

Myth #77: Eliza Cook: Not Nevada's First Female Doctor by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Carson Valley's Eliza Cook, M.D., is erroneously credited with being Nevada's first female physician. In fact, in an interview published in Reno's *Nevada State Journal* on March 16, 1941, Dr. Cook claimed "that so far as I know I was the first woman physician to practice in Nevada."

Cook's obituary, entitled "Nevada's First Woman Doctor Dies Thursday" in the October 3, 1947 issue of *The Record-Courier* noted that she had been born in Salt Lake City in 1856, relocated to Carson Valley in 1870 with her family, graduated from the Stanford University Medical School, and studied at Women's Medical College in Philadelphia. Stories of Cook's life tell of her nursing the sickly wife of Dr. H. W. Smith of Genoa during the winter of 1879-80. Dr. Smith encouraged Cook in the study of medicine and she read all of Smith's medical books while living in his home. Dr. Cook completed the two-year medical program at San Francisco's Cooper School of Medicine (later incorporated into Stanford University) in 1884 and pursued her practice.



Thanks to the good work of Dr. Anton P. Sohn, Chairman of Pathology at the University of Nevada School of Medicine and founder of the history of medicine program and its Greasewood Press, we now know that as many as twelve women practiced medicine in Nevada before Eliza Cook. In his work, *The Healers of 19th-Century Nevada* (1997), he devotes chapter six and appendix II to "Women Doctors."

Dr. Sohn noted that among the few female physicians in the Silver State it was common for the women to limit their practice to females and children. Sohn's research uncovered a "Doctress Hoffman" practicing medicine on South C Street in Virginia City in 1865. Hoffman's ads in the *Territorial Enterprise* and the *Virginia Daily Union* (beginning January 1, 1865) were directed "TO THE LADIES!" and noted that "[s]he will cure all kinds of female complaints and diseases of children." Hoffman claimed to have practiced medicine for twenty-four years and earned a diploma from "the highest school in Germany." While the first female graduate from an American medical school, Elizabeth Blackwell, dates back to 1849, "Doctress Hoffman's" claim to a German medical degree in about 1841 cannot be verified.

Other women practiced medicine in Nevada before Eliza Cook, such as "Doctress and Accoucheur" Helene Jones in Virginia City, Dayton, and Treasure City; "Doctress" A.C. Buchins in Elko; Helen Anderson in Reno and Carson City; Georgia Grey in Hamilton; and Brown DeForrest of Virginia City. However, Dr. Sohn was not able to determine if any of these women had medical degrees.

Sohn did find three women practicing medicine in Nevada before Eliza Cook that had medical degrees. Dr. Ruth E. Newland, who practiced in Virginia City in 1882, received a degree from the Medical Eclectic College in Cincinnati. Dr. Hattie F. Atwater, who practiced in Carson City in 1882, received her degree from Wooster Medical College in Cleveland. Of particular note, the first woman known to practice medicine in Nevada with a bona fide degree, Catherine Nicholas Post (Van Orden), graduated from the University of Pacific Medical Department (later the Cooper Medical School) in 1879, five years before Eliza Cook. Dr. Kate Post practiced in Virginia City in the early 1880s and her office was located at 87a South C Street.

Why were all these female physicians overlooked in making the claim that Eliza Cook was the first female doctor in Nevada? Many writers accepted the claim without pursuing the research necessary to verify its accuracy. Physicians were not licensed in Nevada until 1899, when the regulatory board was created. Determining who the female doctors were in Nevada prior to that date would have been a daunting challenge given that most of



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them only spent a few years in the state. Essentially, people believed Eliza Cook to be Nevada's first female doctor because she was the first woman licensed to practice by the State Board of Medical Examiners in 1899. The confused and inaccurate claim for her being the first female doctor became an article of faith and community pride in Carson Valley.

Dr. Eliza Cook spent most of her life in Nevada and for a considerable portion of that time she practiced medicine. Besides delivering scores of babies, and attending to the medical needs of hundreds of patients in and around the Carson Valley, Dr. Cook was an ardent feminist--she never married--and supported the women's movement and its long-standing call for female suffrage. She would see Nevada grant women the right to vote in 1914; the United States following suit with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920.

In the end, Dr. Eliza Cook did what the female doctors before her did not do. She lived and died in Nevada, expiring at the age of ninety-one at her house near Mottsville. Unlike her counterparts in 19th-century Nevada, she has not been forgotten.

Photos: Stanford University, Lane Medical Library, Special Collections.

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