

# Centennial Moments

PRESENTED BY THE HERITAGE ROOM, DEL WEBB MEMORIAL LIBRARY

## Nineteenth-Century Health Reform

Early Adventists were closely involved in a wide variety of nineteenth-century reform movements. Many, including John Byington, were highly-regarded for their active support of the abolitionist movement (Byington's home was a stop on the "Underground Railroad").

Joseph Bates was active in denouncing the effects of alcohol and helped to organize one of the earliest state temperance organizations. It came as no surprise that Adventists would be involved in 19th-century reforms in medicine.

In order to appreciate Adventist involvement in these reforms, one must also remember that these reforms were not without cause. Historians of medicine generally consider antebellum medicine as a rather dark period in the history of American medicine. One historian has noted that "during the first half of the nineteenth century American physicians engaged in almost no research and lagged far behind their European counterparts in the study of physiology and pathology."

This was also the age of "heroic medicine" made famous by Benjamin Rush. He believed that it was the physician's job to conquer nature, and quite often the best way to do this was to purge the body—some times through strong drug dosages (chloride of mercury and arsenic to name just a few) and "bloodletting." This was also the age of Jackson in which democratic ideals led people to believe that the common person could accomplish anything. This democratic impulse resulted in calls to reform medicine.

One of the most visible 19th-century health reformers

who laid a foundation for an Adventist understanding of health reform was Sylvester Graham (1794–1851). Graham was a minister and temperance advocate who believed that during a time when the diet of most Americans consisted of meat that any illness relating to the stomach was directly connected to the removing of bran from flour. There was an "intimate relation" according to Graham between whole flour and moral character. Graham's temperance reform grew into a health movement that swept America by storm during the 1830s.

Other reformers soon followed in Graham's footsteps. One of the most famous followers was James C. Jackson who attended the Eclectic Medical College in Syracuse,



New York. In 1858 after being a patient at a "water cure," he purchased a defunct "water cure" in Dansville, New York. The place was named "Our Home on the Hillside." He also became famous through his experiments in water treatments to cure diphtheria out-

breaks during the 1860s. It would be Jackson's article on treating diphtheria that would convince James and Ellen White, co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, about the importance of natural remedies.

It would be only a little while later, on June 5, 1863, that Ellen White would receive a comprehensive vision on health reform that would become the foundation for an Adventist view of health. While Mrs. White would enumerate and enlarge on this foundation the rest of her life, the health message was encapsulated in the importance of natural remedies and avoiding harmful drugs. Later she would summarize her health teachings into eight health principles: "Pure air, sunlight, abstemiousness, rest, exercise, proper diet, the use of water, trust in divine power—these are the true remedies. Every person should have a knowledge of nature's remedial agencies and how to apply them. It is essential both to understand the principles involved in the treatment of the sick and to have a practical training that will enable one rightly to use this knowledge" (Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing*, 127). It would be this wholistic understanding of health reform that would become the foundation for the Adventist medical work and the nucleus of workers who founded Loma Linda Sanitarium. This view of health reform would eventually lead to the founding of an Adventist health institution in Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1866. It is to this next development, the founding of an Adventist health institution, to which we will next turn our attention.