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The Goat-Gland Doctors of Rosalia

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A DREAM THAT HAS COME TRUE

A huge and beautiful hospital, watched over by a great surgeon, a man who understood and sympathized with the sufferings and the hardships of men and women. A hospital with the very finest and most modern medical and surgical equipment obtainable, a staff of highly trained specialists; a hospital to which men and women, broken in health, with hope almost gone, could come for relief of their worry and restoration of their health; a hospital that would be a veritable mecca for thousands harassed by the suffering and anguish of sickness.

Such was the dream of a barefooted boy years ago, as he halted to lean against the handle of the plow with which he was "breaking ground" on a mountain farm. He was only twelve. It was a heart breaking task even for a strong man. But the lad had a will of iron. He couldn't give up. The spirit of his departed father told him he must go on. The boy revered the memory of his kind and gentle parent. And there was Aunt Sally too. The sweet old lady with whom he lived in the small but neat cabin tucked away down in the

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The Goat-Gland Doctors of Rosalia



Many Kansans are familiar with the name John R. Brinkley, notorious doctor from Milford, known for his goat-gland transplant procedure in the early 1900s. However, few are aware that the small town of Rosalia has ties to his name and, more specifically, his chief surgeon, O. M. Owensby.

By the early 1920s, Brinkley had perfected his goat-gland transplant, a "charger" for men who were impotent. Claiming to transplant an artery, a nerve, and some gland tissue from the testicles of goats to men, he made a name for himself and his Milford hospital, with over 4,000 supposedly cured patients by 1926. However, problems arose. The American Medical Association accused him of "blatant quackery," while the Kansas Medical Society revoked his medical license for "gross immorality...malpractice and unprofessional conduct." The U. S. Postal Service accused him of mail fraud, and the federal government revoked the broadcasting license for his radio station KFKB for peddling his medicines over the air. By 1930, Brinkley would perform no more transplants in Kansas.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A DREAM THAT HAS COME TRUE
 ABOVE: DR. JOHN R. BRINKLEY STAMP

All images courtesy Kansas State Historical Society

Brinkley, however, continued to hire others who were licensed in Kansas to perform the transplants. Among them was Dr. O. M. Owensby, who left a private practice in Pittsburg, Kansas, in 1930 on a one-year experimental basis at Milford. At the end of the year, he left Milford and opened his own practice in Arkansas, but Brinkley lured him back after only three months, promising him a high salary. That lasted less than a year before Owensby was forced to leave again, this time over disagreements with Brinkley. Brinkley accused Owensby of treating incurable patients. Owensby saw it the opposite way, seeing Brinkley as accepting patients that could not be helped by the transplant, only wanting their money. He felt there were many dishonest activities going on at the hospital, and he had personal reasons for leaving. Owensby resigned, along with Dr. C. H. Dragoo and Brinkley's office manager, Lyman Denver.

At this point Owensby chose to open his own hospital in Rosalia, which was experiencing the Great Depression like

much of the rest of the country. The oil boom, which had made Rosalia into a prosperous town of 600 residents, had declined, the bank had closed, and local farmers and ranchers were suffering from the drought. Upon leaving Milford, Dr. Owensby established his Rosalia hospital in the former Liggett Hotel, a three-story structure built during the oil boom at a cost of over \$100,000. Having renovated it to accommodate thirty-five patients, he opened the Owensby Sanitarium in March 1932, specializing in the famous goat-gland transplant. He stressed to the *El Dorado Times* that "Dr. Brinkley is in no way associated with the venture."

Why choose Rosalia? Mary Owensby, widow of Dr. Owensby, said in an interview in 1984 that the hotel was suitable for a small hospital, and it was available at a reasonable price. Also, a passenger train and good highway ran through the town, and the Owensbys liked the school and the town's proximity to El Dorado and its shopping. The



DR. JOHN R. BRINKLEY AND SURGICAL TEAM

family settled into the hospital with their five sons and one daughter.

