

Issac Ridge

Physician

1825-1907

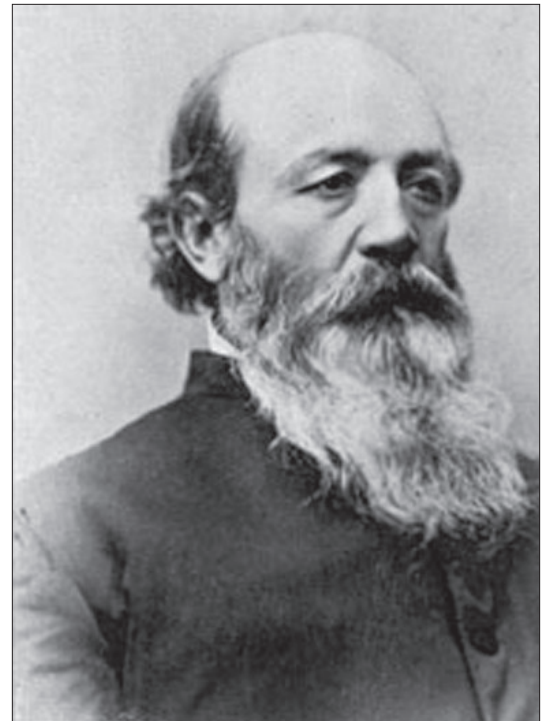
by Daniel Coleman

Isaac Ridge, who came to Kansas City at age 22 with only a horse, his doctor's bag, and 25 dollars, found the struggling young town to be "about the most unpromising" place he had ever visited. Ridge became Kansas City's first physician, and for many years he was also its only medical school graduate. But his devotion to saving the lives of his patients, regardless of their politics, ethnicity, or social status, provided the city with something more than education and technical skill.

Isaac M. Ridge was born July 9, 1825, in Adair County, Kentucky, to parents William and Sophia Dillingham Ridge. The family relocated to Lafayette County, Missouri, when Ridge was still a boy, and he received a private school education in a Dover, Missouri, academy. Following medical school at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, from which he graduated with highest honors in 1848, Ridge settled in the newly incorporated "Town of Kansas" then taking shape around a natural stone steamboat landing at the junction of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers. He met and soon married Miss Eliza A. Smart, the daughter of a town founder.

Although the town's inhabitants numbered only about 400, Ridge found no shortage of doctoring work. Common diseases on the frontier included pneumonia, smallpox, and cholera, an epidemic which ravaged Missouri River settlements in 1849. In his treatment of its victims, Ridge was as impartial as the disease itself, traveling many miles to minister to white and Native American communities alike. Among the Wyandotte Indians, for instance, he became known as "Little Thunder" for his assertive bedside manner and insistence on strict adherence to his prescriptions. When Ridge fell seriously ill with cholera himself, he survived in part due to the treatment of fellow physician Dr. Charles Robinson, who, en route to California when news of Ridge's suffering reached him, returned in a desperate ride of over 100 miles.

Ridge's professionalism and personal reputation earned him a brief stint on the city council during the late 1850s, followed by 10 years of service as Kansas City's first city physician, a position



which included sanitation and undertaking duties prior to the city's establishment of an official health department. During the Civil War, Ridge maintained difficult but steadfast neutrality; he was summoned on numerous occasions to treat the injured on both sides of the conflict, including excursions in which he was brought blindfolded to and from his patients. He was forced to serve as a physician under Confederate General Sterling Price at the Battle of Lexington, but treated wounded from both sides during the fight and was later offered a commission to be a surgeon in the Union Army, which he refused.

Ridge survived several brushes with violence, due in large part to his integrity as a man of medicine. During the tense period of border strife prior to the Civil War, he and his family were roused from their home one night and surrounded by a group of Kansas guerillas out for blood, but were spared when the group's leader allowed Ridge to explain who he was. On another occasion, an African American barber in Kansas City whom Ridge had helped in the past persuaded two customers not to murder Ridge, whom they accused of having Confederate sympathies. Proving his barber correct, in 1861 Ridge made an emergency trip to Napoleon, Missouri, to help defuse a pro-slavery mob planning to lynch Kansas Governor Charles Robinson—the same man who had treated the cholera-stricken Ridge years before. Ridge also survived a gunshot to the leg, which he received at the hands of highwaymen.

During Kansas City's peaceful post-war economic boom, Ridge enjoyed success as a real estate developer, constructing two multi-story downtown buildings near "The Junction" at 9th Street and Main. He retired from medical practice in 1875 to a spacious 85-acre estate south of the city, upon which he built his luxurious Castle Ridge, a towering mansion located near today's 21st and Woodland. Through a telescope high in his own observatory, Ridge could look down upon the nearby homes of his three children or north to Kansas City, now bustling where once it struggled to rise from the mud. He died a wealthy man at age 81 on May 7, 1907, although his books revealed nearly \$50,000 in unpaid doctor's fees he had long since forgiven.

Sources

Case, Theodore S. *History of Kansas City, Missouri*. Syracuse, NY: D. Mason, 1888.

Conard, Howard Louis. *Encyclopedia of the History of Missouri*. New York, Louisville: The Southern History Co., 1901.

"Stories of Dr. Ridge's Life." *The Kansas City Star*, 8 May 1907.

Whitney, Carrie Westlake. *Kansas City, Missouri: Its History and Its People*. Kansas City, MO: S. J. Clarke Publishers, 1908.

© 2008

Photo: Courtesy of The Kansas City Star