1977

Dr. L. S. Oppenheimer: Culture Among the Sandspurs

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Few lives offer a study of such violent contrasts as that of Louis S. Oppenheimer, often known in his time as "Dean of the Florida Profession." Repeated early failure contrasted to later success; the joys of family and of practice contrasted with frequent depression; the raw, harsh atmosphere of late 19th century West Coast Florida contrasted with his polished cultural background.

Louis Oppenheimer was born January 24, 1854, at Louisville, Kentucky, the son of devout orthodox Jewish parents who had emigrated from Germany as steerage passengers. These humble parents devoted their entire lives and their total earnings to
the education of their children. At the age of six Louis began violin lessons and the study of English, German and French.

The family moved to Montgomery, Alabama, where Louis had his early formal education. In 1873 he entered the College of Medicine at the University of Louisville, graduating in 1875. After his internship at Louisville City Hospital, he took the customary grand tour of the European clinics to round out his medical training.

**Spoke Six Languages**

A meticulous, lifelong keeper of notes, the 23-year-old Louis wrote that his life in Vienna, Munich and Paris was not entirely devoted to study. His descriptions of the beer gardens, parties and ladies of Europe leave no doubt that his maturation, although delayed, occurred rapidly during this period. By the age of 24 he was able to read and speak fluently in six languages.¹

Returning to Louisville he was appointed a Demonstrator of Histology at the College of Medicine and one year later Lecturer on Diseases of Women. Although his success as a teacher was unquestioned, he was never able to establish a private practice. He recorded, "I failed to make a living in Louisville, so after four years, moved to Seymour, Indiana, where I barely existed for another four years." Chronically depressed and sometimes contemplating suicide, he abandoned the practice of medicine. At the urging of his younger brother, Joe, he moved to Savannah. Joe was "the flower of the flock, a most lovable, idea character" who had married into one of the leading families of Savannah. On learning that Louis intended to give up the practice of medicine and was planning to become a prescription clerk in a small drug store in Savannah, this aristocratic family "turned up their noses at me, snubbed me, and humiliated me without reserve." In the face of such hostility, Louis left Savannah after two years. It was during these years that thoughts of suicide recurred frequently.

**Years at Bartow**

At this dismal moment in life, Oppenheimer first encountered the all-powerful forces which were to shape not only his life but that of tens of thousands of others for the next two decades Henry B. Plant and the railroads of Florida. Plant was a canny New Engander who had modest capital, shrewd business sense and unlimited vision for the potential of development of Florida. He had acquired, for almost nothing, several small railroads in southeastern Georgia, all of which had failed following the Civil War. Meanwhile, the state of Florida had become virtually bankrupt as a result of the reckless spending of the Florida Internal Improvement Fund. In order to put public land to use and to acquire tax funds, the legislature had authorized the granting of 3,840 acres of land for every mile of railroad track built in the state. At times even larger acreage per mile was granted.² With his Georgia railroads as a base, Plant expanded his lines at an almost unbelievable rate into northern and western Florida. Learning from railroad officials that there were very few qualified physicians and almost no drug stores in Florida, Oppenheimer simply boarded the train and rode it to the end of the line. The southern terminus of the South Florida Railroad was the rough, raw town of Bartow. The combination of huge deposits of phosphate and availability of transportation by rail had quickly made Bartow one of the busiest towns in the state. In addition, the citrus industry was just
reaching its first full production in mid-Florida.

**Flea-Bitten Majority**

It was here that Dr. Oppenheimer achieved his first success. He immediately established a large practice and opened the only drug store in the entire area. In his notes he described Bartow as "the County seat of Polk in South Florida in 1890 with many earmarks of a frontier town; deep sandy streets, plank sidewalks, two blocks of assorted stores, a single barroom, nestling on the corner opposite the primitive Court House, with its usual well-furnished gambling adjunct in the back room. In front of the Court House there was a row of sour orange trees. Nobody ever wanted more than a single taste of tempting, golden fruit. However, the trees served several useful purposes; namely as hitching posts for horses, mules, and oxen; and as scratching posts for his flea-bitten majesty, the Florida Razor-back hog."3

For seven years Dr. Oppenheimer was one of the dominant men in Polk "County. In addition to his many professional activities, he continued his interest in music and in the violin. He established the first classical music group and was instrumental in organizing the public school system. During these activities he met a young school teacher and musician, Alberta Dozier, who had come down from Macon, Georgia, to take charge of a small school near Bartow. Their courtship was short and intense but was virtually brought to a halt by the objection of their families to the mixing of religion in their marriage. Both Louis and Alberta set out to charm the members of each other's family. In a short time they were successful and were married in 1888. Fifty years later Dr. Oppenheimer recorded that, "Since that day my wife and I have never discussed any question of religious belief except in a casual manner." He describes his wife as "the ideal woman, beautiful, dignified, refined, educated, strong, intelligent."1 Their marriage was a perfect union.

