

# Sylva L. Ashworth, D.C., the "Grand Old Lady of Chiropractic"

Keating & Cleveland

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank Allen Ashworth, Jr., Lillian Ashworth, Phillip Ashworth, Drs. W.R. Caine, Carl Cleveland, Jr., M.B. DeJarnette, Russell Sawyer, Jr., Lelia Schlabach, Ray M. Stover and Sylvester Shick for their assistance and input. This paper was supported by the Palmer College of Chiropractic/West, the Cleveland Chiropractic College of Kansas City and the National Institute of Chiropractic Research

## Abstract

Sylva L. Ashworth was a 1910 Palmer graduate and pioneer whose zeal for chiropractic, diligence in political causes and winning personality placed her in the center of chiropractic activities during the profession's middle ages. Although a life-long friend of B.J. Palmer and a self-professed straight chiropractor, she was most active in the broad-scope organizations of his rivals, particularly the National Chiropractic Association (NCA). Dr. Ashworth is the only woman ever to serve as president of a national chiropractic professional association in the United States: the Universal Chiropractors' Association in 1926. She was a founding member of the NCA (1930), the International College of Chiropractors (1938) and the Chiropractic Research Foundation (1944), ancestor of today's Foundation for Chiropractic Education and Research. Dr. Ashworth was a "liberated" woman and independent thinker before women's suffrage, and thereafter became an active player in state and national Democratic party politics. As long-time president of the Nebraska Board of Chiropractic Examiners and a founding member of the International Chiropractic Congress she participated in early struggles to standardize college curricula nationwide and in licensing battles with organized medicine in her state. Her daughter, Rose Ruth, was so inspired by her mother's work that she too became a chiropractor, and with her husband Carl Cleveland, founded the Cleveland Chiropractic College of Kansas City.

-----  
**Figure 1.** Sylva, circa 1892, age 18  
-----

Sylva Lula Burdick was born to Joshua Phillip Burdick and Deborah Gray Burdick on November 27, 1874 in Peru, Nebraska. The Burdicks were descendants of early British immigrants to Rhode Island; Joshua Burdick is recalled as a prosperous farmer, stockbreeder and shipper . He helped to organize the Peru Normal College, and in 1887 he was elected Justice of the Peace, presumably in Peru, Nebraska. He walked with the help of a wooden leg owing to a combat injury sustained in the Civil War; he served in Company E of the Nebraska Cavalry. The future Dr. Ashworth was the ninth of 10 children; a brother

Jerome is remembered as a "sharpshooter". Sylva attended Peru Normal College and prepared for a teaching career. She graduated in 1892, and on August 16 of that year married Pinckney E. Ashworth in Lincoln, Nebraska, the state capital. Mr. Ashworth is recalled as a farmer, school teacher, grocer and bookkeeper. Between 1893 and 1901 Sylva bore him five children, including (in 1895) the future Dr. Rose Ruth Ashworth Cleveland. Tragedy struck the Ashworths in April of 1902 when their fourth child, Lester, died short of his third birthday (see **Figure 2**).

-----  
**Figure 2.** Sylva, with husband, Pinckney Ashworth  
and two of their five children, circa 1900  
-----

According to surviving son Philip, who recently celebrated his 90th birthday in San Diego, in 1907 or 1908 Pinckney and Sylva separated, and Mr. Ashworth "went south"; he died in Fort Worth, Texas in 1928 after remarrying. Sylva Ashworth was left to raise her four children and manage the family farm near Eagle, in Cass County, Nebraska. At about the same time she developed severe health problems, including some combination of "valvular heart trouble," "diabetes," "dropsy" and "cystic tumors." She would relate to grandson Carl S. Cleveland Jr. that the diabetes had produced severe ulcerations on her legs, which she kept wrapped in gauze. Many years later she would recall the foul odor that these ulcerations produced, and that the toes of one foot had turned purple. Surgeons at the local hospital had decided against amputation, because Mrs. Ashworth was not expected to survive more than 3 or 4 months with or without the operation.

