

# Chiropractic's Unsung Hero: Dr. William H. Werner

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*"Your honor, as long as I have these two hands and there are sick people, I will use them in rendering my vocation as a chiropractor."*

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By Joseph E. Maynard, D.C., Ph.C.

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**I** CONSIDER MYSELF fortunate to have chosen chiropractic as a career. I consider myself more fortunate that I had the privilege of meeting pioneer chiropractors who have played significant parts in the history and development of chiropractic.

Without these "unsung heroes," who laid a foundation for the profession, chiropractic would not have a bright future.

One of the most distinguished chiropractors I have known was Dr. William H. Werner, who practiced in a suburb of Brooklyn, N.Y., on Long Island. He graduated from the Palmer School of Chiropractic in the early 1920s, and chose to practice in New York, which was not a licensed state until 1963.

During Werner's era, some Brooklyn chiropractors started their practices by standing on street corners with a full spine model in their hands explaining the principles of chiropractic as people walked by and gathered to listen. Many thought it was a demeaning way to advertise chiropractic, but they were dedicated to

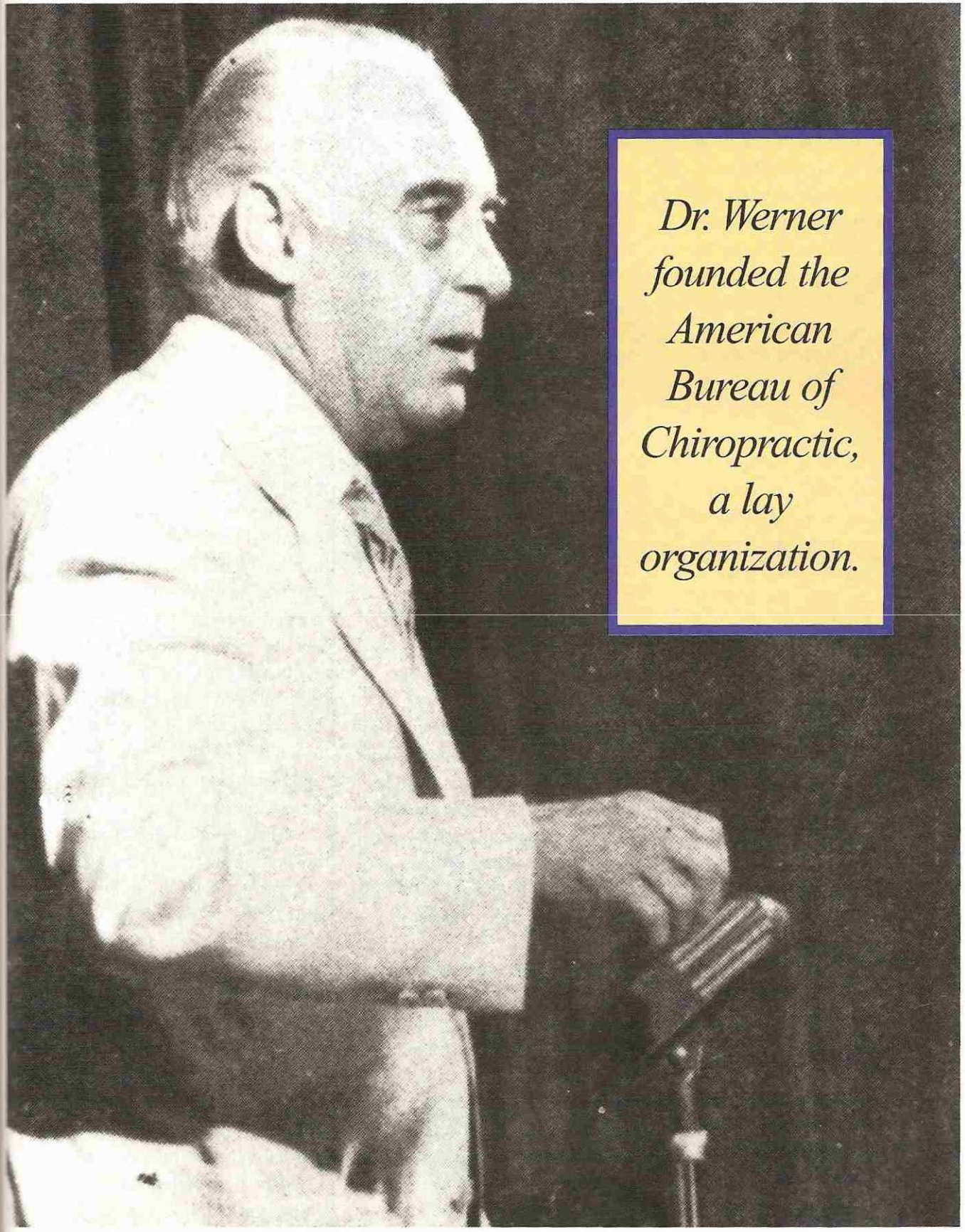
teaching the benefits of chiropractic and it didn't bother them.

