impetus that started its development originated in this country as a result of the genius and persistent efforts of J. Marion Sims who founded the Woman's Hospital in New York from whence proceeded gynecological teaching that spread throughout the world.

Until that time little was known and less done to alleviate the sufferings women had to endure, and gynecological practice was limited to the use of a tubular speculum through which erosions of the cervix were treated with nitrate of silver, the employment of an infusion of red oak bark for leucorrhoea, and a spherical pessary for the relief of prolapse. Operative gynecology was rarely attempted.

Sims gave the impulse which upset the do little conservative treatment of diseases peculiar to women which then prevailed and opened wide the field of active surgical, scientific and rational methods that are now in vogue.

The career of Sims reads like a fairy tale. He was born in Lancaster, South Carolina, January 25th, 1813. His

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ancestors were hardy Colonials of English and Scotch-Irish descent. His father, John Sims, had little education until late in life and was therefore most desirous that his son should have every educational advantage. He wished him to be a lawyer, his mother Mahola MacKey Sims, wanted him to be a minister, and to their great disappointment he chose medicine, not for any love for it, but his dislike for medicine was less than his dislike for the law or the ministry.

Sims' preliminary education consisted of instruction in local schools. He then spent two years in Columbia College, S. C., graduating in 1832, after which he commenced to read medicine with Dr. Churchill Jones in Lancaster. Sims says he was a great surgeon and that he received his inspiration for surgery from him. He then studied at the Charleston Medical School in 1833, after which he went to Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, graduating in 1835. There he had the benefit of working under Dr. George McClellan, a great surgeon and father of the Civil War General, for whom he had a great admiration.

He then returned to Lancaster to practice, but after his first two patients died, he moved to Mt. Meigs, Alabama, and later to Montgomery where he settled permanently. He rapidly established a reputation as a surgeon of ability. In 1837 he had removed the lower jaw without mutilation, and the superior maxilla for a tumor of the antrum in another instance. He was the first surgeon in the South to treat clubfoot successfully, and one of the first to operate on strabismus. He also operated with success on harelip, which he reported in the *Journal of Dental Surgery* in 1845 and which was his first publication.

In 1845 he first encountered the condition of vesicovaginal fistula and in line with the opinion of the day pronounced it incurable.

In those days the obstetric forceps were not in general use, and there was a lack of obstetric knowledge and care, and therefore not infrequently the baby's head became

impacted and compressed the bladder against the pelvic bones for hours, which resulted in devitalizing the tissues so that in a few days they sloughed out leaving a vesico-vaginal fistula. These pitiable patients were to be found in every community with no hope of cure.

Shortly after Sims saw his first case, he saw three others all in negro slaves. The morning after he had seen the last case he was called to attend a woman who had been thrown from her pony. Sims found her with great pain in her back and vesical and rectal tenesmus, and a digital examination disclosed an acute retroversion of the uterus. He then remembered the teaching of Professor Prioleau in the Charleston Medical College, that in such a case he should place the patient in the knee chest position, and try to reduce the dislocation with one finger in the rectum and another in the vagina.

He, therefore, placed his patient in the knee chest position and on retracting the perineum with his fingers, to his great surprise the air rushed in ballooning the vagina, and on turning the woman on her side he heard the air escape. He at once realized that the posture had allowed the intestines to be displaced from the pelvis leaving a vacuum and that the air distending the vagina would permit of an access for examination and operation such as had never been available before.

He immediately returned home, having bought a pewter tablespoon on the way, and placed the negro slave, whom he had previously dismissed as incurable, in the knee chest position, introduced the bent handle of the spoon when in his own words "he saw everything as no man had ever seen before. The fistula was as plain as the nose on a man's face."

Sims worked for four years before he succeeded in curing his first case. He established a hospital with twelve beds in his yard for these patients who were negro slaves, and he operated forty times on three patients and twenty-one times on one of them during this experimental work.

His four years of failure was due to infection of his sutures as this was before the days of asepsis or antisepsis, and also there was no anaesthesia. During this work he devised the method of fastening the sutures in inaccessible locations with a perforated shot. It was not until he picked up a piece of spiral spring wire one day when he hit upon the idea of using silver wire for suture material instead of silk that he achieved success, as the silver wire sutures did not become infected and therefore allowed the wound to heal. An S shaped self retaining catheter made of block tin, which he devised, was an essential part of his technic.

