

Historical Profiles of Mayo

Dr. Louis B. Wilson, Pioneer Mayo Scientist and Educator

On Oct. 5, 1943, Dr. Louis Blanchard Wilson died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (bulbar type) in Rochester, Minnesota. Thus ended a 38-year career at Mayo that had been filled with accomplishments in various endeavors. Prominent among these activities were education and pathology.

Dr. Wilson's early years helped prepare him for the substantial role he would have in developing new programs in education and research at Mayo. Born on Dec. 22, 1866, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, young Louis was raised in a family whose male members had been killed in the Civil War. Growing up on an uncle's farm, he gained an appreciation of agriculture, botany, and self-sufficiency. After graduation from Pennsylvania State Normal School in 1886, he taught school in several states before he arrived in Minnesota in 1888 to teach biology at Central High School in St. Paul.

Hoping to become a bacteriologist, Wilson enrolled in the University of Minnesota while teaching evening classes at Central High School. After some 7 years of attendance, he received the M.D. degree in 1896. Dr. Wilson then worked for the Minnesota State Board of Health Laboratory until 1905, when he joined the Mayo Clinic to "organize and develop its laboratories."

At Mayo, Dr. Wilson quickly applied his pathology skills and, in 1905, introduced a method of rapid preparation of fresh tissues for the microscope. Utilizing a unique freezing technique, he enabled Mayo surgeons to obtain pathologic results from frozen sections while their patients were still in the operating room. This highly successful technique is still used by Mayo surgical pathologists.

As director of laboratories until 1920, Dr. Wilson helped expand the focus of research at the clinic. Among his own investigations were pathologic studies in exophthalmic and simple goiter. In addition, he developed cameras for laboratory use. Moreover, he fostered the growth of the medical photography and medical graphics sections at Mayo.

When the Mayo brothers established the Mayo Graduate School of Medicine in 1915, Dr. Wilson was appointed its first director. During his 22-year tenure, he successfully developed the first advanced degree program in clinical medicine. That program now has more than 10,000 alumni. Under his leadership, the school became one of the foremost medical education institutions in the world.

In addition to his responsibilities at Mayo, Dr. Wilson served with honor in the US Army during World War I, and developed an interest in wounds produced by various projectiles. In 1928, he served on an army commission that conducted ballistics experiments, some of which were performed on his farm in Rochester.

Among his many professional associations, Dr. Wilson was president of the Association of American Medical Colleges (1931 to 1933) and the National Society of Sigma Xi (1932 to 1934). He was active in fostering the development of medical specialties. He served as president of the Advisory Board for Medical Specialties from 1935 to 1937. He was also a member of the National Board of Medical Examiners.

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