Resigned to her fate, Sylva divided her farm among family members and arranged for her children's care after her death. Her sister Lucy suggested that she seek the assistance of some new kind of healer, a Dr. Olson (perhaps Charles N. Olson, D.C., a Palmer graduate) who practiced some previously unheard of profession in western Nebraska, possibly near North Platte (Ashworth, 1991). Sylva responded: "What on earth is a chiropractor?" However, with nothing to lose for trying, she rented several rooms for herself and her children within walking distance of Olson's clinic. The chiropractor advised her of "problems in the mid-dorsal spine" (Cleveland, 1991), and began a regimen of twice daily adjustments. His rationale was that this area of the spine innervated the pancreas, which was believed to have something to do with diabetes. Sylva learned to conduct her own urinalyses, and began to note improvement. Her urine gradually became clearer, the leg ulcers began to heal, and her toes began to "pink up" (Cleveland, 1991). Her recovery was thorough: she apparently never suffered the effects of diabetes again, and ate whatever she pleased.

-----  
**Figure 3.** Sylva, circa 1910, a new DC  
-----

Mrs. Ashworth was inspired by her own recovery to devote her life to chiropractic. She mortgaged her 80 acre farm in order to raise funds, and moved herself and at least two of her four children to Davenport, Iowa. College transcripts reveal her enrollment at the Palmer School of Chiropractic (PSC) on May 6, 1909; she earned her doctorate in chiropractic on May 31, 1910. At the age of 35 the future "GRANDMA of CHIROPRACTIC" began her professional career; a legend was about to begin (see **Table 1**).

-----  
**Table 1** about here  
-----

Dr. Ashworth immediately returned to Nebraska with her family, established her practice in Lincoln and began to assist in organizing the profession in the state. Pioneer Nebraska chiropractor "Daddy" Walsh (1924) reported that the "N.C.A. of Nebraska" held its first meeting at Dr. Ashworth's clinic on June, 1912. On August 4, 1913 the annual meeting of the "Nebraska Chiropractic Association" was held at her office at 401 South 14th Street, Lincoln, and she was elected to the board of directors. She is also remembered as an incorporator (on August 18, 1915) of the Nebraska Chiropractic Association.

-----  
**Figure 4:** D.D. Palmer, from 1910 *Adjuster*  
-----

Dr. Ashworth was acquainted with D.D. Palmer, and had him introduced by Mayor Frank Zehrung of Lincoln when Palmer made a public presentation, apparently in Lincoln. On August 20, 1913, Sylva Ashworth, D.C. was in Davenport, Iowa for the PSC lyceum (college homecoming), at which time Palmer was supposedly struck by an automobile driven by his son, B.J., during a parade through the city. According to grandson Carl Cleveland Jr.: "B.J. did not hit D.D. Palmer with the automobile....because she said she was there....and that she testified or told BJ, and she says that the old man jumped, and the car did not hit him at all, that he just jumped out of the way and lost his balance and fell. And, she helped him up" (Cleveland, 1991). Her account essentially agrees with that of Frank W. Elliott, D.C., registrar of the PSC and a friend to both generations of Palmers.

As early as 1914 a pattern of charitable services by Dr. Ashworth was apparent. Her adjustive care for death row inmates of the Nebraska penitentiary in Lincoln was remembered in newspaper clippings 25 years later, and by Nebraska chiropractor Ray M. Stover who began his practice in the state in 1928. Sylva's grandson recalls that she visited the "prison in Lincoln at least once a week, maybe more, even though she was busy with her office" (Cleveland, 1991). Her youngest son, Phillip would drive her as she made her rounds to the penitentiary and to patients in the community. Carl Cleveland Jr., then about age 5, often accompanied Dr. Ashworth on her prison visits, and recalls the affection the prisoners felt for

his grandmother's generosity. Stover (1991) recalls Dr. Ashworth's concern for the prisoners' and condemned men's spiritual growth, and Sylva noted her satisfaction with a growing prisoner caseload in a letter to B.J. Palmer. Some of the citizens of Lincoln, however, considered these mercy visits decidedly "un-lady-like" (Cleveland, 1991).

