INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

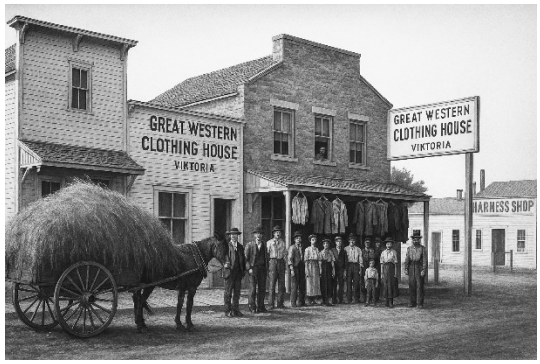
The World That Shaped D.D. Palmer (1800–1920)

The United States in the mid-1800s was a nation in transition—a country galloping toward modernity while still dragging a wagonload of old habits, bad hygiene, heroic medical practices, homemade remedies, superstitions, and more than a little frontier bravado. If you imagine the America of D.D. Palmer's childhood as resembling a Western film, you would not be far off. Much of the country still bore the characteristics of the Wild West: dusty towns, horses, saloons, folk healers, epidemics, itinerant salesmen, and a widespread belief that one could reinvent oneself from farmer to peddler to "doctor" simply by changing the sign on the door.

To understand D.D. Palmer—his ideas, his assumptions, his metaphysics, and eventually the creation of chiropractic—we must first understand the America that produced him. The world that shaped Palmer's thinking was not the sanitized, hygienic, medically regulated society we know today. It was a place where disease came suddenly, often fatally; where medical care was unpredictable at best and dangerous at worst; and where ordinary men and women navigated life with a combination of folk wisdom, guesswork, prayer, improvisation, and sheer luck.

A Society Searching for Meaning and Relief

By the time Palmer was born in 1845, the United States was undergoing significant religious, intellectual, and cultural transformation. The old Puritan worldview—with its stern moral logic and belief in divine cause-and-effect—was losing its cultural authority. Cities were growing, industries expanding, and scientific discoveries multiplying. Traditional religion could no longer adequately explain epidemics, childhood deaths, comets in the sky, or why the neighbor who seemed so devout still fell violently ill with fever every year. Instead, it offered a moral interpretation of disease, viewing sickness as the result of vice, impurity, or the violation of natural or social laws—especially by the poor, the sinful, or those believed to be under God's judgment.



A typical scene of everyday life in a late nineteenth-century American frontier town


An early demonstration of animal magnetism by Franz Anton Mesmer

People were searching for new frameworks—new ways to explain a rapidly changing world—so a whole wave of metaphysical and healing movements rushed in to fill the gap: Swedenborgianism, mesmerism, spiritualism, hydrotherapy, magnetic healing—each promising not only new therapeutic methods but deeper insight into the hidden meaning of life, illness, and human suffering.

In nineteenth-century usage, the term "metaphysical" referred broadly to efforts to understand reality through concepts such as spirit, mind, vital forces, and unseen energies, rather than through material anatomy or chemistry alone.

In this atmosphere of religious rethinking and scientific experimentation, Palmer's declaration—that health depended on natural law, bodily alignment, and a vital intelligence—would not sound radical, but like a fresh version of a very familiar theme: the belief that invisible forces governed both the body and the universe.

Heroic Medicine and Alternatives: A Chaotic Marketplace

Medicine before 1900 was confusing and dangerous. The average American treated illness the way one might treat a broken wagon axle: try something, and if that fails, try something else. Anyone could call themselves a doctor. Many did.

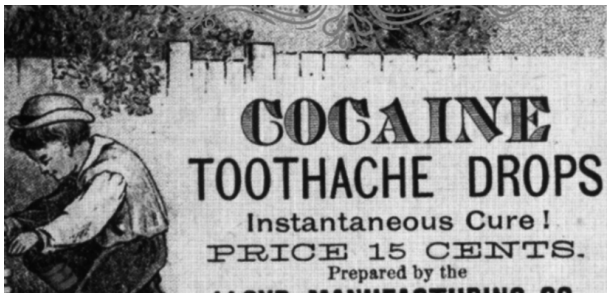
The rare "regular doctors" (today's M.D.'s) were often avoided because they were *frightening*, and their treatments were aggressive and dramatic. This was the age of *heroic medicine*, a philosophy that insisted the doctor must "do something decisive," even if that something was bleeding a feverish child until the child fainted.

