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# The “Small Napoleon” of Dentistry

## George Van Nest Relyea

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup>

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,”<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup>



George Van Nest Relyea,  
ODA Founding Member,  
President 1872.

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.’”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1842, he decided to move to Canada, where he made his debut “at the old Limestone City, [on] July 1.”<sup>8</sup> There he discovered that “Kingston, though the capital of all Canada, had a population of only 14,000 inhabitants and no local dentist.”<sup>9</sup>

Relyea was not impressed with Kingston, so he “went on a prospecting tour; went by boat to Belleville, then to Toronto by stage.”<sup>10</sup> There he met a Canadian physician “who was anxious to make a canvas of the Canadas and prevailed upon me to join him.”<sup>11</sup>

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.”<sup>12</sup>

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?”<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14, 15</sup> (Today, that would be approximately \$140,000.)

When vulcanite became available, Relyea went to New York and secured the distribution rights for the process for Canada. “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 Kingston] purchased them from me... I had through it acquired a provincial reputation.”<sup>16</sup>

Relyea noted that he “had made some reputation during my six months’ practice, and the Honourable John Hamilton [at Kingston] sent for me to come and attend to his family. This placed me at once in a good position. I put in a set of teeth for the late Mrs. Williamson, also her sister, Miss Macdonald, both sisters of Sir John A. [MacDonald]. I also attended the family of the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, the Honourable G.A. Kirkpatrick. ... I do not know of having lost one dollar during my practice there. I had rooms at the British-American [hotel], took my servant-man (who was also my assistant), and put on style, which pleased the aristocrats.”<sup>17</sup>

However, not everyone was pleased at Relyea’s successful visit to Kingston. “This annoyed Day,” recalled Relyea. “He said, Relyea, I know you have got the practice, but I don’t want them — the others pay best.”<sup>18</sup> By “them,” Day was referring to Kingston’s upper social class, who often disdained to pay their bills. The “others” that Day is referring to were middle-class patients who, in his experience, would pay their accounts.

He went on to write, “This brings me to a[nother] 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 Clement lost his temper, and turned to me, clenching his fist, and said, ‘Relyea, you want to be a small Napoleon among us.’<sup>19</sup>

“I speak of this to show how completely I held the situation. Now for the dark side of the picture. Napoleon had his downfall, so had I. My official position as Grand Worthy Chief involved an enormous correspondence, which, combined with my constant work excavating [decayed teeth], (that was before the dental engine came to our relief), brought on what the doctors said was pen paralysis, but the excavating had its part in it. I lost the use of my arm for fully a year, and was obliged to go to New York for relief.”<sup>19</sup>

Relyea gradually expanded his dental empire until he had offices in Picton, Kingston and Belleville. In his Picton and Kingston offices, he had associates to perform extractions and make appointments. He went to Picton, “every other week for two days, the impressions, etc., and the plates were all made at my office in Belleville. Also, every other week for two days I was at Kingston. Thus I was master of the situation, from Cobourg on the west, Prince Edward County on the south, and Kingston on the east, and all the North.”<sup>20</sup>

In the mid-1890s, Relyea moved to Oswego, New York, after selling his practice to Dr. Jack Marshall. The practice would remain in the Marshall family for three generations.<sup>21</sup>

Dr. Jack Marshall Jr., the third dentist in the Marshall dynasty, recalled that besides general dentistry, there was evidence that [Relyea] also did orthodontics. “Models of before-and-after cases were found in my father’s collection and were subsequently passed on to my father and to me.”<sup>22</sup> Relyea also used nitrous oxide as a general anesthetic for extractions and inserted immediate dentures after the extraction of the teeth, according to an 1868 advertisement in the *Belleville Intelligencer* newspaper.<sup>23</sup>

Relyea’s singular contribution to the Ontario Dental Association was his relationship with MPP Dr. George Boulter. Boulter was a member of the first Legislature of Ontario in 1867, representing Hastings County. The “Small Napoleon” recruited Boulter to assist in drafting the Act Respecting Dentistry and shepherding it through the Ontario Legislature.

On March 4, 1868, the Act Respecting Dentistry received royal assent and created the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario. Without Relyea’s political connections, the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario might not exist. 