When Barnabas Day held a meeting on January 3, 1867, at the Queen’s Hotel in Toronto, in order to form a dental association, he and the eight other assembled dentists agreed that it was essential to grant membership to a dentist who was unable to be present at the meeting. That dentist was George Van Nest Relyea.

Relyea was born on a farm near Albany, New York, in about 1815. His education was limited. The story of Relyea’s life tells us a great deal about dentistry in Canada at the time of the formation of the Ontario Dental Association, and it reveals how it was possible for some dentists to become wealthy while others were not so fortunate.

It also reveals that the early founders of the ODA were not above prejudice and stereotyping, and this is reflected in the following quote from Relyea. He recalled that “my education was what all farmers’ sons get — three months’ schooling in the winter, and not infrequently taught by a drunken Irishman.”

However, George had higher ambitions. Although he worked on the family farm for 20 years, he was “not content to be a farmer.” Relyea attended an academy for three months to improve his education, worked during the summer, then taught school for three months. Following this experience, he became a clerk in a grocery store and then a dry goods store, where, he worked “six months for my board and another six months at $250 a year.” After his year of experience as a clerk, he “had the presumption to go into business.” Relyea bought his own store, paid $4,000 for stock, and hired his own clerk, but “At the end of the year [I] took stock and found myself minus several hundred dollars, and in three days more was out of business again and looking for pastures green.”

While working as a secretary, cashier and proofreader in an Albany publisher’s office, he encountered a student who was attending medical classes at Albany College in preparation to become a dentist. Relyea, “… open for almost anything that offered,” joined him.

Relyea could not afford to attend Baltimore College, the only dental college in the U.S. at the time, so he apprenticed with Dr. J. S. Wood, a physician and dentist. He continued to attend lectures at Albany College, where, he “found myself evenings in the dissecting room with a lot of rude, profane, yes dissipated, medical students.”

This experience made Relyea a staunch member of the temperance movement saying, “I prefer being a temperance fool rather than a drunken one. But it was the mark of a ‘gentleman’ to get drunk, and the standard of comparison was ‘drunk as a lord.’” In time, Relyea would be elected to the position of Grand Worthy Chief of the Good Templars of Canada, an international organization promoting temperance or total abstinence from alcohol.

In spite of his experience with the medical students, Relyea reported that, “In one year I came out a full-fledged dentist; and with a fair outfit, a book of gold foil and of tin foil, a few teeth and colossal cheek…”

Relyea needed to make some money, so he joined one of his medical classmates — presumably, not one of the “dissipated” ones — and moved to the town of Remson, about 12 miles from Rome, New York, “where I had a glorious time for three months; made about $100; [I] was rich.”

In 1842, he decided to move to Canada, where he made his debut “at the old Limestone City, [on] July 1.” There he discovered that “Kingston, though the capital of all Canada, had a population of only 14,000 inhabitants and no local dentist.”
Relyea was not impressed with Kingston, so he “went on a prospecting tour; went by boat to Belleville, then to Toronto by stage.”10 There he met a Canadian physician “who was anxious to make a canvas of the Canadas and prevailed upon me to join him.”11

The two men travelled to Chatham and from there “visited every town and city in Ontario, then Upper Canada. Bear in mind there were no railroads in Canada in those days. In Montreal, there were three dentists, but only two in Toronto. We found no local dentists in any of the large towns such as London, Woodstock, Brantford, Hamilton, Cobourg, Belleville, nor in any Eastern towns.”12

He reported that, “The entire country then depended upon the trunk-in-hand itinerants, and the unskilled operations performed by most of them will long be held in remembrance by an outraged community. ... The country people were poor and illiterate. One of them asked me “What is dentistry? What do you do?” 13

Relyea returned to Belleville and “soon found all I could do, and determined to remain there, and in the fall of 1844 married, and remained there over 30 years. ... I worked up a large practice, and the last year that we worked gold, my business was $5,300.”14 15 (Today, that would be approximately $140,000.)

When vulcanite became available, Relyea went to New York and secured the distribution rights for the process. “My first vulcanizer cost me $80,” he recalled. “An improvement was soon made and they sold them to me for $50. I used to sell a vulcanizer and give instruction for $110. [Barnabas] Day, [Francis] Callender of Cobourg, [Benson] Gilbert of Picton, the Clement brothers [of Kings-]ton purchased them from me... I had through it acquired a provincial reputation.”16

Relyea noted that he “had made some reputation during my six months’ practice, and the Honourable John Ham-ilton [at Kingston] sent for me to come and attend to his family. This placed me at once in a good position. I put in my six months’ practice, and the Honourable John Ham-

However, not everyone was pleased at Relyea’s successful visit to Kingston. “This annoyed Day,” recalled Relyea. “He said, Relyea, you want to be a small Napoleon among the aristocrats.”17

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He went on to write, “This brings me to an[other] little incident at Kingston. Two brothers (the Clements) came to Kingston. They wanted a vulcanizer, but thought my terms too steep. We had a pretty warm time at my rooms at the British-American one evening, and the eldest Clem-

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