With Werner's enthusiasm about chiropractic, it wasn't long before he had developed a very successful practice and was providing care for numerous patients. As was the case in other, unlicensed states, as long as chiropractors were not too successful and kept a low-key reputation, they weren't subjected to prosecution.

But after Werner became successful, he was arrested for practicing medicine without a license. Although patients testified for him on the health benefits they had received from chiropractic adjustments, their testimonies had no bearing because the law was cut-and-dried.

However, the judge did have a certain amount of leeway when it came to sentencing a chiropractor. In Werner's case, the testimonials of his patients and his seeming popularity swayed the judge, who stated that if he would cease from practicing chiropractic, he would not be sentenced to a jail term.

Werner then stood before the judge, put up his two hands and



*Dr. Werner  
founded the  
American  
Bureau of  
Chiropractic,  
a lay  
organization.*

made the statement: "Your honor, as long as I have these two hands and there are sick people, I will use them in rendering my vocation as a chiropractor." The judge banged down his gavel and sentenced him to six months in jail.

While in jail, Werner's patients came to him to receive their chiropractic adjustments, but there was no facility for the jailed chiropractor to meet their requests. He did adjust his fellow inmates in their cells and spent his time constructively in educating his fellow prisoners on the benefits of chiropractic. Upon Werner's release from jail, 500 patients, chiropractors and friends gave him a testimonial dinner, showing their respect for him for enduring incarceration.

Although he faced what could be considered a devastating period of his life, jailed with a criminal record, Werner refused to let the experience become a negative one.

Instead, he immediately resumed his practice and found the motivation to start the American Bureau of Chiropractic (ABC), a lay organization which caught on like wildfire throughout the United States.

### **STARTING THE ABC**

I belonged to one ABC chapter on Long Island, where we would have meetings for doctors and gatherings for our patients. The chapter invited guest speakers who advocated the view that people had a right, regardless of the law, to avail themselves of chiropractic as

their form of health care.

It reminded me of some of Dr. D.D. Palmer's writings when he advocated that chiropractic belonged to the people and that the people would bring about the licensing of chiropractic. Indeed, if you can form an organization and control a certain amount of votes, you can effect changes, spearheaded by politicians, that can be quite beneficial to achieving your goals.

Not only did Werner start, organize and maintain the ABC, but he also started to educate chiropractors who had graduated from other chiropractic schools which did not adequately teach the principles of chiropractic. As these doctors felt the positive influence of the ABC, they started to join auxiliaries and encouraged their patients to attend numerous functions.

At the height of the ABC's popularity, a convention was scheduled on Jan. 23, 1932, during the Great Depression, in the old Madison Square Garden in New York. It attracted more than 16,500 lay people and chiropractors, which was the largest gathering of people affiliated with chiropractic in the profession's 100-year history.

As the convention was being planned, Werner suggested the featured speaker should be Dr. B.J. Palmer, his mentor. However, some of the other organizers refused because they had very strong feelings about B.J. and what he represented in chiropractic. This incident caused a rift in the relationship

between B.J. and Werner which took years to be resolved.

Werner remained active with the ABC and also became involved with the International Chiropractors Association (ICA), which he served as vice president while B.J. served as president.

