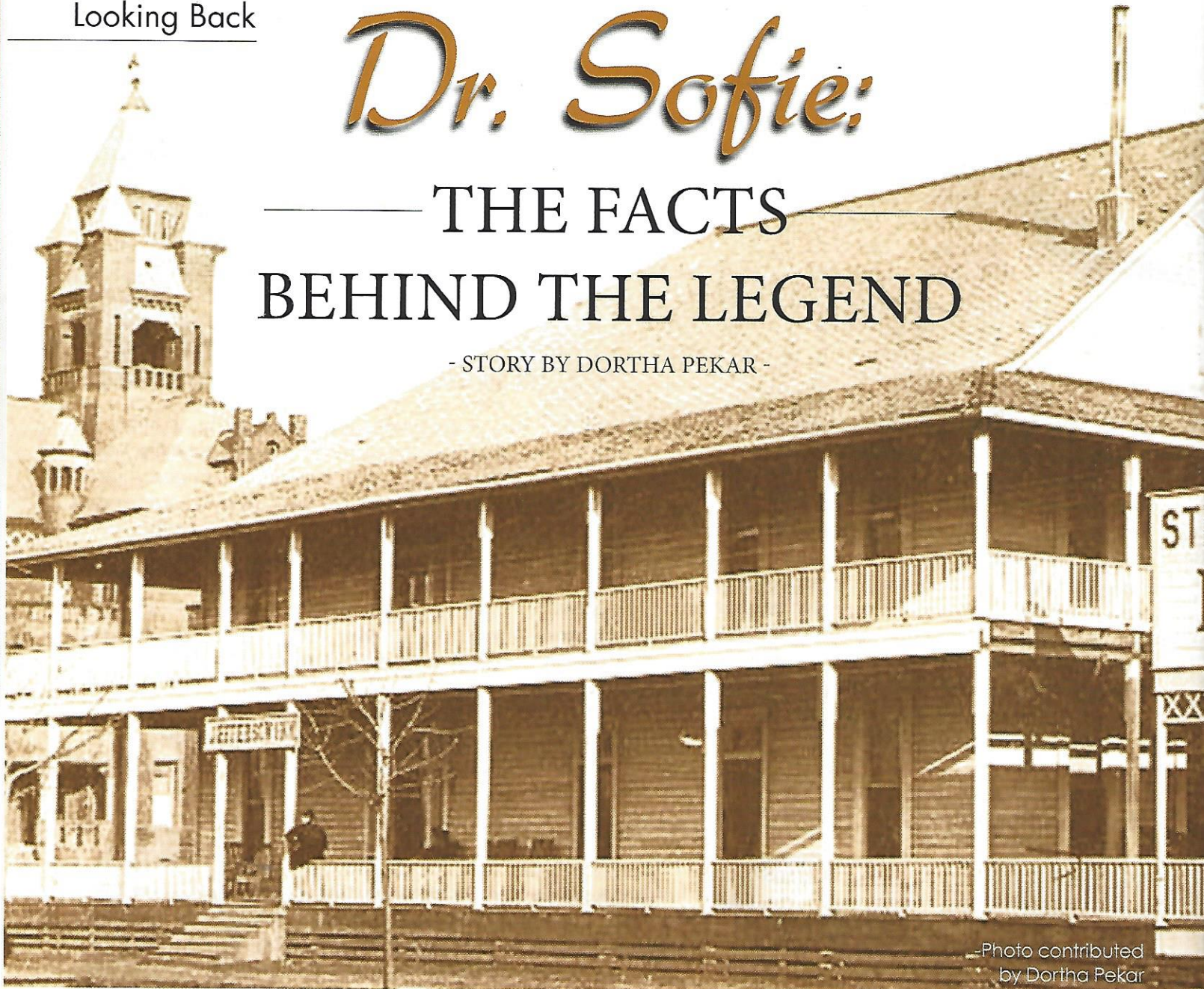


Dr. Sofie:

THE FACTS BEHIND THE LEGEND

- STORY BY DORTHA PEKAR -



-Photo contributed
by Dortha Pekar

Dr. Sofie, one of the first women surgeons in Texas, was recognized by United States and Canadian newspaper articles in 1909-1911 and 1920 as the first female Chief Railroad Surgeon in the world.