-----  
**Figure 6:** Sylva, circa 1920 (age 45)  
-----

S.L. Ashworth was apparently unconcerned about negative local opinions. She owned one of the first automobiles in Lancaster County, and irritated her neighbors by scaring their horses; women were not supposed to be able to drive. The family recalls that "She drove fast, extremely fast, and she had powerful cars....an ordinary car wouldn't do....her first car was a lemon yellow car with black fenders" (Cleveland, 1991). She also purchased an airplane, but was talked out of flying by her family. Son-in-law Carl S. Cleveland suggested: "You've been flying low for years in your Buick - you ought to be satisfied with that" (Cleveland, 1991). Sylva was a "liberated" woman and independent thinker in the days before women's suffrage. (The twentieth amendment to the U.S. constitution, which granted women the right to vote, did not take effect until 1920). She was also one of the first women ever to take an active, official role in national party politics when, in 1924, she was elected "Alternate Delegate at Large" for Nebraska to the Democratic National Convention in New York City. Sylva served on the reception committee which notified Charles Bryan (brother of William Jennings Bryan of national political notoriety) of his nomination for Vice-President. She would remain active in business and political circles on the local, state and national levels throughout her career (see **Table 2**).

-----  
**Table 2** about here  
-----

Sylva was quite the entrepreneur. She hired a management service to oversee her farm while she practiced and invested in the Nebokar Oil & Gas Syndicate of Blackwell, Oklahoma and Omaha, Nebraska, through which she became a partner in oil drilling ventures in Holbrook, Arizona and Oklahoma. She also owned real estate in Ontario, Panama City and Lynn Haven, Florida, Long Beach, California and Los Angeles. In 1923 she was warmly welcomed to membership in the Lincoln Ad Club, and assured that women had always been welcome in the Club (i.e., even before women's suffrage). She would eventually become a highly respected member and executive of the Lincoln Business & Professional Women's Club (LB&PWC). In a 1941 letter to her daughter she noted that even several nurse members had voted for her in her successful campaign for the presidency of the LB&PWC. However, the family recalls her as gullible in some of her business dealings, particularly her oil investments.

Sylva's business interests were balanced by her generosity. She believed that the more she gave away, the more she would receive in return: "Cast your bread upon the waters, etc." (Ashworth, 1920). Her generosity to chiropractic organizations and institutions included donations to the PSC, Cleveland College, the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College, the International Congress of Chiropractic, and the Chiropractic Research Foundation (predecessor of today's FCER/Foundation for Chiropractic Education and Research). In a confidential letter to daughter Ruth, Dr. Ashworth estimated that her donations to chiropractic causes over a 34 year period exceeded \$50,000.

Dr. Ashworth's independence of thought and behavior were also reflected in her practice of chiropractic. She was warned repeatedly to stay out of the University of Nebraska's college infirmary. However, "she would push doctors and nurses aside and say 'I have patients in here who have asked for my service, and I'm going to go in and adjust them,' and she did! It's kind of hard to stop a woman with a made up mind....she was a doctor when it wasn't fashionable for ladies to be doctors" (Cleveland, 1991). Speculatively, her outspokenness on behalf of chiropractic may also have been a stimulus to G.H. Simmons, M.D., who practiced in Lincoln, was a leader of the American Medical Association from 1899 through 1925, and mentor to the chiropractors' arch-nemesis, Morris Fishbein, M.D., editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The Ashworth/Simmons connection has not been confirmed, however.

Sylva "lived and breathed chiropractic...she would explain chiropractic to everyone," such as streetcar conductors and passersby. Often, when she "heard someone had cancer and was given up to die....she would call them on the telephone and she would say 'I think that you can be helped through chiropractic, and you should come to my office and let me examine you and see if there's anything that can be done.' She would call them long-distance, too" (Cleveland, 1991). A patient's inability to pay for her services or for the cost of travel to Lincoln was no barrier; Dr. Ashworth would pay for travel expenses and lodged needy patients in her home. Her grandson, who was a student at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln during the late 1930s, also recalls "four or five patients living in her home; different ones would come and go"; this was truly a burden in more ways than one, since her cancer patients frequently left a foul smell in the home. She is recalled as someone who "....always had a happy smile and that helped to endear to herself everyone she came in contact with".

