

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

Joseph C. Keating, Jr., Ph.D. and Carl S. Cleveland, III, D.C.

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### Introduction

**Birth & Family:** born to Joshua Phillip Burdick and Deborah Gray Burdick on November 27, 1874 in Peru, Nebraska; ninth of 10 children

**Father:** -farmer, stockbreeder and shipper;  
  
-wooden leg owing to a combat injury sustained in the Civil War; he served in Company E of the Nebraska Cavalry  
  
-helped to organize the Peru Normal College, and in 1887 he was elected Justice of the Peace;

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**Slide 1:** Sylva, circa 1892, age 18  
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**Young Sylva:** attended Peru Normal College and prepared for a teaching career; graduated in 1892

**Marriage:** -August 16, 1892 in Lincoln, Nebraska married Pinckney E. Ashworth (farmer, school teacher, grocer and bookkeeper)

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**Slide 2:** Sylva, with husband, Pinckney Ashworth  
and 2 of their 5 children, circa 1900  
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**Children:** -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;

-1907 or 1908 Pinckney and Sylva separated; Sylva Ashworth was left to raise her four children and manage the family farm near Eagle, in Cass County, Nebraska

**Diabetes:** -she developed severe health problems, including some combination of "valvular heart trouble," "diabetes," "dropsy" and "cystic tumors";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

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Intro to chiro: sister Lula suggested assistance of some new kind of healer, a Dr. Olson (perhaps Charles N. Olson, D.C., an early Palmer graduate) who practiced some previously unheard of profession in western Nebraska, possibly near North Platte; Sylva responded: "What on earth is a chiropractor?";

-the DC advised her of "problems in the mid-dorsal spine; this area of the spine innervated the pancreas, which was believed to have something to do with diabetes;

-began a regimen of twice daily adjustments;

-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 "pinken up";

-she never suffered the effects of diabetes again, and ate whatever she pleased

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**Slide 3:** Sylva, circa 1910, a new DC  
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Palmer School: -devotes her life to chiropractic; mortgaged 80 acre farm to raise funds, and moved herself and at least two of her four children to Davenport;

-enrollment at PSC on May 6, 1909, graduated on May 31, 1910 at age 35

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**Table 1a** about here  
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Early Organizing: -establishes practice in Lincoln;  
-assists in organizing the profession in NE;  
-first state association meeting held in her clinic in June, 1912....a frequent reoccurrence....beginning of long professional career

D.D. Palmer: -knew D.D. Palmer, had him introduced by Mayor Frank Zehrung of Lincoln when Palmer made a public presentation, apparently in Lincoln;

-present at the PSC lyceum on August 20, 1913 when Palmer was supposedly struck by an automobile driven by his son, B.J., during a parade through the city;

-tells Carl 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";

-her account essentially agrees with that of Frank W. Elliott, D.C., registrar of the PSC and a friend to both generations of Palmers.

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**Slide 4:** D.D. Palmer, from 1910 *Adjuster*  
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Early Practice: -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;

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- "Ashworth Special," a special train which ran between Omaha and Lincoln to transport patients to and from Dr. Ashworth's clinic;

- quickly earned a reputation as a successful chiropractor;

- in 1919 a convention of Iowa chiropractors voted her the "second most famous woman chiropractor in the country";

- 1921 the *Lincoln Herald* credited her with "the largest practice in Chiropractic in the state, and one of the largest in the United States"

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**Slide 5:** Sylva circa 1920, age 45  
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Prison calls: -1914 begins adjustive care of prisoners & death row inmates at NE penitentiary in Lincoln at least once a week;

- Carl Jr. accompanied her to prison and community house calls, recalls prisoners grateful for her concern with their spiritual well-being;

Univ of NE -warned repeatedly to stay out of the University of Nebraska's college infirmary. However, Carl Jr. recalls that "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"

Enthusiasm: -Carl Jr. recalls that she "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"

-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

-Carl Jr., 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"

-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* (Bealle, 1945...Ashworth/Simmons connection has not been confirmed, however.