Amidst this happiness, the "big freeze" of 1895 devastated the Florida citrus crop. Great losses occurred in Bartow and other citrus areas but the nearby city of Tampa, lethargic for some 35 years, had suddenly exploded under the Midas touch of Henry B. Plant's railroad.
Tampa - The Early Years

Plant became interested in Tampa in 1881, having just bought the South Florida Railroad. He then quickly purchased the Tampa Bay, Jacksonville, Tampa and Key West Railway which had run out of money. With this charter Plant received the incredible grant of 10,000 acres of land plus alternate sections within six miles on each side for each mile of track laid. Thus, he received a total of 13,840 acres for a mile of track. By official records Plant received a total of 4,202,038 acres of Florida land in grants and there is substantial evidence that he acquired even more. His railroads lost money for years but such losses were insignificant in the face of such enormous land acquisition.

Surprisingly, with all of this effort and investment, Mr. Plant had never visited Tampa. He had made the decision to extend his railroad by simply studying maps and navigation charts. On December 1, 1883, Plant entered Tampa in triumph aboard his own train accompanied by the president of the South Florida Railroad, James E. Ingraham. The party given that evening at the old Orange Grove Hotel, now the site of the Federal Building, still stands as one of Tampa’s monumental social occasions.

Another great loss occurred in 1895. Dr. John P. Wall of Tampa, a great medical and civic leader and a past President of the Florida Medical Association, died in April while addressing a session of the Florida Medical Association. Responsible citizens
of Tampa were searching for a physician to take his practice and to assume some of his many civic duties. Dr. Oppenheimer, with his established reputation both as a physician and surgeon and with his wide cultural background, was a natural choice. He had attracted the interest of Colonel Peter O. Knight (grandfather of Tampa internist Peter O. Knight IV) two years prior. Colonel Knight, then in the process of establishing Tampa Electric Company, urged the Oppenheimers to move to Tampa.5

This move occurred in 1896, and the Oppenheimers occupied the house of the late Dr. Wall. This house and its supporting stables were located on the spot where the Tampa Federal Savings Bank now stands. In spite of its recent growth, Tampa was still a primitive frontier town without water supply or sewers. It retained much of the color and character of the Old West, as its major industry was still the exportation of cattle to war-torn Cuba.6 The sandy streets, board sidewalks, armed cowboys and noisy saloons were typical of a cattle town. The shoot-outs was still socially acceptable as a proper way to resolve an argument.

The most common currency in use was the Spanish doubloon and the American silver dollar. Spanish paper currency from Cuba was worthless. The Florida cattle barons accepted only the solid gold doubloon—a coin worth $16.80 each.6 Their motto was "if you can bite it, you can spend it." On the other hand, the Spanish and Cuban cigar makers living in Tampa, suspicious because of past civil strife and labor disputes, did not trust American currency. They demanded payment in silver. This led to the building of a narrow gauge railroad, with a woodburning locomotive, which carried the heavy load of coins from the bank on Franklin Street to the -cigar factories of Ybor City. The coins could not be carried by horse-drawn wagon through the sandy ruts.

Once again, Oppenheimer fell even more deeply under the influence of Henry B. Plant. Largely in an effort to outdo his friend and rival, Henry Flagler, Plant had begun in 1888 to build the Tampa Bay Hotel, as the southern terminus of his railroad. The hotel that architect J. A. Wood of New York created was indeed unique—a dark red castle of Moorish architecture modeled after the Alhambra in Granada. It was a tremendous rambling building, five stories high, two blocks long, and covering six acres. By the time it was completed in 1891, it had cost $3 million to build and $11.2 million to furnish with European art treasures. Moorish arches supported all of the balconies and over it towered 13 silvery domes, each topped by a minaret. It contained 500 rooms and if operated as a hotel today would still be the largest in Tampa. All the floors and ceilings were made of concrete reinforced with countless tons of steel rails salvaged when the South Florida changed its tracks to standard gauge. It was in the atmosphere of this hotel that Oppenheimer finally came into his true element.

