

Kells' Legacy on Display in Library

Eighty-four years after his death, Dr. C. Edmund Kells Jr. is still known as New Orleans' most famous dentist. A prolific inventor, writer, and dental crusader, he is best known as a pioneer in demonstrating the application of x-rays to dentistry. Son of prominent New Orleans dentist Charles E. Kells, he graduated from the New York Dental College in 1878 and then returned to New Orleans to practice dentistry.

In 1896, shortly after the discovery of radiography, Dr. Kells was the first dentist in the U.S. to take x-rays of a living patient. His experiments with x-rays caused lesions on his hand, eventually leading to the amputation of his entire left arm. Learning that the cancer had spread to his heart and lungs, Dr. Kells committed suicide on May 7, 1928.

On January 19, 1927, Tulane University dedicated the C. Edmund Kells Memorial Library and Museum in the Hutchinson Memorial Building. At this ceremony, Tulane also conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws upon Dr. Kells.

Dr. Kells created the nucleus of the library by donating his private book collection and dental objects and appliances, including models and examples of his own inventions. He then sent a "chain letter" to other dentists requesting books or "some old, old instruments, now well out of date; or some dental anomaly...."

Tulane's dental school closed in 1928. Later on, Tulane dispersed the contents of the library and museum. Dr. Major B. Varnado, Dr. Kells' associate for 10 years, said that in the 1950's he found equipment stashed in a storeroom under Tulane Stadium and sent much of it to the Smithsonian Institution.

When Dr. Varnado died in 1971 at the age of 89, the dental office in the Maison Blanche Building on Canal Street in New Orleans, where Dr. Varnado had practiced with Dr. Kells, was dismantled. This was the end of a dental practice started in 1850 by Dr. Kells' father. The late Dr. A. Peter Fortier, long-time faculty member in the LSUHSC School of Dentistry Department of Oral Diagnosis/Medicine/Radiology, transported equipment, furniture, and instruments to the school, where the office was re-created in the library.

In 2011 Opelousas dentist, Al Huguet, LSUSD '73, donated a collection of dental antiques to the LSUSD library. He had found the boxes, containing over 100 items, in an antique shop on Magazine Street in 1972. Included in the



Gold crowns carved and cast by Dr. Kells in 1890

collection were objects that clearly belonged to Dr. Kells, such as the printing blocks for the illustrations in his book, *The Dentist's Own Book*, published in 1925, and a set of four gold crowns that he carved and cast in 1890. Tags, labels, and notes tucked among the objects further indicated that this collection had been part of the Kells museum.

The equipment, tools, and materials contained in Dr. Huguet's treasure trove represent early 20th century dentistry and complement

the Kells' objects and other donations that were already in the LSUSD library exhibit. Among the items from the Kells museum are:

- A small trunk containing Dr. Kells' suction apparatus for the aspiration of fluids from the human body during surgical procedures. According to Dr. Rudolph Matas of New Orleans, Dr. Kells "has won the eternal gratitude of every working surgeon in the world."
- Four gold foil mallets. In addition to the lead hand mallet preferred by Dr. Kells, the collection contains three electric pluggers: an S.S. White Electrical Mallet, 1875-1880; a Lewis Plugger no.8, 1899-1920, from the Buffalo Dental Manufacturing Co.; and an unidentified engine mallet.



19th and early 20th century amalgam pluggers

- Five hinged and flanged brass impression trays patented by Bowen K. Bowen of Nashville, Tennessee in 1922
- A vulcanite denture with porcelain teeth and gold springs
- A jaw bone with five teeth, described on the accompanying label as "found under five feet of debris in a cave on the Guatemala border with Mexico, probably about 1000 years old."

We are grateful to Dr. Fortier and to Dr. Huguet for their passion for preserving the Kells legacy and making the LSUHSC School of Dentistry the repository of these artifacts.