"Anarcha" his first successful case had been operated on thirty times, and when the time came to remove the sutures he wrote "with a palpitating heart and an anxious mind I turned the patient on her side, introduced the speculum, and there lay the suture apparatus just exactly as I had placed it. There was no inflammation, there was no tumefaction, nothing unnatural, and a very perfect union of the little fistula." Sims' original report was published in the American Journal of the Medical Sciences, 1852, XXIII, January.

Shortly after this Sims succumbed to a severe dysentery which rendered him an invalid for six years, but which resulted in his seeking health in a northern climate and his coming to New York in 1853.

He received a cold reception from the profession in New York, although he was able to demonstrate his operation successfully on a patient of Dr. Valentine Mott.

He proposed to found a hospital for women, especially for the cure of cases of vesicovaginal fistula, but he met stubborn opposition from the medical fraternity. In 1854 however through the influence of a newspaper reporter, Henry L. Stuart, who had heard of Sims' work, and through the friendship and help of Dr. John W. Francis, who stood high in the profession, a call was issued for a public meeting to be addressed by Sims on the importance of organizing a special hospital for women. The New York papers of

May 17, 1854 carried the following announcement due to Stuart's influence,—“Lecture on the Necessity of Organizing a Great Hospital in the City for the Diseases Peculiar to Females,—the undersigned will deliver a lecture on this subject at the Stuyvesant Institute, No. 659 Broadway, on Thursday evening, the 18th inst. at eight o'clock. The medical profession and the public are respectfully invited to attend. J. Marion Sims, M.D., 77 Madison Ave.”

Seven hundred invitations were sent out, and in spite of a heavy rain some two hundred and fifty doctors and laity filled the hall, and as a result a Committee was appointed to launch the project.

Professional jealousy however, seemed to overwhelm Sims' efforts and doom him to failure when the timely support of a few influential farsighted women came to his aid, and thus in spite of bitter opposition of the medical men then dominant in New York, the Woman's Hospital came into being and opened its doors on May 4th, 1855 at 83 Madison Avenue in a house rented for the purpose. The successful launching of the hospital was due to Dr. Fordyce Barker, Dr. Francis, Dr. Mott and Dr. Stevens. This first Woman's Hospital had about thirty beds.

Sims was fortunate in procuring Thomas Addis Emmet as his assistant, and the first patient was Mary Smith, an immigrant from Ireland, who had a bad fistula which her Irish physician had attempted to alleviate by introducing a wooden seine bob, or float, to stop the opening. This had become incrustated with phosphatic deposit. This patient was relieved of her infirmity after many operations so that she was able to serve as a nurse in the hospital.

Anaesthesia was not in use at the hospital until the close of the Civil War.

We cannot speak of the early days of the hospital without referring to Margaret Brennan, who, Emmet has stated, was the pioneer nurse in this specialty. She was illiterate but a most remarkable woman whose whole life was guided by an earnest wish to discharge her duties faithfully and

serve God through her unselfish care of others. For forty years she served as assistant holding the speculum for Sims and Emmet.

The hospital was closed for three months in the summer as it was thought that wounds did not heal well in hot weather.

The first anniversary of the Woman's Hospital was held in Clinton Hall in Astor Place on February 9th, 1856, and from this time the hospital flourished. A charter was obtained in 1857.

While the first patients in the hospital were sufferers from vesicovaginal fistula, various gynecological operations were soon developed, until the fame of the institution as a fountain head of knowledge for the cure of the many ailments peculiar to the sex became widespread throughout the land, and the hospital became a Mecca for all who wished to perfect themselves in gynecology.

Through Sims' efforts the city of New York gave to the hospital in April, 1858 the plot of land situated between 49th and 50th Streets and Lexington and Park Avenues, which was the old potter's field during the cholera epidemic of 1832. Many thousands of bodies had to be removed and reburied on Ward's Island. This is where the Waldorf Astoria Hotel now stands.

A new hospital was built and opened for patients October 12, 1867. It had accommodation for seventy-five patients. In September, 1877, a second building similar to the first was completed and opened.

This property was sold in 1902 and the present hospital, the third, on West 110th Street was opened in December, 1906.

With the successful establishment of the Woman's Hospital, Sims' position as a leader in gynecology was definitely recognized.