**Medical Practice**

The medical community in Tampa by 1895 was divided into two opposing factions, those physicians who practiced in a conventional manner and those who practiced under contract to the large Latin health societies. A generous contract as Surgical Director was offered to Dr. Oppenheimer by a coalition of these societies. He was forced to resign from the Hillsborough County Medical Society in order to accept this position. After two years of these duties, he could no longer stand the censure of his peers. He resigned his post
and was readmitted to the county society. By this time the Tampa Bay Hotel was open, and Oppenheimer had developed a warm friendship with Plant. It was Plant who enabled him to build a home across the street from the hotel and who appointed Oppenheimer as house physician to the Tampa Bay Hotel.

Oppenheimer was friend, confidant and physician to Plant. With a mastery of six languages, he was indispensable to the Hotel as a translator. His charm, wit and intelligence made him one of the true personalities of the Hotel. With the beginning of the Spanish-American War in 1898, it was obvious that embarkation of troops would occur somewhere in Florida. Both Plant and Flagler set out to have their hotel and port accommodations designated as this point. Each had his physician (Dr. Worley of St. Augustine representing Flagler) write a glowing account of the health facilities available at each hotel. These quasimedical pamphlets, both published in 1898, are liberally sprinkled with descriptions of port facilities, hotel accommodations and tourist attractions. Dr. Oppenheimer appeared to be the more skillful writer. The War Department chose Tampa as an embarkation point and the Tampa Bay Hotel as its headquarters.

With the arrival of Theodore Roosevelt, his staff and thousands of American troops destined for Cuba and the Spanish-American War, the Tampa Bay Hotel reached its zenith. “The big lobby of the hotel exploded in a flash of golden braid, glittering sword hilts, and boots bright with polish. Wide-brimmed Stetsons and the dark blue uniforms of the army men were the prevailing note, but here and there were monocled men in foreign uniforms, the military attaches of European nations, standing by to see what they could of the show. Also, there were officer’s wives and a throng of newspaper men from northern cities.”

A tragic story of a wealthy hotel guest appears later in the doctor’s journal. In February 1905, he was called to see an attractive young woman in her thirties. She occupied a room on the second floor facing the doctor’s residence on the opposite side of the park. She was quite upset emotionally and confided that she had come to Tampa to obtain a divorce from her alcoholic husband. She was still deeply in love with her husband but could endure his abuse no longer. He was insanely jealous of her and when drinking had threatened to kill her. The following morning when Mrs. Oppenheimer went into her children’s room facing the hotel, she found a small hole in the windowpane and a spent bullet lying on the floor. Dr. Oppenheimer put the bullet in his pocket and set out on his usual morning rounds in the hotel. It was then that his patient told him that her husband had come to her room intoxicated and had fired at her with a pistol, and then hurried away. When the flattened bullet was taken from his pocket and shown to the patient, she exclaimed, "Doctor, you got the bullet
instead of me. What shall I do?” She refused to have the house detective protect her and was seen later in the day walking with her husband in the park, conversing calmly.

Early the next morning the housekeeper hurriedly called the doctor to the patient’s room. On the bed lay the man and woman, both fully clothed in their finest ballroom attire—arms closely clasping each other-dead. The bedside table contained a small empty bottle of potassium cyanide tablets.3

Surgeon for Seaboard

His practice was by no means confined to the hotel. He enjoyed a large private practice in the town and was also Surgeon-in-Chief for the Seaboard Airline Railroad. He performed the first appendectomy in the City of Tampa in 1896.9 This was noteworthy in view of the fact that acute appendicitis had only recently been differentiated as a surgical emergency from typhlitis and perityphlitis by the brilliant Boston pathologist-internist, Reginald Fitz.10 Dr. Oppenheimer recognized the disease in a ten year old boy and operated on the family kitchen table with chloroform, anesthesia. The boy’s rapid recovery was considered near miraculous by the lay community. This was a fairly accurate assessment in view of the site and circumstances of the operation.

Innovation came easily to Dr. Oppenheimer. In addition to the first appendectomy, he established many precedents in Tampa including the first fixed traction splint, first Red Cross Aid Station (at the Florida Fair), installation of the first x-ray equipment, and the first use of anti-sera for rabies and tetanus. He used the first diphtheria antitoxin in the city to treat his youngest daughter, Carmen.9

His surgical experience varied widely, even into neurosurgery. He recalls in his journal that one morning he was called to the Seaboard Railroad yards where Negro section hands had been sleeping in abandoned box cars. One of the men had been beaten in the left temple with a bloody hammer, which lay on the floor. “I ordered a bucket of water, a basin, a cake of soap, and as many clean towels as they could gather up. How clean these towels were may easily be imagined. They were steeped in a weak bichloride of mercury solution and squeezed as dry as possible. After cleaning and disinfecting the scalp as thoroughly as possible and cutting away all the hair, I found a crushed skull over the left temple. A mass of brain was protruding from the wound. After enlarging the wound with a scalpel and removing all loose bone, I cut away all projecting brain down level with the meninges, about a large tablespoonful in all. The wound was carefully cleansed again, a small drain was inserted, and the wound was closed lightly with silk satures. He did not move or make a sound during all these rough, crude, unsterile manipulations.”