Stories of doctors "killing the patient to save them" were not metaphors. President George Washington's last illness is a famous example: his physicians bled him repeatedly during a severe throat infection, likely hastening his death.

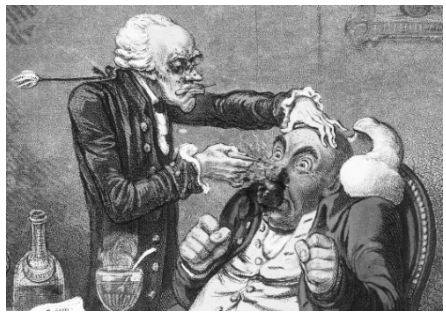
In such an environment, the average American learned a simple rule: avoid the doctor unless absolutely necessary.

Professional medicine offered such remedies as calomel (a mercury compound that caused teeth to fall out), bleeding (often until a patient was ghost-white), laudanum and opium for almost every ailment, or tobacco-smoke enemas for resuscitation.

On the other hand, irregular doctors were the alternative: men with charisma, conviction, and a halfway coherent theory that could easily gather a following: traveling medicine shows, hydropaths, homeopaths, Thomsonian botanists, phrenologists…



A late nineteenth-century advertisement promoting cocaine toothache drops as an "instantaneous cure"



A late eighteenth-century caricature of a practitioner applying "Metallic Tractors" to a patient in a satirical scene

A Nation Without Sanitation

Illness came not only from doctors but from daily life. In the 1800s, the U.S. was largely a nation without sanitation. Streets were open sewers. Garbage piled up wherever there was room. Every sip of water contained a lively microbial cocktail.

Bathing was rare and often considered dangerous. Opening the pores, people believed, allowed "night air" (another danger) to seep into the body. Should a person decide to wash anyway, the water itself was almost certainly contaminated.

Even wealthy families slept in beds crawling with lice. Clothes were worn until they disintegrated. Swine wandered city streets eating human refuse; townspeople eventually ate the swine, completing a culinary circle modern readers might prefer not to visualize.

In such conditions, epidemics were not occasional tragedies—they were *seasonal events*. Yellow fever, cholera, typhoid, diphtheria, tuberculosis, measles, malaria-like "ague"—these were constants.



An 1866 satirical illustration titled *Death's Dispensary*, portraying a grim reaper distributing water to the poor as a grim commentary on public health

The American Diet: Salt Pork, Whiskey, and Willpower

Nutrition was another challenge. The American diet consisted largely of salt pork, lard, starch, and occasionally a vegetable. Infants teethed on bacon rinds. Frontier families depended on foods that could withstand long winters without refrigeration—salted meat, molasses, and hard bread.



1907 photograph capturing a moment in a typical American saloon, spanning the frontier to the Prohibition era

And then there was alcohol. Nearly every American drank, including many children. Whiskey and hard cider were safer than water and easier to transport. Alcohol was used all day and every day—at breakfast, at barn raisings, funerals, and social gatherings—and as medicine, anesthesia, and currency.

Americans drank far more alcohol than they do today, making the average nineteenth-century citizen, in effect, a walking celebration of fermentation.

Rural Hardship and Self-Reliance

Until 1900, about 90% of Americans lived in rural areas, where daily life was an exhausting cycle of chopping wood, farming, hauling water, lifting, carrying, building, and repairing.

When a family member fell ill, productivity halted. Crops went unharvested, animals went untended, and winter stores diminished. Illness could mean starvation.

Regular doctors were far away and expensive. Most families treated themselves with home remedies, some wise, others comically misguided: onion poultices, goose grease, bear oil, pumpkinseed tea, and, for nearly everything else, whiskey. Superstitions were also believed to ward off disease: garlic amulets, vinegar cloths, and cannon fire.

Self-reliance was not a virtue; it was survival.

A rural farm family at work with livestock, emblematic of the labor-intensive self-reliance that defined nineteenth-century American life. Children laboring in a cotton field, reflecting the harsh demands of rural survival in the United States around 1900.