Sylva was an early riser whose practice day began shortly after dawn and ended late in the evening. During the 1918 epidemic of influenza which swept the country "she lived practically in her automobile and hired a driver to take her from house to house...she would sleep right in the car....she went for days and days and days that way" (Cleveland, 1991). Family members were also enlisted during this epidemic to help her care for her patients. W.R. Caine, a chiropractor in Culbertson, Nebraska recalls that Dr. Ashworth routinely made many house calls. Son-in-law C.S. Cleveland, Sr. remembered that

she kept two office workers busy in her clinic with megaphones; they would summon patients into the dressing and adjusting areas by numbers. Her grandson personally remembers that she often saw more than 100 patients per day (Cleveland, 1991). Chiropractor Sylvester Shick (1990) of Lincoln recalls that there once was an "Ashworth Special," a special train which ran between Omaha and Lincoln to transport patients to and from Dr. Ashworth's clinic. Dr. Ashworth quickly earned a reputation as a successful chiropractor, and in 1919 a convention of Iowa chiropractors voted her the "second most famous woman chiropractor in the country". In 1921 the *Lincoln Herald* credited her with "the largest practice in Chiropractic in the state, and one of the largest in the United States."

-----  
**Figure 7:** Carl S. Cleveland Sr. in his later years  
-----

Sylva inspired her daughter to follow her example, and so became the matriarch of a chiropractic family that would rival the Palmers of Davenport. Ruth Ashworth graduated from the PSC in 1917. On April 19 of that year Ruth married Carl S. Cleveland (see **Figure 7**); the ceremony was held at the Palmer mansion, and B.J. gave the bride away. The union would produce several more generations of Cleveland chiropractors and a tradition in chiropractic education. The following year Carl S. ("Max") Cleveland, Jr., current president of the Cleveland College of Los Angeles, was born in Webster City, Iowa (March 29, 1918). On December 22, 1922 Drs. Carl and Ruth Cleveland joined forces with another PSC graduate, Perl B. Griffin, D.C. (Carl Sr.'s brother-in-law), to incorporate the Central Chiropractic College of Kansas City; two years later the school was renamed the Cleveland Chiropractic College. In 1926 Dr. Ashworth indicated that she believed the Cleveland institution "one of the best in the country. Second only to the P.S.C."

From her days as a student at the PSC until her death Sylva Ashworth considered B.J. Palmer her friend. She was a "Palmer Ambassador" during the 1920s, and frequently referred students to the Davenport school. Advertisements for her practice often listed her as a "Palmer graduate," and she was invited to contribute articles to the PSC's *The Chiropractor & Clinical Journal* (PSC, 1921). She also donated money to the PSC, some of which is commemorated by "a chair with her name on it" (Cleveland, 1991); this "stately wooden chair with cushions" is preserved at Palmer College in Davenport. A flurry of correspondence between 1920 and 1936 indicates Sylva's and BJ's regular and frank discussions of clinical, educational, political and legal developments in chiropractic. In 1926 son-in-law C.S. Cleveland, Sr. characterized Dr. Ashworth as "the best friend BJ and Mabel have." The senior Cleveland also alluded to an alliance between BJ and Sylva (against Drs. F.G. Lundy and Lee Edwards) in Palmer's unsuccessful attempt to return to office as Secretary of the Universal Chiropractors' Association (UCA) following the disillusionment precipitated by the neurocalometer debacle (Keating,

1991). Daughter-in-law Lillian Ashworth (1991a) recalls that Sylva and Dave Palmer (BJ's son) were penpals during the 1930s.

During the 1920s Dr. Ashworth's role as president of the Nebraska Board of Chiropractic Examiners involved her in the early struggles for educational standardization. Many state boards had followed BJ Palmer's lead in recommending a chiropractic course of "3 years of 6 months each" (Palmer, 1919c) for license eligibility. However, actual regulations varied among those states where chiropractors were licensed.