"Three days later I was astounded by the patient, who marched into my office, assisted by a fellow section hand. He had no pain or fever, but was utterly unable to speak a word. Obviously, the speech center in his brain had been injured or destroyed. He was told at this time that he had more sense with less brains than he ever had before. Several years before I operated on a similar patient, a young doctor who had accidentally shot away the same region of his skull in a hunting accident. I removed about the same amount of brain in this patient, and prognosis the loss of speech. His wife wrote me some years after that he had recovered his speech to a great extent after about three years."3
The Final Years

The Oppenheimer children, five daughters and a son, were no less vigorous or gifted than their father. Growing up in a world filled with fine books, music and sober industry they found it easy to share and to emulate their father's accomplishments. Daughter, Hortense (Ford), became incensed at the city fathers in 1914 because the City Hall had no tower clock to give the proper time. Yielding under the pressure of Mrs. Ford and her irate band of ladies the mayor erected a large clock in the City Hall tower with four faces. Inevitably, it was named "Hortense" and it still keeps accurate time today. The other sisters, Irma, Olive, Dorothy and Carmen, are still involved in the cultural affairs of Tampa, including the Friday Morning Musicale which was established by Dr. Oppenheimer.

One of the most prolific medical authors in Florida, Dr. Oppenheimer covered the widest variety of subjects. He provides an exhaustive description of the diagnosis and treatment of cholelithiasis in the Western Medical Reporter of June, 1881. Two years later in the same journal,11 he expressed sharp criticism of the excessive use of surgery to correct retroversion of the uterus.

In 1923 he defined a management of endocervicitis which would still be acceptable.12 Five years later he is found chiding the plastic surgeons for their failure to use cosmetics and tattooing in the correction of deformities of the face and eye.13 In spite of the improper title of "Worship of the Sun" a 1937 paper predicts many of the problems of solar injuries encountered by the currently overexposed population.14

On the philosophical side, there are papers on "Some Incongruities in the Medical Profession,"15 "Music in Medicine"16 and "The Victories of the Disabilisteer."17 The latter is a classic description of the modes and methods of both patients and lawyers seeking disability benefits. With the exception of the whiplash injury, these vignettes are virtually unaltered 45 years later. In advice in 1936 on how to "Live Longer"18 he advocates lowering the serum lipids by dieting.

Testimonial Dinner

In his later life Dr. Oppenheimer received many honors from his medical colleagues. Newspaper clippings and an old printed program reveal that on the night of March 11, 1932, at El Pasaje Restaurant in Ybor City, a testimonial dinner was held by the Hillsborough County Medical Association in his honor. The Society President, Dr. Leland Carlton (uncle of Tampa surgeon Leffie M. Carlton), presented Dr. Oppenheimer with a gold watch, chain, and fob suitably inscribed with the sentiments of the Society.19

Minutes of the Hillsborough County Medical Association record that on January 24, 1936, a formal banquet was held at Palma Ceia Golf and Country Club with Dr. Oppenheimer as the guest of honor. On this, as on other occasions, he was lauded as the "Dean of the Florida Profession."

Death came as no stranger to Oppenheimer. At the age of 83 he suffered a severe myocardial infarction and, contrary to most expectations, made a partial recovery. Confined by angina and cardiac failure he predicted that he would die within a year. It was then he undertook the formidable task of writing, not an autobiography, but rather an extensive set of notes and recollections spanning his entire life. One of his opening remarks on these pages is a rather sage
observation that "no sane-man will write a complete history of his life."

During his last illness, on Sunday, January 2, 1938, the Tampa Tribune\(^1\) devoted an entire page, including several pictures, to the doctor's rich life and varied experiences. This yellowed, 33 year old page gives ample evidence of the respect and affection held for him. How many physicians practicing today would merit such an accolade? An accurate clinician to the last, Dr. Oppenheimer died on June 12, 1939, 33 days within the limits of his own prognosis.

**ADDENDUM**

The author is deeply grateful to the late Mrs. Hortense Oppenheimer Ford for her generous aid and unfailing enthusiasm in the preparation of this biographic sketch of her father. A few days before completion of this manuscript, Mrs. Ford suffered a coronary occlusion and died on May 28, 1971.

**REFERENCES**

1. Tampa Tribune, January 2, 1938.


19 Tampa Tribune, March 12, 1932.