In 1861 he went to Europe and was immediately received with great cordiality by the profession in Ireland, England, Scotland and in France and Belgium. He successfully performed his operations in famous clinics throughout Europe. He operated successfully on five cases in succession in Paris, and also in London and Brussels. His first case operated on in London was at the Samaritan Hospital and unfortunately the patient died. This is the first case he had ever lost from his operation. In short, he created such a furore and his European reputation became so great that he had a large consultation practice and had as his patients many of the titled aristocracy, among whom was the Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III.

Sims remained abroad during the period of the Civil War, in part due to his Southern sympathies. By 1863 he had reached general and authoritative recognition in America, largely as a result of his great success in Europe. The honors and renown that followed were but the natural sequence.

In 1870 while in Paris he helped to organize the Anglo-American Ambulance Corps for service in the French Army in the Franco-Prussian War. He was Surgeon in Chief of the Corps with a staff of seven American and eight English surgeons. He was on the battle field of Sedan and in charge of a military hospital of four hundred beds, treating both French and Prussian wounded. When Marshal McMahan was wounded at Sedan he accompanied him off the field.

While in London in 1869 he published his book, "Clinical Notes of Uterine Surgery" which was issued simultaneously in English, German and French. Its publication attracted much attention and awakened the profession throughout the world to American gynecology of which he may be justly termed the father.

Sims returned to the Woman's Hospital in 1872, but resigned in 1874, on account of an absurd rule passed by the Lay Board of Managers that a due regard for the modesty of the patient required limiting the number of

spectators to fifteen. Sims had any number of spectators, both American and foreign, so when the hospital refused to alter this rule the hospital's father resigned.

Marion Sims died suddenly on November 13, 1883 and was buried in Greenwood Cemetery.

In reviewing Sims' contribution to gynecology it is interesting to note that his great achievement in the cure of vesicovaginal fistula was not priority as practically the main points in his technic had been attempted by various operators. Prior to Sims, favorable results in the operation of vesicovaginal fistula were incidental rather than the result of a logical and rational method of procedure. His success was due to first—the discovery of a method of access and exposure of the lesion, by posture and his speculum, second—silver wire sutures (aseptic), third—a self-retaining block tin catheter,—and as has been pointed out by Bissell he popularized a technic which was simple in principle and more universally applicable than any technic previously devised.

Sims in his first operations for vesicovaginal fistula employed the knee chest posture, but he soon utilized the lateral prone position which is now known everywhere as the Sims posture. In his first work the direction of the denudation was transverse to the vaginal axis, but later became longitudinal. A spear pointed straight needle was used at first and the edges of the denuded fistula were held in apposition by a lead clamp on each side of it, which were fastened with silver sutures, crushed shot anchoring the sutures against the proximal clamp.

According to Emmet, Sims first suggested bimanual examination. He invented the depressor, the tenaculum, a flexible copper sound and a uterine elevator. He first introduced glycerin on vaginal tampons. He devised block tin pessaries which could be given any shape, and he was the first to abandon barbarous quill sutures in operating on the perineum, using interrupted silver wire instead.



He was the pioneer in anterior wall surgery for cystocele and in operations for prolapse. Sims wanted to do a laparotomy but was opposed by his consultants and did not do his first ovariectomy until 1860.

In 1846 Sims published an article on "The Nature and Cure of Trismus Nascentium" in the American Journal of Medical Sciences. Sims' theory as to the nature of this injury was not accepted by the profession however until some forty years later when Dr. J. F. Hartigan of Washington, D. C., in 1884 confirmed the truth of Sims' theory in an essay on the "Pathology and Treatment of Trismus Nascentium or Lockjaw in Infants" in the same Journal.

Sims originated the operation for cholecystotomy without knowledge that Robb of Indiana had preceded him by a few months.

On October 6, 1881 Sims presented an epoch making contribution before The New York Academy of Medicine entitled "The Careful Aseptic Invasion of the Peritoneal Cavity for the Arrest of Hemorrhage, the Suture of Intestinal Wounds and the Cleansing of the Peritoneal Cavity and for All Intra-peritoneal Conditions."

Quoting from his own experience in the Franco-Prussian War he courageously promulgated these rules for gunshot injuries of the abdomen,—first—the wound of entrance should be enlarged sufficient for a thorough inspection,—second—injuries should be sutured and bleeding vessels ligated,—third—a search for extravagated matter and cleansing of the cavity,—fourth—the surgeon must judge as to the advisability of drainage.