At this stage Sylva was allied with BJ, son-in-law CS Cleveland, DC (Cleveland, 1925), Lee Edwards, MD, DC, Anna Foy, DC of the Kansas Board of Chiropractic Examiners and with other members of the Federation of Chiropractic Schools & Colleges (FCSC). The FCSC met in Davenport in August, 1919 to urge a "standard of education" involving "3 years of 6 months each" in "all states now having laws governing the practice of Chiropractic" (FCSC, 1919). The Palmer School had first announced its 18-month curriculum in 1911, and various schools and state legislatures adopted this as policy. Sylva also sided with BJ in opposing the activities of the Crabtree clan, who included HC Crabtree, MD, DC, his wife Rosalie Crabtree, DC and her brother John Calamore, DC, all of whom were graduates of the Carver Chiropractic College. The Crabtrees apparently moved their chiropractic school from Coffeyville, Kansas to Lincoln in 1911, where they operated the Nebraska College of Chiropractic (NeCC) until 1929. The NeCC offered a course of three years of nine months each in accordance with the Nebraska chiropractic act. By the early 1920s the school had apparently established a curriculum that included laboratory courses taught at the University of Nebraska, but would eventually become a victim of the Basic Science legislation introduced circa 1927: student enrollment could not be sustained in a state which effectively barred license acquisition.

Earlier on (1919 and the early 1920s) the Palmer-Crabtree battle within the profession had been waged, as reflected in the pages of BJ's *Fountain Head News*. The ire of Palmer and his followers was especially directed at O.G. Clark, D.C. of Columbus, Nebraska, who had sought to have the 27-month educational requirements of the law enforced, ostensibly to keep 18-month graduates from the PSC out of the state. Clark apparently joined with the Crabtrees in seeking prosecution of Palmer graduates who practiced without obtaining a license. The dispute grew heated, and prompted a walk-out from the state convention in Omaha on June 14, 1921 by PSC graduates Ashworth, Edwards, Walsh, Vogt and BJ Palmer. Major B. DeJarnette, D.O., D.C., developer of the sacro-occipital technique and a 1924 graduate of the Nebraska Chiropractic College in Lincoln, remembers Dr. Ashworth's opposition to his alma mater. Her political activities were considered principally responsible for a 1923 reduction in the required length of education for license eligibility from 27 to 18 months, which made PSC alumni license-eligible in the state. As President of the Nebraska Board of Chiropractic Examiners Sylva encouraged

PSC graduates to seek licensure in Nebraska by keeping BJ informed of requirements and examination dates.

Correspondence from state senator E.J. Spirk, who had been helpful in obtaining legislation favorable to chiropractic in 1915, suggests that Sylva was able to influence Nebraska Governor Bryan in pressing her opposition to the Nebraska school. Grandson Carl Cleveland Jr. recounts her relationship with the governor (the unsuccessful Democratic vice-presidential candidate of 1924), whom she had helped to nominate. The governor would call Dr. Ashworth at her office for advice on appointees to the Nebraska Board of Chiropractic Examiners: "I've been there when he would call her and say 'Sylvia, its time for me to appoint a board, again; now who do you want on this board?'; and he would appoint whomever she recommended." However, Sylva's 1923 victory in opening the state to Palmer graduates was short-lived. Her efforts could not deter the formation of the Basic Science Board and examinations which Nebraska enacted in 1927. No chiropractors passed Nebraska's basic science examinations from 1929 to 1950. In a 1928 letter to A.W. Schweitert, D.C. Sylva noted:

In reply to your inquiry will say that the basic science law in Nebraska has been very detrimental to chiropractic. We have not had a single new chiropractor in the state since the basic science law went into effect. There have been five applicants for admission, but all failed, which was nothing more than we expected. I have been told that one member of the board said that no chiropractor should pass the board while he was on it. Of course that is the intention of the law. Any teacher knows that they can fail anyone. It is not a question of qualification or training.