Dr. Sofie had practiced medicine in Brazoria for almost ten years when the St. Louis, Brownsville & Mexico Railroad began laying track near Brazoria. Brazoria residents had learned to respect and admire their lady doctor and local railroad officials frequently hired her to treat sick and injured workers on the Bay City to Alcoa segment of the line. When officials back East decided to hire a

Chief Surgeon, local officials hired Dr. Sofie. That created quite a ruckus back East. There had never been a woman railroad surgeon—and that was the way they wanted it!

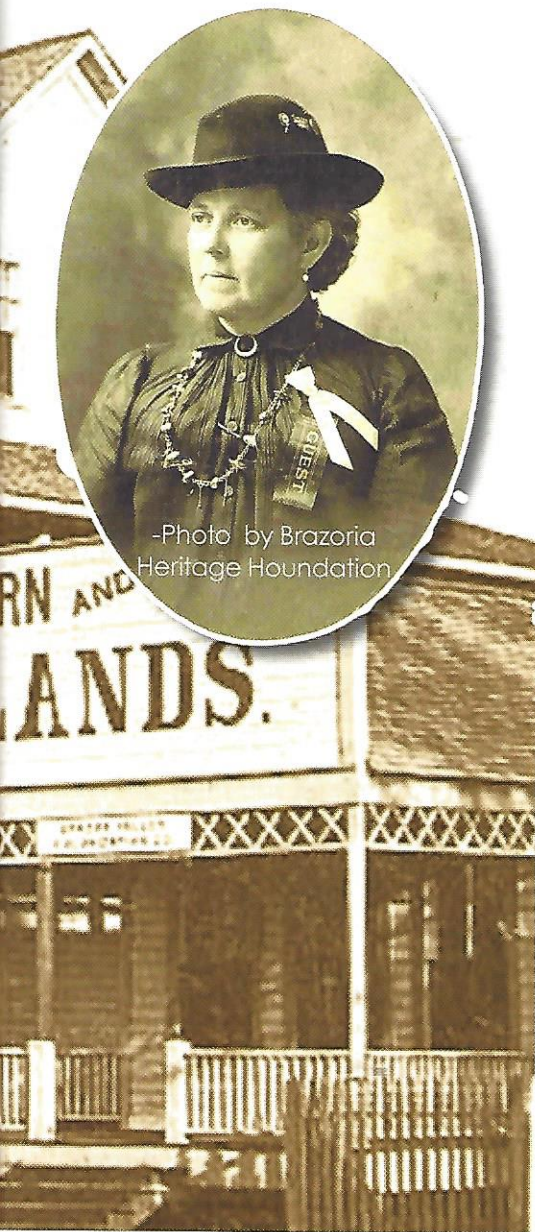
They sent Dr. Sofie a telegram to assure her they realized the position was not suitable for a lady so they would “understand” if she submitted her resignation. Dr. Sofie telegraphed back that she expected no conces-

sions because of her gender and if she failed to do her job they could fire her. She gave them no excuse. The Gulf Coast Line retained her when it took over SLB&M and she continued in that position until she suffered a paralytic stroke on February 1, 1925—three days before her 79th birthday. For almost 18 years Dr. Sofie served, and served well, in the position officials deemed “not suitable for a lady.”

In June of 1925, Dr. Sofie Delia Herzog Huntington was taken to Methodist Hospital in Houston. She died there on July 21, 1925. Her body was returned to Brazoria and buried in Old Town Brazoria's Catholic Cem-

Far left: Hotel that Dr. Sofie built on Market Street, Old Town Brazoria in 1908.

Left: Dr. Sofie portrait c. 1908 in bullet necklace. All rights reserved to Brazoria Heritage Foundation. Photo was a gift from Elizabeth Krause Vondy



-Photo by Brazoria Heritage Foundation

etery. Her obituary in the Missouri Pacific System Lines Magazine concludes with:

"...The employees came to know her well, and many refused to permit anyone else to attend them. This, of course, added to her tasks, but she loved the work and never failed to respond...."