D.D. Palmer and Chiropractic

D.D. Palmer grew up in a *Wild West of ideas*—a cultural frontier crowded with strange cures, wandering healers, metaphysical philosophies, religious revivals, and the aggressive practices characteristic of heroic medicine. Chiropractic did not emerge in spite of that world but because of it. It emerged as a refinement and reorganization of beliefs already circulating widely in the culture around him. He lived at a time when Americans were searching for new explanations of health, new sources of meaning, and new systems that made sense of a rapidly changing world. Chiropractic was his answer to that search. It was Palmer's attempt to reform, reinterpret, and give order to the medical and spiritual chaos around him.

Palmer's philosophy of health aligned closely with the metaphysical thought of his era: the conviction that true health depended on natural law, bodily balance, and a vital intelligence animating living organisms. These were not notions he invented out of thin air. They were refinements of ideas circulating widely—from mesmerism and magnetic healing to Swedenborgianism, Christian Science, and the popular health movements of the nineteenth century.

His moralized view of illness—that disease reflected a kind of "disobedience" to nature's laws—fit comfortably within a culture that routinely interpreted sickness as a failure of order, discipline, or spiritual alignment. To Palmer, restoring proper alignment of the spine restored both moral and physical harmony, without drugs or surgery. This moralized understanding of disease resonated deeply with a society accustomed to seeing health through religious, spiritual, and ethical lenses.

His distrust of medical doctors was shaped by the medical practices he witnessed in his lifetime. He had lived through the era of bleeding, blistering, mercury-laden purges, and aggressive heroic medicine. These practices convinced him that "regular medicine" was harmful, misguided, and too obsessed with material substances.

Likewise, Palmer's rejection of germ theory was not mere stubbornness—it reflected a lifetime spent in environments with no sanitation, contaminated water, rampant epidemics, and visible filth, where disease seemed to surge from within families, households, or communities without a clear external cause. In such a world, the idea of invisible microscopic agents seemed less compelling than the obvious environmental and bodily disruptions people could see with their own eyes.

Self-reliance, necessary for survival on the frontier, shaped Palmer's conviction that the body heals itself. If nature produces the problem, it must also produce the solution. Chiropractic simply became the mechanical and philosophical framework he used to express that principle.

And although Palmer rejected superstition, he did not abandon metaphysics. Instead, he replaced magical or religious explanations with what he believed to be a rational, law-governed, scientific model of healing—one consistent with the new spiritual and intellectual movements emerging in the late nineteenth century.

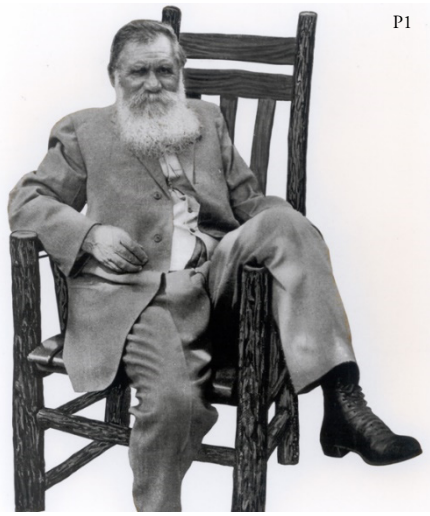
Palmer believed, as many Americans did, in the power of reinvention—the right of an ordinary man to rewrite his identity and fate, and to do the extraordinary. He stepped onto the stage of history convinced he had discovered what he believed to be the hidden cause of health and disease—the spinal subluxation—and that it would transform his era. Chiropractic spread because it matched its historical moment—because it spoke to the same hopes, fears, frustrations, and aspirations ordinary people carried.

It offered meaning when modern science felt confusing.

It offered safety when medicine felt dangerous.

It offered self-control and hope when society felt unstable.

In this sense, chiropractic was not just a treatment system—it was a cultural voice, speaking for a portion of the population that distrusted elites, feared drugs, valued nature, and longed for a deeper moral order in health. Chiropractic became, for a segment of the population, the voice of the people rather than the authorities.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D.D. Palmer.

Chiropractic was, and remains, the child of its historical moment—and D.D. Palmer was its first interpreter and its father.

It would only become a profession, however, once these ideas were taught, shared, and taken up by others, transforming his personal insight into a collective enterprise.

This is the story of an unusual, self-made, and self-educated man who passed through this world convinced he had a purpose: to serve and uplift humankind through the principle of chiropractic. His fierce character, his conviction, his defiance of the establishment, his persistence, and his willingness to pay a heavy personal price made his movement possible. This is the history of Daniel David Palmer, founder of the chiropractic profession.