

Matriarch of the Cleveland Clan, Part I

By Joseph Keating Jr., PhD

Born in Peru, Nebraska on 27 November 1874, Sylva Lula Burdick was the ninth of the children raised by Joshua Philip Burdick and Deborah Gray Burdick (Schnath, 1988). Her father was a prosperous farmer and stockbreeder, and was elected justice of the peace in their community in 1887. He helped to organize Peru Normal College, and we may therefore assume that the family valued education. Joshua lost a leg in combat during the Civil War, and limped about on a wooden substitute (Ashworth, 1991a,b). Sylva's education qualified her for study at the Peru Normal College, where she graduated in 1892 at age 18. That same year she married Pinckney Ashworth, and during the next eight years bore him five children. Among these was Rose Ruth, who would follow in her mother's footsteps, and Lester, who died in April 1902 at age three (Keating & Cleveland, 1992).

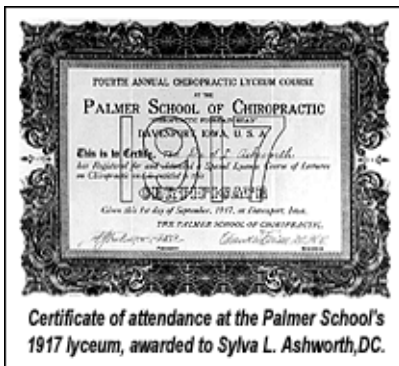


The couple separated around 1907, and Sylva determined to raise her four remaining children on the family farm near Eagle in Cass County, Nebraska. But soon their situation was further complicated when Sylva developed what has been described as diabetes. Putrid ulcers developed on her legs, and local surgeons would not operate; they advised her to prepare for her death and make plans for her children's welfare. Instead, Sylva took her sister Lucy's advice to see a new type of healer, chiropractor Olson (possibly PSC graduate Charles Olson,DC), who practiced in the western part of the state. She relocated herself and her children, and received daily adjustments of her "mid-dorsal spine" (Cleveland, 1991) for several months. The chiropractor trained her to monitor her urine, and she watched in delight as her chemistry improved and

the lesions began to "pinken up." The family recalls that she never again suffered from "diabetes," and ate whatever she wanted thereafter.



Grateful and impressed, Sylva decided to dedicate her life to chiropractic. She mortgaged her farm and moved to Davenport, Iowa with at least two of her children to take the course at the Palmer School of Chiropractic (PSC). She enrolled on 6 May 1909 and earned her degree slightly more than a year later. While at the "Fountain Head," she cultivated a friendship with B.J. and Mabel Palmer that would continue for years; she graduated a decidedly "straight" chiropractor and faithful alumna of the PSC.

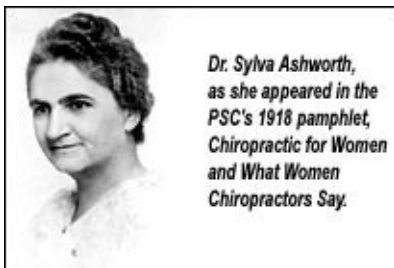


And so began a chiropractic career that would span almost five decades. Sylva established her practice in Nebraska's capital city, Lincoln, and developed a very extensive clientele. She became well known in her community, both for her tendency to recruit new patients on street corners, and for her large Buick, "a lemon yellow car with black fenders" (Cleveland, 1991) in which she made house calls. Many neighbors disapproved of women who drove automobiles and frightened their horses, but Sylva was a "liberated" woman before passage of the suffrage amendment. The family barely managed to talk her out of purchasing

an airplane.



Dr. Ashworth's generous nature extended to the inmates of the Nebraska penitentiary in Lincoln, which she visited weekly (Keating & Cleveland, 1992). She was as much concerned for their spiritual welfare as their spines and nervous systems. Once again, the citizens of Lincoln raised their eyebrows. These mercy visits were considered decidedly "unladylike," but Sylva paid them no mind. During the flu epidemic of 1918, "she practically lived in her automobile," as she made house calls; "she would sleep right in the car...she went for days and days and days that way" (Cleveland, 1991). She provided free care to the indigent, and boarded cancer patients in her homes. And for anyone who might think that the chiropractic art was beyond a lady's strength, she insisted that "...I have known women who weighed less than one hundred pounds that were good adjusters. It is not what the adjuster weighs, but the knowledge and skill possessed that is most important" (Chiropractic, 1918; Gromala, 1983).



Sylva's pugnacious style also manifested itself at the University of Nebraska's college infirmary. Her grandson, Carl S. Cleveland Jr, DC, recalled that when challenged by the medical staff:

"...she would push doctors and nurses aside and say, 'I have patients in here who have asked for my service, and I'm going to go in and adjust them,' and she did! It's kind of hard to stop a woman with a made-up mind...she was a doctor when it wasn't fashionable for ladies to be doctors" (Cleveland, 1991).