"She was highly esteemed by her fellow members of the State and other medical associations, and frequently occupied prominent positions on their programs. Erection of a memorial to honor her has been suggested."

Dr. Sofie established a successful medical practice in the late nineteenth century. That was neither an easy nor acceptable task for a lady--not even for the daughter of a prominent Viennese physician. She inspired both admiration and controversy during her long career.

Sofie Delia was born in Vienna, Austria on February 4, 1846. Vienna was one of the greatest medical centers in the world and Sofie was born into a medical dynasty. In a 1915 interview with the Fort Worth Telegram she stated there were 21 doctors in her immediate family.

Sofie married Dr. Moritz Herzog in 1860. They had 15 children. Moritz died in 1887 and only four children survived her. Somehow, between the births and deaths, Dr. Sofie studied medicine. She began practicing on May 4, 1871. On May 18, 1921 this short article appeared in the "Brazoria Column" of the Angleton Times:

"On May 4th Dr. HH (Herzog-Huntington) celebrated her 50th anniversary as a practicing physician and treated all patients free on that day."

What happened on May 4, 1871 that caused Dr. Sofie to consider herself a doctor? Austria did not award a medical degree to a woman until 1897. The archivists at the Institut Fur Geschichte Der Medizin Der Universitat Wien suggested she might have studied in Vienna since her father and husband were doctors, but all insisted she would have been required to go to Zurich or Paris for her promotion. Although the event is unknown, Dr. Sofie obviously considered it significant.

In the 1886 Hoboken, N.J. City Directory, Dr. Sofie is listed as a midwife; in 1887 she is listed as a physician. She graduated from Eclectic Medical College of the City of New York on May 9, 1895. Notes in the school's brochure state that many of their students were practicing physicians.

The Evening News and Hoboken (1893) lists Dr. Sofie as one of 30 "gentlemen" practicing medicine in Hoboken. It says that Dr. Sofie settled in Hoboken in 1885 and "in the interim secured a practice of no mean proportions."

In February, 1895, Dr. Sofie left her successful practice in Hoboken to follow her youngest surviving daughter, Elfriede Herzog Prell and her newborn grandson, Randolph, Jr. to Brazoria. The dirt roads and wide-open spaces of Brazoria presented a new set of challenges for the 49-year-old physician. It is difficult to imagine how Dr. Sofie, used to the cobbled streets of Vienna and Hoboken, felt as she surveyed the dirt roads of Brazoria and realized that many of her patients would be miles, not blocks, from her office. Having met many challenges in her life, she immediately took action to conquer this one. She purchased a carriage, a fine pair of horses, and hired a driver. She knew her carriage

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could not navigate the dirt roads of Brazoria during wet weather and that it would be useless on the dirt paths of the Brazos and San Bernard River bottoms. Dr. Sofie was practical. She commissioned a seamstress to make her a bifurcated skirt so she could ride astride her horse like the men. Brazoria was no place for a sidesaddle.

Brazoria ladies were shocked! A woman doctor in a split skirt riding astride her horse and sporting a mannish, wide-brim hat over short, curly hair—why the whole thing was scandalous. She quickly became the main topic of conversation.

Many sources indicate that Dr. Sofie was the only physician in Brazoria. She was not. The 1896 Medical and Surgical Register of the United States lists William J. Ezell, Mason L. Weems and Dr. Sofie Herzog as Brazoria physicians. Registration of physicians in Brazoria County began in 1908. That year the register lists J. G. Smith, Wastella, Sofie Herzog, C.C. Hampil, and M. L. Weems, IV in Brazoria and three doctors in West Columbia. With so much competition and a general reluctance to accept female doctors,

Dr. Sofie's early cases were probably limited to births, emergencies, and illnesses among the less prosperous members of the community. Many emergencies were gunshot wounds. Dr. Sofie developed her own method for extracting bullets and her success with it was phenomenal. Twenty-two months after she arrived in Brazoria Dr. Sofie was invited to share her technique with the South Texas Medical Association. It differed significantly from the standard treatment:

“...when I have arrived, I inquire how the shooting was done, position of the person, distance, Winchester or pistol. I never probe. I desire that the bullet shall come to me, and I never failed to get it. I have lived in Brazoria for twenty-two months, and during this time I have been called in fifteen times to remove bullets and twice for shot. I got the bullet out every time, and never lost a case....”

