Building the Palmer Enterprises, 1913-1924: Part II

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From his perch in the "Pigeon Roost" above the Palmer mansion, B.J. looked down upon an ever-expanding campus. Student labor had assisted in the construction of the earliest, temporary structures of the campus, but these soon grew inadequate as enrollments burgeoned. The first permanent structure to be added was the $60,000 D.D. Palmer Memorial Hall, completed in 1916, followed shortly by the printing plant, and in the next few years by the administration and classroom buildings.

These expansions made room for the work of the PSC, including classrooms, the osteological collection, faculty offices, public and private clinics, the x-ray facilities and the shipping and receiving division. The school also briefly operated several "health homes" (About, 1919; The PSC, 1919); these were in-patient facilities which made use of residences adjoining the campus. There was room also for B.J.'s other enterprises: a school cafeteria (which was advertised to the public, and apparently appreciated), recreation and amusement areas, and, commencing in 1922, his broadcasting business. Palmer was delighted when a letter to him from Drs. B.F. and Flora Gurden of San Antonio, addressed only to "Largest Chiropractic School, Davenport, Iowa," found its way to his desk. He reveled in his position and that of the Fountain Head school, and attributed the fame to printer's ink:

Who is the best known chiropractor in chiropractic ranks? The answer is so immediate that there is no contradiction.

Which is the best known chiropractic school in the world? The answer is so positive that it is beyond question.

Why are these things true? Persistent advertising ... (Palmer, 1916d)

By the early 1920s, the grounds of the PSC fronted a long section of road at the top of Brady Street. When B.J. added broadcasting to his businesses, the school took on a halo of wires and antennae. This spectacle could leave no one in doubt about the substantial nature of the chiro-Vatican; Elbert Hubbard would surely have been impressed had he lived to see it all. The campus itself became an advertising medium for B.J. and chiropractic, as he filled its walls with thousands of epigrams, admonitions, cartoons and witticisms
(Palmer, 1988). It was Palmer’s version of an "intellectual feast," served up billboard style, and it significantly influenced the advertising styles of his students.

There was circus hoopla, too (Crisp, 1984). Not the traveling sort, full of animals, but the annual educational, inspirational extravaganzas: the week-long college homecomings that came to be known as the Palmer lyceums. To accommodate the visitors (3,400 in 1916) who flocked from near and far each August to attend the annual lyceum, B.J. erected huge circus tents on campus. There, in Iowa’s sweltering summer heat, the faculty of the PSC presented their clinical and educational programs. There were famous guest speakers as well, including governors and congressmen; leaders of industry; prominent advocates of alternative health care like Bernarr Macfadden; radio personalities (in the 1920s); and the occasional movie star. Field practitioners made inspirational addresses and recounted their trials (literally) and tribulations in dealing with the medical establishment and an oppressive legal system.

Heading the cast, and always the star attraction of the week-long hypnotic festivities, was "B.J. himself," who used these occasions to introduce his newest theories, methods and equipment, and to rally his supporters to a renewed commitment to straight chiropractic principles. The lyceum programs were presented free of charge to alumni and non-Palmer chiropractors alike and provided the opportunity for the annual meetings of the UCA and many state associations as well. The public was invited to partake, and permitted to attend "any and all" of the sessions. B.J. promoted the lyceum throughout the year in the pages of the FHN; he promised to reinvigorate his followers’ passion for the cause by filling them with unadulterated chiropractic. There would be chiromagic in the air.

Alumni response to the annual homecomings was generally enthusiastic from 1914 through 1924. Some of this spirit was captured in the letters of approval that typically filled the pages of the FHN in the weeks following each annual lyceum. A 1919 letter from Palmer graduates B.F. and Flora Gurden, who were soon to become co-owners of the Texas Chiropractic College in San Antonio, was typical:

San Antonio, Texas

Dear Friends:

We have just returned from our vacation and feel that we have absorbed our full quota of "Pep" from you and from the Lyceum in general. Frankly, "Folks," we don’t see how you "Put it over" in the big way you did.
It was surely SOME Lyceum and we have heard nothing but the highest praise for the excellent way that everything was conducted, and we don’t see how anyone can go there and come away without feeling a more determined desire to fight for Chiropractic and The Palmer School.

If there were any that sat and sulked they, naturally would not get much, but for those that were there in the proper spirit, the Lyceum was an intellectual feast... (Gurden & Gurden, 1919).

Sometimes the pilgrims’ treks to the yearly Palmer gathering served as promotions for the profession, much to B.J.’s delight. "On My Way 2 C BJ" was a popular button motto that festooned the automobiles of many who traveled by way of the nation’s still primitive roads. A remarkable journey by the Searby family from Australia to the PSC became legendary. Requiring more than a year to complete, the final leg of the trip, from Seattle to Davenport, was made on foot while pushing a 600-pound cart to carry their three children, two of whom had been born in transit. When they reached their Mecca, a thousand enthusiastic PSC students turned out to help them and their cart up the steep grade of Brady Street to the Fountain Head.

With so many thousands of people descending upon Davenport each year, the PSC lyceums were not just a professional event, but also a sort of Christmas in summertime for the local merchants. The extra business that B.J. brought to town in August each year, over and above the routine commerce connected with a school annually drawing 600+ students, faculty and staff to the region, raised Palmer’s value and visibility in the tri-cities area (i.e., Davenport, Iowa and the neighboring municipalities of Moline and Rock Island, Illinois, just on the other side of the Mississippi River). The mayor of Davenport was always glad to address these vast chiropractic gatherings, and the buildings in the business district were decorated with images of B.J. and welcoming words for the visiting doctors and their families. Davenport knew it was the capital of chiropractic.

The heady times that the Palmer School knew in that early period (1913-1924) did not last. The Developer’s 1924 introduction of his two-pronged, spinal-heat-sensing, subluxation-detection device, the neurocalo-meter, brought an end to his reign as the majority leader of the chiropractic profession (Keating, 1991, 1997). Enrollment at the PSC plummeted, and with the onset of the Great Depression, the center of B.J.’s financial fortunes shifted: from education to broadcasting (Keating, 1995). Supporting it all was the relentness marketing campaign that seemed to emanate from "B.J. himself."

Much of that earlier era lingers within the chiropractic culture. Attitudes about science, philosophy, health care and business practices spawned during the evolution of the Palmer enterprises are reflected in the
behavior of chiropractors today. There are many positive and negative lessons to be learned from this period of the profession’s development.

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