



W. W. Mayo House

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DR. WILLIAM WORRALL MAYO founded a medical dynasty in Minnesota. William was born May 31, 1819, in the English village of Eccles. He attended college in nearby Manchester, and was inspired by the world-famous scientist John Dalton, formulator of the atomic theory of chemistry. William developed an enthusiasm for chemistry that was to set him apart from other frontier doctors.

After short periods of medical study in Manchester, Glasgow, and London, William Mayo boarded a ship bound for the United States in 1845. He found work as a pharmacist at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. However, he soon moved west, and after a short stop in Buffalo, New York, settled in Lafayette, Indiana, where he established a men's tailoring business impressively named "Hall of Fashion." He had been a tailor in England.

In 1849, William returned to medical work with Dr. Elizur Deming, one of Lafayette's leading physicians and a founder of the Indiana Medical College in nearby La Porte. That fall, after able service during a cholera epidemic in Lafayette, William enrolled in the college for a 16-week course.

By today's standards, Dr. Mayo's medical education seems astonishingly brief, but it was above average for practicing American physicians of the mid-nineteenth century. The preceptor system, in which an aspiring doctor assisted a practicing physician for several months or years, was declining by 1850, but the medical schools established to train doctors varied widely in quality, and few offered clinical experience. Many young doctors setting up practices with a medical degree had never had an opportunity to examine a patient. Dependent on student fees, private schools like Indiana Medical College had no admission requirements, and some students were barely literate. Courses were ungraded and professors repeated the same lectures each year. There was an occasional demonstration of surgery and an optional course in dissection. Indiana Medical College had one advantage over other schools in 1850 - it provided a microscope for its one hundred students; this valuable tool was not available at Harvard until 1869. William Mayo developed a lasting interest in microscopic analysis. In 1860 in Le Sueur, he may have been the only physician in Minnesota to own and use a microscope in his practice.

Perhaps because of his earlier study in England, William Mayo was excused from the second series of medical lectures and was awarded a degree on February 14, 1850. A year later he married Louise Abigail Wright, whom he had met while studying at La Porte. Louise soon discovered that her impulsive husband was not ready to settle down to a steady practice, for only two years later Dr. Mayo was off to St. Louis, where he spent a winter working as an assistant in anatomy at the University of Missouri medical department and received another M.D. degree. In Lafayette, Louise established a successful millinery business, which she carried on even after the birth of a daughter, Gertrude, in 1853.

By 1854, Dr. Mayo had become increasingly annoyed at the bouts with malaria he suffered in Indiana, and one day in the midst of an attack he hitched up a horse and buggy and announced to his wife, "I'm going to keep on driving until I get well or die." He drove to Galena, Illinois, and took a steamboat to Minnesota, a growing territory whose proud boast of a healthful climate with no fevers had attracted many settlers from the malaria-infested regions to the south. A short time in St. Paul convinced Dr. Mayo that Minnesota would be a good place to settle, and he returned to Indiana to help his family move. Soon after they were settled in St. Paul, the doctor left again, this time for Lake Superior, where he was appointed census taker for the lakeshore area around present-day Duluth and became involved in a political fight over election districts that challenged his census figures.

In 1856, Dr. Mayo traveled south along the Minnesota River to an area near Le Sueur called Cronan's Precinct, where he took over an abandoned farm and moved his family into a one-room log cabin. The "Little Doctor" (so called because of his five-foot-four-inch stature) supported his family - enlarged by two more daughters, Phoebe and Sarah - by trying his hand at farming, starting and operating a ferry service between Cronan's Precinct and Le Sueur, located across the Minnesota River and a few miles upstream, serving as Justice of the Peace, and practicing medicine when called upon to do so.

After a severe flood in the spring of 1859, the doctor and his brother, James, built a small two story house on Main Street in Le Sueur. The family moved into the house in November of 1859. From this home, Dr. William Worrall Mayo set up his first medical practice in Minnesota. At first there was little calling for his services. Although there was illness among settlers, most dosed themselves with home remedies and patent medicines and called a doctor only as a last resort. Here a son named William James was born on June 29, 1861. The doctor continued to supplement his income by working on a Minnesota river steamboat and publishing a weekly newspaper, the *Le Sueur Courier*, which lasted about three months. When the Civil War started in 1861, he tried to get an appointment as a regimental surgeon, but was not accepted. In August, 1862, when the U.S. Dakota War erupted on the Minnesota frontier, he volunteered to march with a hastily organized group from Le Sueur and St. Peter to the relief of besieged New Ulm farther up the Minnesota River. There Dr. Mayo and several other doctors set up emergency hospitals to care for the wounded and the refugees who poured into the town from surrounding farms. Meanwhile, Louise Mayo remained in Le Sueur and opened her home and barn to eleven refugee families.

Early in 1863, Dr. Mayo was appointed examining surgeon of the draft enrollment board serving the southern half of Minnesota. The board's headquarters were in Rochester, so

once again Dr. Mayo said goodbye to his wife and children and was soon busy examining volunteers and drafted men. He found Rochester to his liking and moved his family there in January, 1864. Another son, Charles Horace, was born to the Mayos on July 19, 1865.

Dr. Mayo's medical practice grew quickly, and although he found time to participate actively in Rochester's civic affairs - serving as mayor, alderman, and school board member - the "Little Doctor" never again had to find other work to support his family. He became an outstanding medical practitioner pioneering in such surgical techniques as ovariectomy for the relief of women's diseases. In 1869, he spent several months in New York and Pennsylvania studying general surgery and gynecology. As he made his rounds of the Rochester area and performed "kitchen surgery" with remarkable success, his two sons, Will and Charlie, accompanied him and were often asked to assist. In 1883 after a tornado devastated part of Rochester, Dr. Mayo organized the treatment of the injured. His sons helped, other doctors came to help, and he asked for help from the Sisters of St. Francis. A short time later, Mother Alfred persuaded the "Little Doctor" to work with them to build and operate a hospital, St. Mary's. When the hospital opened in the fall of 1889, Dr. William Worrall Mayo, at age 70, was the head of the medical staff and his two sons served as the medical staff. All other doctors invited to join the staff at this time declined. The common belief was the hospital was doomed to fail. It did not fail. From this beginning grew the Mayo Clinic, a group of medical and surgical specialists working in a co-operative practice, which brought Rochester and the Mayos world-wide fame.

Dr. William Worrall Mayo died in 1911, shortly before his ninety-second birthday; Louise Mayo died four years later. Drs. Will and Charlie, by that time established and renowned surgeons, continued to expand the Mayo Clinic's programs of medical care, surgery, teaching, and research. Throughout their careers they were quick to credit their parents for a large part of their success. "We have accomplished much, my brother and I," wrote Dr. Will. "But we should have done great things; we were given the opportunity. We were born at the right time and to the right parents." And Dr. Charlie put it more informally; "The biggest thing Will and I ever did was to pick the father and mother we had."

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