

The Resurrectionists

BY JAMES TOBIN

A FEW DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

1857, near the hamlet of Cambridge Junction southwest of Ann Arbor, a discovery was made by men arriving for work on the construction of a church. They found an unholy mess — tufts of hair, bloody smears, signs of heavy objects being dragged across the floor. And in the little graveyard beyond, heaps of fresh earth next to empty graves.

A deputy sheriff went directly to Ann Arbor, news accounts said. Everybody knew the trail of a grave-robber in southern Michigan usually led to the University of Michigan. Sure enough, students were found hiding the bodies.

Established in 1848, the Department of Medicine boasted a fast-growing student population and a fine faculty. The two stars were physicians Moses Gunn, M.D., a tall, outspoken figure, and Corydon Ford, M.D., “timid and cautious,” who “feared nothing more than to do wrong.” The two had been roommates at Geneva Medical College in New York, where Ford was a young instructor and Gunn his student. Hearing that Michigan’s new university planned to offer a medical degree, they dreamed of landing professorships. Gunn got the first appointment, arriving by stagecoach reportedly with a cadaver swiped from Geneva; Ford soon followed.

The two professors lived with the paradox that confronted all instructors of anatomy and surgery of that era. To teach the saving of lives, they had no choice but to escort medical students on a thorough exploration of human anatomy. But at a time of widespread faith in the literal resurrection of every Christian body, there was no legitimate way to obtain cadavers for the purpose of dissection.

The upshot was an excruciating moral compromise. To advance the science of healing, anatomists and surgeons stole corpses — or, more precisely, they established criminal conspiracies by which other men were paid to do so. These entrepreneurs were often known, with a gallows wink, as “resurrectionists.”

Responsibility for procurement fell to a series of assistants, most of them recent graduates, with the title of demonstrator in anatomy. One of them, Edmund Andrews, M.D., later recalled his predicament in a memoir.

“I found my duties peculiar,” Andrews wrote. “I was a state officer charged with the duty of getting the material, but there was a statute consigning me to prison if I did my duty.”

Andrews settled on two principles. First, figuring that no one would pursue him for the loss of a “pauper cadaver,” he worked only with the supervisors of “potter’s fields” — burying grounds for the unclaimed dead — and poorhouse cemeteries, mostly in Detroit and western Wayne County. Second, he made sure to procure only

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out-of-towners, so that “the receiving point at Ann Arbor” might “be kept perfectly calm and friendly.

“It was pretty hard work at first,” Andrews recalled, “and I had to get up 13 cadavers with my own hands the first winter. I was chased sometimes by constables but never caught, and I supplied the University.”

But as medical classes swelled just after the Civil War, demand increased. Ford, overwhelmed with the burden of acquisition, complained about it to Regent Thomas Dwight Gilbert.

In the early days, Ford said, when only 10 or 15 bodies a year had been needed, the costs and the danger of exposure had been relatively low. Now, with each student needing his own specimen, the annual total was rising to at least 125. Ford’s demonstration was forced to forage farther afield.

“He must find men willing to undertake such illegal and dangerous work,” Ford said. “After a body is received, it must be boxed, carted, and transported. All by unreliable persons who must be bribed!”

In 1867, the lid, so to speak, was nearly blown off. Moses Gunn had feuded with the Regents for years over his proposal to move the medical department to Detroit. Now, leaving for a new post in Chicago, he purportedly took with him the University’s entire inventory of some 40 cadavers. When the Regents threatened legal action, Gunn called their bluff, saying they would never pursue him for fear of exposing the University’s traffic in cadavers.

Apparently Gunn had the Regents pegged; he worked with impunity in Chicago for another 20 years. But



his brash deed likely had a good deal to do with Michigan’s Anatomy Act of 1867, by which institutions with unclaimed bodies on their hands were required to hand them over to doctors, preferably at the U-M. This act, many times amended and improved, led to the modern regime under which bodies are donated (never sold) under tight regulation, and annual memorial services are held to honor the contributions of the dead in the training of future physicians.

Sources include: Donald F. Huelke, “The History of the Department of Anatomy of the University of Michigan,” U-M Medical Bulletin, Jan.-Feb. 1961; Robert Kedzie, “The Early Days of the Medical Department,” and Henry M. Hurd, “The Medical Department in 1865,” Michigan Alumnus, Feb. 1902; “Body Snatching,” Ann Arbor Local News and Advertiser, 12/29/1857; Linda Robinson Walker, “Grave Subjects: The Birth of the University of Michigan Medical School,” Michigan Today, Fall 1999; and Mary Roach, Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers (Norton, 2004).



TOP: Female medical students, referred to at the time as “hen medics,” perform anatomy dissections, circa 1893. Male and female students had separate dissection rooms until 1908. **BOTTOM:** An anatomy classroom in March 1865; standing are Abram Sager, Alonzo Palmer, Corydon Ford, Moses Gunn and Silas Douglas, five of the Medical School’s original faculty members.