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

1918 Flu epidemic -Sylva " 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";

-family members enlisted to help her care for her patients;

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**Slide 6:** Ruth Ashworth Cleveland, circa 1925, age 30  
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Rose Ruth Cleveland: -inspired to follow Sylva's example, and so Sylva became the matriarch of a chiropractic family that would rival the Palmers of Davenport;

-Ruth Ashworth graduated from the PSC in 1917

-April 19 of that year Ruth married Carl S. Cleveland, star of the PSC baseball team; ceremony was held at the Palmer mansion, and B.J. gave the bride away

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**Slide 7:** Carl S. Cleveland, Sr., high school baseball star  
**Slide 8:** Carl S. Cleveland, Sr., 1917 graduation from the PSC  
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-1918 Carl S. ("Max") Cleveland, Jr., current chancellor of the Cleveland Colleges, was born in Webster City, Iowa (March 29, 1918);

CCC/KC -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."

Local Opinion: -Locals found prison visits un-lady-like....Sylva couldn't care less; owned first car in Lancaster county, drove large, fast cars; family talked her out of flying the airplane she purchased

Liberated Woman: -an independent businessperson before women's suffrage (20th amendment, took effect 1920);

-1923 warmly welcomed to membership in the Lincoln Ad Club...assured that women had always been welcome in the Club (i.e., even before women's suffrage)

-respected executive of the Lincoln Business & Professional Women's Club; 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

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**Table 2** about here  
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Democratic Politics: -immersed herself in Democratic party politics at the state and national level during the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s; a "hard core" FDR-New Deal Democrat

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- involvement initiated by her efforts to seek passage (1915) and subsequently amend (1923) the laws regulating chiropractic in Nebraska;

-a natural politician who enjoyed the company of governors, state lawmakers and other party leaders; relished a political campaign;

-correspondence includes numerous letters from prospective congressional and gubernatorial candidates and incumbents who sought her support in their electoral bids;

-never held elected public office, but 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";

-"Alternate Delegate at Large" for Nebraska to the Democratic National Convention in New York City in 1924;

-served on the reception committee which notified Charles Bryan (brother of William Jennings Bryan of national political notoriety) of his nomination for Vice-President;

-remained active in business and political circles on the local, state and national levels throughout her career

-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"

Entrepreneur:

-hired a management service to oversee her farm while she practiced;

-owned shares in oil and gas drilling ventures in Oklahoma, Nebraska & Arizona

-owned real estate in Ontario, Panama City and Lynn Haven, Florida, Long Beach, California and Los Angeles

Chirodonations:

PSC, Cleveland College, CMCC, ICC, and the Chiropractic Research Foundation (predecessor of today's FCER); in a confidential letter to daughter Ruth in 1944, Sylva estimated that her donations to chiropractic causes over a 34 year period exceeded \$50,000

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**Slide 9: Sylva's Lyceum certificate, 1917**  
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BJ Friendship

considered B.J. Palmer her friend; "Palmer Ambassador" during the 1920s;

-referred students to the Davenport school;

-contributed articles to the PSC's *The Chiropractor & Clinical Journal*

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-frequent correspondence with BJ during 1920-1936: 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";

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**Table 1b** about here  
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### UCA Politics:

-1920s 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"

-Sylva was the first (and still the only) woman to lead the UCA or its successors, the NCA and today's American Chiropractic Association;

- allied with BJ, CS Cleveland, DC, 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) against opposing the activities of the Crabtree clan;

-HC Crabtree, MD, DC, wife Rosalie Crabtree, DC and her brother John Calamore, DC, all graduates of the Carver Chiropractic College operated the Nebraska College of Chiropractic (NeCC) until 1929;

-NeCC offered 3 years of 9 months each in accordance with the Nebraska chiropractic act;

-curriculum that included laboratory courses taught at the University of Nebraska;

-1919-1923 Palmer vs. Crabtree/Clark battle in NE over licensure of 18-month PSC graduates;

-Crabtrees O.G. Clark, D.C. 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;

- walk-out from the state convention in Omaha on June 14, 1921 by PSC graduates Ashworth, Edwards, Walsh, Vogt and BJ Palmer;

-Sylva's responsible for 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; she interceded with Governor Bryan;

-Carl Jr. recalls that the governor would call Dr. Ashworth at her office for advice on appointees to the Nebraska BCE: "I've been there when he would call her and say 'Sylva, its time for me to appoint a board, again; now who do you want on this board?'; and he would appoint whomever she recommended";

-as President of the Nebraska BCE, Sylva encouraged PSC graduates to seek licensure in Nebraska by keeping BJ informed of requirements and examination dates

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-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;

Basic Science: -1923 victory in opening the state to Palmer graduates was short-lived; she 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

Tolerance of mixing: -Major B. DeJarnette, D.O., D.C., developer of SOT and a 1924 graduate of the Nebraska Chiropractic College in Lincoln, remembers Dr. Ashworth's opposition to his alma mater;

-battle with Crabtrees' school and their lengthier course did not affect her support for broad-scope chiropractic nor for individual doctors who "mixed";

-tolerance suggested in several letters to DeJarnette which she wrote while serving on the Nebraska BCE; 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 ~~then~~ 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...."