Sylva was always active in professional affairs. In June 1912 the seminal meeting of the state society, the Nebraska Chiropractic Association, was held in her clinic office on South 14th Street in Lincoln, as was the society's annual meeting in August 1913, at which time she was elected to its board of directors (Keating, Cleveland, 1992). Later that month she was in Davenport for her alma mater's homecoming (not yet referred to as the "lyceum"), and was present along the historic parade route down Brady Street Hill (Gibbons, 1992). Her grandson recalled her description of events at that time:

"...B.J. did not hit D.D. Palmer with the automobile...because she said she was there...and that she testified or told B.J., and she says that the old man jumped, and the car did not hit him at all, that he just jumped out of the way and lost his balance and fell. And, she helped him up (Cleveland, 1991)."

Dr. Ashworth was apparently acquainted with the founder of the profession, D.D. Palmer, and introduced him to Lincoln's Mayor Frank Zehrung when Dr. Palmer spoke in that city (Ashworth, 1939). The date of Old Dad Chiro's visit to Nebraska's capital is not known.

Sylva's political involvements were extensive (see **Table 1**) and not limited to the chiropractic profession. She participated in the national activities of the Democratic Party, and was elected "alternate delegate" to the Democratic National Convention in New York City in 1924 (World, 1924), one of the first females to be so recognized. As well, she was a member of the reception committee that notified the Democratic vice presidential candidate, Charles Bryan (brother of William Jennings Bryan), of his nomination (Johnson, 1931). She also served as president of the Lincoln Business and Professional Women's Club (Ashworth, 1941).

Table 1: Dr. Sylva L. Ashworth's Professional and Political Activities, Positions* and Honors
--

1910	doctor of chiropractic awarded, Palmer School of Chiropractic
1913	member, board of directors, Nebraska Chiropractic Association
1915	incorporator, Nebraska Chiropractic Association
1919	"Second most famous woman chiropractor in the country," Illinois Chiropractic Society
1924	alternate delegate-at-large, Democratic National Convention in New York City
1925	vice president, Universal Chiropractors' Association
1925	president, Nebraska Board of Chiropractic Examiners
1926	president, Universal Chiropractors' Association
1926	re-elected vice president, Universal Chiropractors' Association
1926	vice president, International Congress of Chiropractic Examining Boards
1927	vice president, Nebraska Branch of the Universal Chiropractors Association
1930	charter member, National Chiropractic Association (NCA)
1932	member, Nebraska Board of Chiropractic Examiners
1932	vice president, International Congress of Chiropractic Examining Boards
1934-38	president, Nebraska Chiropractic Association
1936	delegate to the Democratic National Convention
1938	"Best Scientific Paper," NCA convention, Toronto
1938	incorporator and member, Board of Trustees, International College of Chiropractors
1939	vice chair, Gavel Club of the NCA
1939	treasurer, Council of Chiropractic Examining Boards of the United States and Canada
1939-40	member, executive board, Nebraska Chiropractic Association
1940	vice president, Belmont Community Center
1940	legislative chairman, National Council of Women Chiropractors of the NCA
1940	re-appointed Member, Nebraska Board of Chiropractic Examiners
1941	president, Lincoln Business & Professional Women's Club
1944	delegate, Nebraska Democratic Convention; committeewoman, Nebraska Democratic Party
1944-47	founder and executive member, Chiropractic Research Foundation (today's FCER/Foundation for Chiropractic Education and Research)
1947	vice president, Chiropractic Pioneer Club (NCA)
1948	president, Chiropractic Pioneer Club (NCA)
1949	honorary citizen, Father Flanagan's Boys' Town
1951	member, Order of the Eastern Star, Chapter 275, Lincoln, Nebraska
1954	president, Chiropractic Pioneer Club (NCA)

*Dates indicate minimum terms; actual terms may have been longer.

"She was a powerful Democrat," her son recalled in a 1991 interview; "...they counted on her for 40,000 votes" (Ashworth, 1991b). She never held elected public office, but was personal friends with the elected leadership of her state, and served for decades on the Nebraska Board of Chiropractic Examiners (BCE). When she was hospitalized following an automobile injury, the medical staff refused to permit her chiropractic care. Sylva put a call through to Charles Bryan, then former governor of Nebraska and a member of the hospital's board of directors. Bryan admonished the staff: "You give Dr. Ashworth anything she wants" (Caine, 1991). She got her adjustments.

(In part two of this two-part series, Dr. Ashworth's daughter Ruth marries, helps to perpetuate the Cleveland clan, and the institution of Cleveland Chiropractic College is begun.)

Joseph Keating Jr., PhD

Phoenix, Arizona

jckeating@aol.com

Click [here](#) for previous articles by Joseph Keating Jr., PhD.



Page printed from:

http://www.chiroweb.com/mpacms/dc/article.php?id=15141&no_paginate=true&p_friendly=true&no_b=true