

Dr. Edwin Munn and Dr. Stephen Almy

Pioneer Physicians

by Lynne Belluscio

Irene Beale wrote several books. Her 1983 publication, "Genesee Valley People, 1743 - 1962", included a short article about Dr. Edwin Munn. He was born in Munson, Massachusetts in 1802. His family soon moved to LeRoy, where he grew up and went to school. He studied with a local general practitioner, Dr. Stephen Almy. The story is told that while working with Dr. Almy, the elder doctor was often frustrated that he could not help his patients with eye disease, and he would turn to young Munn and plead: "Ed, for God's sake, try and help us." Munn attended the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Fairchild, New York and, in 1828, he began his practice in Scottsville. During this time he treated Hattie Abell, who had been born blind because of cataracts. Her parents took her to Scottsville and stayed at the Eagle Hotel when Dr. Munn came to examine her. She later wrote about her experiences: "My mother asked if he could make me see again. And he said, 'Yes. I'm going to make her see like a rat!' This braced me up a great deal." Her father had planned to take Hattie to New York City to see doctors there, but they had written that they couldn't help. Her father wrote that the New York doctors "did not know enough to come in when it rained."

The operation on Hattie Abell was apparently documented in an unpublished manuscript, listed in Irene Beale's book, but she doesn't mention where she found it.

Since the operation would be performed without anesthetic, Mrs. Abell urged Dr. Munn to tie Hattie's hands and feet for fear she might push him away. To this he replied, "No, I wouldn't confine her even if I were to take her head off." Telling the family that Hattie's cataracts would never recur, he began removing them,

she sitting opposite him with both hands clutched around his knee. She recalled that he had an instrument which held the eyelid open and worked with one that was like a crochet needle. "He put something close around my eyes that was black as ink. It was to draw the pupils out so he could see better." As for her mother's fears, that the girl might move, Hattie could report, "I did not - - I was so anxious to see. I do not think I would have moved if he had taken my head off." During the next year, Dr. Munn performed nine operations on one eye and three on the other. Hattie wrote: "I had just as much courage then as I did the first time, and then I could see a little." She was under Dr. Munn's care for two years. "He was so anxious to be successful and have me see. I never heard of anyone so anxious to be successful as he was. He had a large house in Scottsville, and that house was filled with patients all the time. He cheered everybody up when they went to see them. He always had something pleasant to say and told stories to cheer a person up." In 1834, he studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1837, Dr. Munn moved his office to the Smith Arcade in Rochester and patients came from New York City and many Midwestern states, "at times as many as 100 thronging in his waiting room." Dr. Edward Mott Moore, who later would serve as surgeon-in-chief of St. Mary's in Rochester, considered him a brilliant surgeon. A newspaper account described him as "humane, social and more anxious to relieve the miserable than to amass wealth." At a time when ophthalmology was virtually unknown, Dr. Munn was truly a pioneer. He and his wife lived on a farm in Gates. He died at the age of 43 in 1847.

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The doctor that he studied with, Stephen Almy, was also a pioneer. As a young man, he had taught school in winter and cut timber in the summers. He had received his physicians' license from Genesee County Board of Censors in 1819. He went into business with Dr. Fitch and bought a small drug store. Twice he walked to Albany to purchase drugs to sell in his store. In 1821, he attended medical lectures at Yale and received a diploma. In 1823, he was living in a small house on Wolcott Street in LeRoy and practiced medicine for 15 years. But for some reason, he moved to Olean and went into the lumber business for Herman LeRoy. He remained in Olean until 1841 and then moved to Cincinnati and continued in the lum-

ber business. But his reputation as a doctor, encouraged him to return to the medical profession for 8 years. He then formed a partnership with Dr. Alfred Wilcox, a former medical associate in LeRoy, and they went into the banking business. The financial crash of 1854 nearly ruined him, but once again he returned to the medical profession and in 1855 and 1856, he was living in Buffalo. But once again he returned to Cincinnati and practiced medicine until 1866. After the death of his wife and daughter, he returned to LeRoy and died in 1877. It was said of Dr. Almy, "he was every man's friend, every man's helper. He had a word of good council and cheer for all and smiles of approval for all who needed them."

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