In addition Sims contributed some seventy-eight or more articles on a variety of gynecological and other subjects. "The Story of My Life," his autobiography, was published after his death, and edited by his son.

He was the recipient of numerous decorations from foreign governments, among them France's Commander of the Legion of Honor, Knight of the Order of Isabella the Cath-

olic of Spain and Knight of the Order of Leopold of Belgium, and from Germany the Iron Cross, and two medals from the Government of Italy.

While visiting in Budapest a few years ago I was conducted through the University Hospital by the Professor of Gynecology who proudly pointed out to me the name over one of the wards which had been dedicated to Marion Sims.

He was one of the founders of the American Gynecological Society and its President in 1880. He was the President of the American Medical Association in 1876. In 1881 Jefferson University conferred upon him the Degree of Doctor of Laws. He also received Honorary Membership in many Foreign Scientific Societies.

A gifted orator has said of him, "He possessed the qualities ideal in the make-up of a truly great surgeon, namely, the brain of an Apollo, the heart of a lion, the eye of an eagle and the hand of a woman."

The J. Marion Sims Asylum for the Poor was founded by him in Lancaster, S. C.

Immediately after his death a movement for the erection of a memorial to his memory was inaugurated in Europe and his native country. This was a spontaneous gift from his brothers in his profession throughout the civilized world, and from many of the unfortunate beings his genius and skill had benefited. This monument was erected in Bryant Park, New York in 1894, and was moved to a new site on the borders of Central Park on Fifth Avenue and 103rd Street, opposite the Academy of Medicine, where it was erected on a more beautiful pedestal. It was rededicated on October 20, 1934, with appropriate ceremonies, at which Dr. Sachs, President of the Academy, presided.\*

The inscription on the old pedestal of this monument tells the story of his career:—

\* There was an exhibit of mementos relating to Sims and the early history of the Woman's Hospital including instruments used by him, the first records of the hospital, and his literary contributions which were arranged through the courtesy of Dr. Malloch.

J. MARION SIMS, M.D., LL.D.

Born in South Carolina, 1813, died in New York City in 1883

Surgeon and Philanthropist.

Founder of the Woman's Hospital of the State of New York

His brilliant Achievements carried the fame of American  
Surgery throughout the civilized world

In recognition of his services in the cause of science and mankind  
He received the highest honors in the gift of his countrymen  
And decorations from the governments of France, Portugal,  
Spain, Belgium, and Italy.

And on the reverse :—

Presented to the City of New York

By

His professional friends, loving patients

And

Many Admirers

Throughout the World.

In his native state, South Carolina, in the capitol  
grounds has been erected in 1929 a very lovely monument  
with the inscription on the sides :—

“The first surgeon of the ages in ministry to women,  
treating alike empress and slave,”

and

“He founded the science of gynecology, was in all  
lands honored, and died with the benediction of  
mankind.”

On March 14, 1922 the newly constructed operating theatre in the present Woman's Hospital was opened and on this occasion a bronze memorial tablet was unveiled and dedicated to the memory of J. Marion Sims, the founder of the Woman's Hospital. Among the speakers was our beloved friend, Dr. Henry C. Coe. Coe in his remarks told how when a student at Harvard, Dr. William H. Baker, his teacher, brought a friend to his lecture whom he introduced as his former instructor and Attending Surgeon at the Woman's Hospital, Dr. J. Marion Sims, and asked him to talk to the students on a theme of his own choosing. He held the rapt attention of the class while he discoursed on "Cancer of the Uterus." In the words of Coe, "the bell rang for the close of the lecture and the Professor of Obstetrics, Dr. Reynolds, walked in to be greeted with cries of "Go on, go on," and the courteous gentleman of the old school promptly urged Dr. Sims to fill his hour and he did. What lecturer before or since could hold a class of restless students for two hours? He bowed to us, the door opened and he passed from our mortal vision forever. You remember when we used to read in Virgil and Homer how the Gods assumed the shapes of men and came down to talk to mortals. Their divinity was recognized only as they departed. So, in a dim way we felt as the door closed, that we had met face to face one who was endowed with the genius which made him one of the Immortals."