Ashworth's stand against the Crabtrees' school and their lengthier course did not affect her support for broad-scope chiropractic nor for individual doctors who "mixed." Tolerance for her fellow chiropractors was suggested in several letters to DeJarnette which she wrote while serving on the Nebraska Board of Chiropractic Examiners; in these she warned him of possible litigation for unlicensed medical practice because of his use of physiotherapeutic modalities, and advised him of her efforts to dissuade the state's attorney general from proceeding with the case. Interestingly, her position in support of broadscope chiropractic was at variance with her own relatively "straight" practice. In describing her talk with the attorney general she noted that she had:

"...tried to convince him that you had a right to use these modalities and the Chiropractors generally were using them. He wishes the Association to bring a friendly suit which will cost about \$200 to determine once and for all whether we can or cannot do anything but adjust the spine. So far as I am concerned I can get along but do not believe we should be restricted. I told the Atty Gen. that these modalities were vibration, the same principle we use in Chiropractic,



that I believed that it helped to bring up the reserve force, and that it was always used in conjunction with Chiropractic. I had quite a conversation with him....".

Dr. Ashworth immersed herself in Democratic party politics at the state and national level during the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s (**Table 2**). Her involvement and interest seem to have been initiated by her efforts to seek passage (1915) and subsequently amend (e.g., Ashworth, 1923) the laws regulating chiropractic in Nebraska, but took on a life of its own. Sylva was a natural politician who enjoyed the company of governors, state lawmakers and other party leaders, and she relished a political campaign. Her correspondence file includes numerous letters from prospective congressional and gubernatorial candidates and incumbents who sought her support in their electoral bids. Although she never held elected public office herself, her behind-the-scenes influence seem to have been considerable. Her youngest son, Phillip, recalls that "She was a *powerful* Democrat....they counted on her for 40,000 votes."

Sylva's involvement in Nebraska politics sometimes brought very personal benefits. On one occasion she was injured in an auto accident in Lincoln while on her way to make a house call and was taken to Bryan Memorial Hospital, which was named after William Jennings Bryan (who died in 1925). When the medical doctors refused to permit her daughter Ruth to provide chiropractic care in the hospital, Sylva called her friend, Charles Bryan, former Nebraska governor. Bryan was active as a member of the hospital's board of directors, and his outraged orders to the supervising medical physicians are recalled as "You give Dr. Ashworth anything she wants").

The close rapport between Sylva and BJ may have waned over the years. In the late 1920s and after, as Dr. Ashworth became ever more involved in the activities and politics of the UCA, its successor, the National Chiropractic Association (NCA) and an affiliated group that she helped to found in 1926 (Turner, 1931): the International Congress of Chiropractic (ICC), the frequency of communication with BJ seems to have tapered off. Although son-in-law CS Cleveland would eventually lean further away from his early enthusiasm (e.g., Cleveland, 1933) for the broadscope NCA, Sylva would remain a lifelong, active member of the group BJ considered his opponents. The GRANDMA of CHIROPRACTIC, although retaining a sense of pride and loyalty to her alma mater (see **Figure 5**), was also generous in her contributions to non-Palmer organizations and to other chiropractic schools (including Cleveland College and Canadian Memorial). In a 1944 letter to daughter Ruth, Dr. Ashworth noted that Mabel Palmer had avoided her during a recent visit to Davenport and the PSC; she also mentioned with sadness the run-down appearance and low enrollment of the PSC. However, newspaper obituaries in 1958 listed "Drs. BJ and Dave Palmer" as "honorary pallbearers" at Sylva's funeral.

-----  
**Figure 5.** Lyceum certificate from the

## Palmer School of Chiropractic, 1917

---

The gradual cooling of the friendship between Drs. Ashworth and Palmer may also have been due to her interest in techniques and devices of which the "Developer" disapproved, or at least, did not support. Sylva had been an early enthusiast for Palmer's "neurocalometer," and may have been one of the pre-lyceum (1924) field-testers for the instrument; the post-lyceum neurocalometer that she leased was serial number 1204. However, in later years she would note her impression that the device was primarily "a gimmick that BJ was using to make money" (Cleveland, 1991). Her grandson also recalls that "She liked BJ as an individual, she was really sold on him. She didn't like the milking cow speech and concept....she felt that the NCA was the better organization....she was a straight chiropractor." (The "milking cow speech" is a reference to BJ's apocalyptic speech at the 1924 PSC lyceum in which the neurocalometer was introduced ostensibly for the purpose of forcing the "mixers" to support straight chiropractic. Palmer claimed that he had been feeding the cow [chiropractic] for too long, and now demanded his turn at the milking end of the animal.) Dr. Ashworth did not attend the historic 1924 PSC lyceum.