-Carl Jr. recalls lively family discussions when his parents visited Dr. Sylva: Carl Sr. was fairly straight, Sylva gradually became more and more of a "mixer" and a staunch advocate of the National Chiropractic Association

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**Table 1c** about here  
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Distance from BJ: close rapport between Sylva and BJ waned over the years 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: the International Congress of Chiropractic;

-son-in-law CS Cleveland would eventually lean further away from his early enthusiasm for the broadscope NCA, Sylva would remain a lifelong, active member of the group BJ considered his opponents;

-however, newspaper obituaries in 1958 listed "Drs. BJ and Dave Palmer" as "honorary pallbearers" at Sylva's funeral.

Mixer tendencies: -cooling of friendship with BJ may also have been due to her interest in techniques and devices of which the "Developer" disapproved, or at least, did not support;

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- early enthusiast for Palmer's "neurocalometer"; the post-lyceum neurocalometer that she leased was serial number 1204

-in later years she would note her impression that the device was primarily "a gimmick that BJ was using to make money";

-Carl Jr. 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;

-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 training at the PSC probably provided little experience with x-ray procedures, since BJ Palmer was just introducing "spinographic" equipment about the time she graduated in 1910;

-Carl Jr. recalls that he took 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";

-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"

- repeatedly addressed chiropractic state and national conventions on topics such as "A broader scope of practice, including obstetrics" and an "abdominal adjusting technique"

-*Chiropractic American* of October 20, 1939 noted Sylva's involvement with the Logan Basic Technique organization (see Figure 2). Stover (1991) recalls that "She had quite a program for weight reduction and specialized along that line."

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- Slide 10:** Sylva with Logan Basic technique group circa 1940;  
Vinton F. Logan, D.C. is standing in rear row
- Slide 11:** Hugh Benedict Logan, D.C., founder in 1935 of Logan College
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NCA politics:

-involved in years of negotiations (1926-1930) which led to the amalgamation of the UCA and an earlier ACA to form NCA in 1930

-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;

-pictured on the September, 1937 cover of the NCA's *Chiropractic Journal* with other presidents and vice-presidents of the ACA, UCA and NCA

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- Slide 12:** left to right are Drs. 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
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-1944 one of the incorporators and served for several years as an "executive member" of the Chiropractic Research Foundation, better known today as the FCER;

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**Tables 1d & 1e** about here  
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-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;

-service as president and vice-president of the UCA qualified her for membership in the NCA's Gavel Club, trusteeship of the International College of Chiropractors, and membership in the NCA's National Council of Past Executives;

-*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;

-Carl Jr. recalls that she attended the NCA's annual conventions so regularly because "She enjoyed the NCA Gavel Club meetings more than anything";

-When a stroke prevented her attendance at the 1955 NCA convention in Atlantic City, her absence was felt;

-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";

- a "rational chiropractor"; unquestioning in her belief in the clinical value of chiropractic care, yet she encouraged intensive study of the biological sciences

-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* (Ashworth, 1938b) and the *Associated Chiropractic Colleges of America News* (Ashworth, 1938a), a periodical briefly published by son-in-law Carl Cleveland (see Figure 4).

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**Slide 13:** Jar of tumors which appeared in the *Associated Chiropractic Colleges of America News*, January 1938 and again in the November 1938 issue of NCA's *The Chiropractic Journal*  
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Finale: 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;

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**Slide 14:** Ruth Cleveland, D.C., circa 1945  
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## **Sylva L. Ashworth, D.C., the "Grand Old Lady of Chiropractic"**

-final years were spent with daughter Ruth Cleveland in Kansas City

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**Slide 15:** Classic photo of Sylva Ashworth, circa 1939,  
which appeared in the NCA Journal throughout the 1940s  
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-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 this remarkable pioneer some 19 years before; said Sylva: "we are all humble children of God"