Abdominal wounds were particularly challenging and her presentation included extensive detail on them. She was particularly proud that she had saved a patient with an ab-



-Photo contributed
by Dortha Pekar

Dr. Sofie c. 1913

dominal wound after a male doctor had given up on him. Near the end of the presentation she remarked:

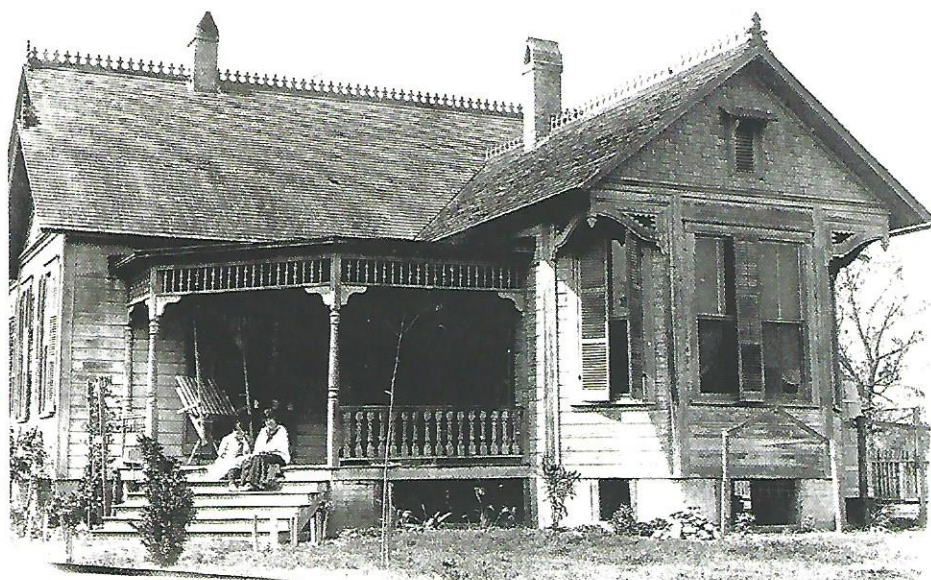
“I have had some severe cases, but all were out by the twelfth day. If you come to Brazoria I will show you my seventeen men who are well and ready to shoot as well as to be shot at any time.”

In 1897, Dr. Sofie became the first female member of the South Texas Medical Association; in 1903 she was elected vice-president. She knew her skill at removing bullets was a reason she was accepted as a doctor and surgeon. She began saving the bullets, calling them her “good luck pieces”. Over the years she had 24 (or 26) of them made into a necklace that was one of her most prized possessions.

During her thirty years in Brazoria Dr. Sofie built a hotel, bought real estate, opened a free library in her pharmacy and is said to have quietly encouraged deserving young people who could not afford college. In 1905 she built an Episcopal Church in Brazoria. An entry in Records of the Registrar: Diocese of Texas, Register of Parishes reads:

“March 14, 1905, Bishop Kinsolving consecrated St. John's Church, Brazoria, preached and celebrated the Holy Communion. Brazoria is one of the oldest settlements in Texas, but with the exception of a Union Chapel there has never been a church building of any kind in the town. We owe the present church building largely to the exertions

Spring 2017



-Photo contributed
by Dortha Pekar

From: R. Prell scrapbook

**The Prell House, Main Street, Old Town
Brazoria was the location of Dr. Sofie's
first office**

and liberality of a foreign lady, and one not technically a member of our communion. (NOTE: The "foreign lady" was Dr. Sophia Herzog, a Roman Catholic from Austria. She was the grandmother of Mrs. C. H. Harang, Sr. and Mr. Randolph Prell.)"