Moreover, like her Omaha neighbor and fellow Palmer graduate Lee Edwards, MD, Dr. Ashworth seems to have become more enthusiastic about Albert Abrams, M.D.'s radionics devices and "electronic reactions" than she was for the neurocalometer. Her grandson recalls that "She became interested in something called radionics - it was some kind of a modality. I remember she had one of those machines"; however, although Sylva believed that radionics "had some merit", she also considered it "just a supplement to chiropractic." Her training at the PSC had probably provided little experience with x-ray procedures, since BJ Palmer was just introducing "spinographic" equipment about the time she graduated in 1910. Dr. Ashworth's grandson recalls that he would take radiographs of her cancer patients for her during his years as a student at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln: "she was afraid of x-ray; she had an x-ray machine but she was afraid to use it" (Cleveland, 1991). She was well trained as an adjuster, however, and felt that women should not be deterred from chiropractic for reasons of size: "I have known women who weighed less than one hundred pounds that were good adjusters. It is not what the adjuster weighs, but the knowledge and skill possessed that is most important" (S.L. Ashworth, quoted by Gromala, 1983). Patients were provided with cots on which to rest awhile following their adjustive sessions with Dr. Ashworth, a practice then standard at the PSC.

In later years Dr. Ashworth was repeatedly invited to address chiropractic state and national conventions on topics such as "A broader scope of practice, including obstetrics" (Rossie, 1935) and an "abdominal adjusting technique" which Dr. Ashworth had developed. It is not known whether Dr. Ashworth's "abdominal technique" was in anyway related to similarly named "bloodless surgery" and

visceral manipulation procedures then being popularized by fellow Nebraska chiropractors DeJarnette and L.H. Burdick. The *Chiropractic American* of October 20, 1939 noted Sylva's involvement with the Logan Basic Technique organization (see **Figure 8**). Stover (1991) recalls that "She had quite a program for weight reduction and specialized along that line."

-----  
**Figure 8.** Sylva L. Ashworth, D.C. with Logan Basic technique group, circa 1940; Vinton Logan, D.C. is standing in rear row  
-----

Sylva's involvement with the NCA was an extension of her service as a member and executive of the UCA. She was vice-president of the UCA in 1918, and again in 1926 when its president, C.H. Wadsworth, DC of Jamaica, New York died on July 10; Sylva became the first (and still the only) woman to lead the UCA or its successors, the NCA and today's American Chiropractic Association. However, by December of 1926 she had been re-elected vice-president of the UCA and C.E. Schillig, DC had succeeded her to the UCA presidency (Morris, 1926). In September of 1926 she was also elected third vice-president of the International Congress of Chiropractic Examining Boards at the Baltimore Hotel in Kansas City, thereby serving among its first slate of officers. A letter to all Nebraska chiropractors from G.O. Cast, DC in January of 1927 (in his capacity as secretary of the Nebraska Branch of the UCA) indicated that Sylva was additionally serving as vice-president of the state organization. Dr. Ashworth was involved in the years of negotiations (1922-1930) which led to the amalgamation of the UCA and an earlier American Chiropractic Association, an issue that was not at all certain at the outset. Her service to the NCA was recognized by the award of Fellowship #5 in the International College of Chiropractors, an honors group established by NCA leaders in 1938. In 1944 Dr. Ashworth was one of the incorporators and served for several years as an "executive member" of the Chiropractic Research Foundation (CRF), better known today as the Foundation for Chiropractic Education and Research (FCER).