Owensby ran a thriving business, with the hospital filled to capacity several times. Patients stayed for one week; they were ambulatory and ate all meals in the dining room with the family. Owensby charged \$600, which was \$150 less than the \$750 Brinkley had charged at Milford. Still, the operation was mainly limited to successful businessmen during the Depression. Patients came from all parts of the country for the surgery; cars bearing license plates from many different states and Canada could be found parked in front of the hospital. Rosalians wondered

what type of man would pay so much money for such an operation, although it was later discovered that at least one local man had had the surgery.

Howard Brickley, a teenage boy who lived just west of the hospital, raised the goats for Owensby. Howard said he had approximately fifty nanny goats in a pasture west of town and bought young billy goats wherever he could find them. Each morning Owensby chose the goats he needed for the day, and Howard took them to a small pen adjacent to the hospital. After Owensby removed the testicles, Howard sold the one-month-old goats or gave them away. He said

five dollars per goat was good money during the Depression. Rosalia was once again bustling as it had during the oil boom ten years earlier.

Brinkley, unhappy with his former employee's success, accused Owensby of stealing the names and addresses of 5,000 prospective patients and complained that his family had "suffered so much and lost almost everything." According to townspeople, Owensby ignored Brinkley's accusations, which had no effect on the residents' opinions of Owensby. The family were said to be great workers and donors to the Christian Church, and they joined in activities of the community, with the children involved in school events. The family organized games for the town on Independence Day 1932. Owensby drilled four water wells across the street from the hospital and later donated them to the school. He took local men to Alaska to mine for gold, joking that they found only mosquitoes. Rosalians did not discuss Owensby's practice



BRINKLEY HOSPITAL IN
ROSALIA, KANSAS
Ralph E. Lake

among themselves, other than to smile and joke about it, mainly because the family was a nice addition to the town.

Rosalia buzzed with excitement in October 1933, when Brinkley announced he would also open a hospital in Rosalia, using a new secret serum treatment, not transplants. His hospital opened on the second floor of a drug store, directly across the street from Owensby's hospital, with a sign on the building's side which read, "New and Improved Brinkley Compound Operation Offered to You Here for \$250." Brinkley himself did not come to town; he hired a former doctor at Owensby's hospital as his physician.

Rosalians did not welcome Brinkley's

hospital, which they felt was there solely to run Owensby out of business. Moreover, they had no choice but to listen to Brinkley's Mexican radio station XER; a public address system placed on the side of his hospital blasted XER all over town. They also questioned Brinkley's reputation.

For four months, the two hospitals competed for patients. Suddenly on January 31, 1934, the Brinkley hospital closed its doors, due to a lack of patients. All equipment was moved to Brinkley's hospital in Texas; Kansas no longer was home to Brinkley quackery. According to the *El Dorado Times*, Owensby was doing a thriving business at the time. Owensby himself was spending much time in Milford, having gone back to the town after Brinkley left. By April 1934, the Owensby Sanitarium in Rosalia had closed. Owensby continued to help at the Milford Hospital until later that year when poor health forced him to retire and move to the family farm in Alabama, where he resided until his death in 1956.

With the closing of the two hospitals, Rosalia returned to the daily life of Smalltown, USA, but for two years it had experienced the shot in the arm it needed. The town had been dwindling, and Owensby offered employment to some local people; local businessmen also benefitted with the patients coming to town. The amount of mail arriving and departing Rosalia increased so much that the post office received a higher classification.

The economic boost of the Owensby/Brinkley hospitals may have been short-lasting, but the two doctors served as a diversion from problems of the Depression and gave residents a topic for amusing discussion for years to come.

Jan Farrar, a graduate of Flinthills High School in Rosalia, spent the last twelve of her thirty-four-year teaching career at her alma mater. She is a native of and has done extensive historical research on this area of the Flint Hills. Her goat-gland doctor research has been her favorite topic. She received an M.A. in History from Emporia State University.