Dr. Sofie stayed on "the cutting edge" of technology. She drove one of the first automobiles in Brazoria County and when telephones came to Galveston she had one installed in her office. She also kept up with developments in medicine. She belonged to five medical societies and seldom missed a meeting. With her European and Eclectic Medical training, she often disagreed with other members of the societies—and was said to always defend her position well.

Dr. Sofie married Col. Marion Huntington on August 23, 1913. On August 22, they filed a prenuptial agreement at the Brazoria County Courthouse. It gave each of them control of their own property. On that day Dr. Sofie also filed deeds giving most of her real estate to Elfriede.

The Directory of Deceased Physicians, 1804-1929 lists her medical practice as "Eclectic." Everything about Dr. Sofie was eclectic! Her office was filled with rattlesnake and animal skins, animal heads, antlers, stuffed alligators—and with diplomas, beautiful artwork, lace and bric-a-brac. The room included a pharmacy that sold postcards and loaned out modern novels. It also featured a piano.

Dr. Sofie wore beautiful jewelry and a masculine hat; made beautiful laces; collected walking canes from all over the world; and displayed preserved medical oddities in glass jars. Her life was even more eclectic. She combined the roles of mother and grandmother with a demanding career generally reserved for men—and she did it with such style that she became a legend in her own time. ■



"I first encountered Dr. Sofie in 1987. What began as a reference question became a program, and later a passion. The search has taken me to New York City, Hoboken and Vienna."

Her family, patients and friends shared stories, photos, post cards and copies of letters. Newspapers, oral histories and public documents answered some questions and offered new questions. My working title changed to IN SEARCH OF DR. SOFIE. The search has been exciting and it's not over yet."

Dortha Pekar (aka Dr. Sofie) behind Dr. Sofie's Tombstone in Old Town Brazoria Cemetery.

-Photo by Nancy Bertoncelj

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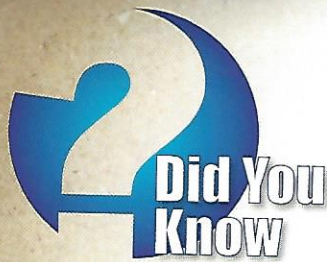
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Dr. Sofie's Birthday Remembrance

celebrations commemorating them become history. That situation was rectified for Dr. Sofie Herzog, on February 4, 2017 on her 171st birthday. Instead of a card and cake, the Brazoria Heritage Foundation and the Brazoria County Historical Commission remembered her with something more permanent: a state historical marker.

Over 112 descendants, friends and dignitaries gathered at Old Town Park, 1001 Market Street in Brazoria.

The marker was a "gift" to both Dr. Sofie and to Brazoria County through the Texas Historical Commission's Undertold History Program. State historical marker designations usually require filling out an application form with the county historical commission, writing a narrative, and paying a \$1500 fee but Brazoria County knew nothing about it until Sandra Pollan, Chair of the Bra-

Everyone likes to be remembered on their birthdays. But when an individual dies, birthdays and

zoria County Historical Commission and Dortha Pekar, Dr. Sofie re-enactor were asked to proof its copy.


This marker's story began with Amanda Zyer, a former employee of the Texas Historical Commission (THC), making application under the state's Undertold Marker Program. The THC accepts nominations for Undertold Marker funding from May 1 – June 15 each year. Dr. Herzog's Marker was among the 2016 applications filed.

Heather M. Haley with the Department of History at Texas State University submitted the required narrative. There is no record of anyone paying the associated fees, but the marker was made.

Dr. Sofie's "gift" was presented on her birthday after dignitaries including Sandra Pollan, Bob Schwebel, David Jordan, State Representative Dennis Bonnen, Brazoria Mayor BobbyJo Newell, and great - great grandson, Randy Harang addressed the crowd. But Mayor Newell had one last birthday tribute, she proclaimed February 4, 2017 was Dr. Sofie Herzog Day in Brazoria. ■


- By Janice R. Edwards





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