### **WERNER'S COMMITMENT**

The question could be asked, "How could men like Bill Werner, who devoted their energy to the ABC, afford to suffer personal loss of income, due to speaking engagements all over the United States, as a result of not being in practice at his office?"

For years, Dr. Henry Orr practiced in Werner's office and kept the doors open for patients and helped provide the finances needed to conduct business. A low-key person like Orr is another example of chiropractic's "unsung heroes." Orr's son has continued his father's work as a chiropractor in New York and is still active in a chiropractic organization.

The first evidence of the healing of the rift between B.J. and Werner occurred in the mid-1950s, when B.J. was scheduled to be the featured speaker at a chiropractic lay gathering in Vancouver, British Columbia.

At the last moment, B.J.'s advisors urged him to cancel due to his declining health. B.J., who was in his 70s, was burned out from his constant crusade of defending his father's principles. He recom-

mended that Bill Werner take his place at the gathering.

Werner, who had great respect for his mentor, immediately agreed and put all his other commitments aside. Before he was scheduled to speak, he told a group of chiropractors, who were his longtime friends, that he couldn't go on because he was in excruciating physical pain. He had been suffering for the past two years, and the pain had flared up to the point where he felt he could not do justice to his lecture.

Dr. Leonard Rutherford, who had interned at B.J.'s research clinic during the 1930s, said to Werner: "I know you have tried other chiropractors in this past two-year period, but would you allow me to give you a specific adjustment that B.J. had taught me?"

Werner consented, and Rutherford gave him a specific adjustment. The pain subsided enough so that Werner could deliver the speech, and his lecture to the gathering was considered one of his best, because he was tuned into his Innate and into the Innate of the group of laymen who listened to him.

### HEALING HANDS

In August 1959, the annual Lyceum at the Palmer School of Chiropractic was considered the highlight of the year in the development of chiropractic. It was sug-

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gested by B.J. Palmer that *Healing Hands*, his official biography that I wrote, would be unveiled during the Lyceum. No one else within the profession knew the book was to be introduced.

During the 10 years I spent in researching and writing the book, I knew that B.J. was able to generate publicity for the chiropractic profession through his natural showmanship ability. Having been involved in show business myself before becoming a chiropractor, I instinctively had a mural the size of a billboard made of the book jacket. Unbeknownst to the Lyceum committee and through the guidance of B.J., the mural was mounted on plywood, put on the stage and covered over with white sheets.

At the appropriate time, with more than 6,000 chiropractors and guests in attendance in a big circus tent for the Lyceum functions, B.J. unveiled the mural of the *Healing Hands* book jacket and announced his official biography. More than 1,000 copies of the book were sold during the two-day Lyceum.

What was the big plus for the introduction of *Healing Hands* was that B.J. Palmer and Bill Werner were the featured speakers at the Lyceum.

It was an event that I cherish to this day.

### PASSING OF A HERO

Werner died in October 1959 while in Ohio for a speaking

engagement. Born in 1890, he passed away just short of his 70th birthday.

I have never challenged what I consider divine providence, but Werner speaking at Lyceum was an omen to me to evaluate the relationship between him and his mentor, B.J. Palmer.

The ABC continued on for six more years until 1965, when it was abandoned. The program that Werner originated on June 27, 1927, had served its purpose. It seems that everything has a season, and that era was the season for the ABC and Bill Werner.

*For information regarding the audiotapes of Dr. William Werner's lecture in Vancouver, write to the Health Education Publishing Corporation, Box 2388, Eugene, OR 97402.*

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*About the author: Joseph E. Maynard, D.C., Ph.C., a graduate of Palmer School of Chiropractic, is a recognized historian of the chiropractic profession. He is the author of the official biography of the Palmer family, *Healing Hands*, which is now in its fourth edition and is a standard text at some chiropractic colleges and universities throughout the world. He is a founding member of the Association for the History of Chiropractic and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Life Foundation. He is currently working on a history of the chiropractic profession. Inquiries should be addressed to him at P.O. Box 1621, LaPine, OR 97739.*