-----  
**Figure 9.** Cover of the September, 1937 issue of *The Chiropractic Journal* (NCA) shows the original members of the NCA's Gavel Club, comprised of former presidents and vice-presidents of the UCA, the original ACA and the NCA; left to right are Drs. Sylva Ashworth, C. Sterling Cooley, Gordon M. Goodfellow, F. Lorne Wheaton, Lillard T. Marshall (seated, center), O.L. Brown, A.B. Cochrane, C.E. Schillig and Harry K. McIlroy (seated). Dr. Ashworth was the first vice-president of the Gavel Club (Front, 1937).  
-----

In later years Dr. Ashworth's service as president and vice-president of the UCA qualified her for membership in the NCA's Gavel Club (see **Figure 9**), trusteeship of the International College of Chiropractors, and membership in the NCA's National Council of Past Executives. Sylva's grandson

recalls that she attended the NCA's annual conventions so regularly because "She enjoyed the NCA Gavel Club meetings more than anything" (Cleveland, 1991). In later years the pages of the *Journal of the NCA* would also recall her service as president and vice-president of the NCA's "Pioneer Club," which was comprised of doctors who had practiced for 25 years or more. When a stroke prevented her attendance at the 1955 NCA convention in Atlantic City, her absence was felt. Dr. Ashworth's many years of membership in the NCA's National Council of Women Chiropractors (NCWC) was recognized in 1954 when the Council decided to award its first student scholarship in Dr. Ashworth's name. Audrey Plourde, DC, president of the NCWC noted:

We expect to make two awards this year. The first will be "The Sylvia Ashworth Award," in honor of that very dear person whose charm once again graced our luncheon, and who simply radiated at the annual Pioneer Luncheon. God bless you, Dr. Sylvia! Future awards will be made in the names of other outstanding women chiropractors as chosen by our committee",

and

....This committee....is most happy to announce that Mrs. Caverly is soon to be awarded the first scholarship, to be known as the "Sylvia Ashworth \$300.00 Scholarship."

-----  
**Figure 10.** Jar of tumors which appeared in the *Associated Chiropractic Colleges of American News*, January, 1938  
-----

A scholarship in Dr. Ashworth's name may have been particularly appropriate given her orientation; in many ways her attitudes epitomize the scholarly thinking among the early "rational chiropractic" proponents whose orientation derived from the PSC (e.g., Vedder, 1924) and who later led the NCA in the 1930s, 1940s and later years. Sylva was unquestioning in her belief in the clinical value of chiropractic care, yet she encouraged intensive study of the biological sciences. Indeed, her rationale for founding the CRF had far less to do with clinical research than with improving the level of basic science instruction in the colleges. She personally sought to understand the complexities of the health problems her patients presented, as demonstrated in a presentation that she made in 1915 to the Nebraska Chiropractic Association on the cause and chiropractic care of patients with typhoid fever. Her collection of "tumors that have sloughed under chiropractic adjustments" earned her an award for "best scientific paper" at the NCA convention in Toronto in 1938, and photographs of her "evidence" appeared in articles in the NCA's *National Chiropractic Journal* and the *Associated Chiropractic Colleges of America News*, a periodical briefly published by son-in-law Carl Cleveland (see **Figure 11**).

-----  
**Figure 11.** Classic photo of Sylva L. Ashworth, D.C., circa 1939, which appeared in the *NCA Journal* throughout the 1940s  
-----

---

Sylva Ashworth, the "Grand Old Lady of Chiropractic" (Carlisle, 1941), continued in private practice in Lincoln until 1954, when at age 79 she suffered a stroke which paralyzed her on one side. Her final years were spent with daughter Ruth Cleveland in Kansas City. On June 6, 1958 Sylva met the *Universal Intelligence* she felt had so long guided her work as a chiropractor. Numerous obituaries in the professional press and in Nebraska newspapers sought to summarize her career and extoll her lifelong dedication to the care of the sick and underserved, but her own attitude was perhaps best captured by her friend, Frances Julander, DC, who had quoted Sylva in a biographical sketch of the pioneer some 19 years before: "we are all humble children of God" (Julander, 1939).