

Dr. Sofie Herzog
by Dortha Riggs Pekar c. May, 2004

<http://brazoriahf.org/site/museum/dr-sofie-herzog/>

Establishing a medical practice was not an easy task for a lady in the late 19th century, not even for the daughter of a prominent Vienna physician. Sofie Deligath (this spelling of her maiden name seems to be in error, but it is from the earliest record available at this time—U S records give her maiden name as “DELIA”) was born in Vienna, Austria on Feb. 4, 1846. At that time Vienna was considered one of the greatest medical centers in the world; and Sofie was born into a medical dynasty. During a 1920 interview with the FORT WORTH TELEGRAM Dr. Sofie stated that there were 21 doctors in her immediate family. One of these was her husband Dr. Moritz Herzog. They married in 1860 and over the next 19 years Dr. Sofie gave birth to 15 children (including 3 sets of twins). Eight of her 15 children died before she came to America. Somehow, between the many births and deaths, Dr. Sofie managed to study medicine. Dr. Sofie considered May 4, 1871 to be the date that she began practicing medicine. This is probably the date that she received her midwifery certificate. While she may have been allowed to study at the University of Vienna since her father and husband were doctors, Austria did not knowingly award a degree to a woman until 1897.

Dr. Sofie is listed as a midwife in the 1886 HOBOKEN, NJ CITY DIRECTORY; in 1887 and following years she is listed as a physician. She graduated from ECCLECTIC MEDICAL COLLEGE OF NEW YORK CITY in 1894. A brochure put out by that college states that most of their students were already practicing physicians. According to THE EVENING NEWS AND HOBOKEN Dr. Sofie had a large and successful practice in Hoboken by the time the book was published in 1893. While one other female, Dr. Marea H Brokaus, is included in the 30 doctors listed the introduction refers to the whole group as “gentlemen”.

In February of 1895 or 1896, Dr. Sofie followed her youngest surviving daughter and her young grandson to Brazoria, Texas. The rutted dirt roads and wide-open spaces of Brazoria presented a whole new set of challenges for the 49-year-old physician. It is hard to imagine how Dr. Sofie, used to the cobbled streets of Vienna and Hoboken, felt as she surveyed Brazoria’s muddy streets and realized that many of her new patients would be miles, not blocks, from her office. She immediately began adapting to these challenges. First she purchased a carriage and a fine pair of horses; then she hired a driver. Dr. Sofie realized that her buggy could not quickly navigate the dirt roads of Brazoria or the dirt paths of the Brazos and San Bernard River bottoms during the “rainy season” which caused ruts that were so deep that the buggy bottoms might skim along on a bed of mud. This was a major problem since Brazoria’s “rainy season” could be, and often was, any season of the year.

Dr. Sofie was a very practical lady, so she commissioned a local seamstress to make her a split skirt to make it easy for her to ride astride a horse like the men. Brazoria, she decided, was no place for a sidesaddle!

The Brazoria ladies were shocked! A woman doctor who wore a split skirt, rode horseback like a man, and wore a mannish, wide-brim hat over short, curly hair-why the whole thing was scandalous! She quickly became the main topic of conversation in town.

Dr. Sofie was not the only doctor in Brazoria, and, while midwives had long delivered most of the babies in the area other medical matters were considered best left to men. Dr. Sofie's early cases probably consisted of births, emergencies, and illnesses among the less prosperous members of the community. Many of the emergencies were gunshot wounds. Dr. Sofie's success in treating them was phenomenal. She had been in Brazoria only 22 months when she was invited to address the South Texas Medical Society about her method of removing bullets. In that address she stated that she had already removed 15 bullets and 2 rounds of buckshot using her method without losing a single patient.

Probably after a shooting accident in Hoboken that involved her son, Dr. Sofie had decided that the traditional method of removing bullets—probing—often caused death. If she probed at all she used only a sterile finger. She would then position the patient so that gravity would “bring the bullet to her”. In the case of abdominal wounds she reported that she would hang the patient a couple of inches above the bed. In every case she reported that the bullet “came to her” within 24 hours and that every one of her first 17 patients was up and about by the 12th day “ready to shoot or be shot at any time.” By 1897, Dr. Sofie was the first female member of the South Texas Medical Association and in 1903 she was elected vice-president of the organization.

According to newspaper articles during her lifetime, Dr. Sofie was the first woman Railroad Surgeon for a major railroad in the world. In 1904, the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railroad began building a railroad in the Brazoria area. By this time, Dr. Sofie had earned the respect of the local officials, and she was frequently called to treat sick and injured workers up and down the line. When the officials back East decided it was time to hire a surgeon for the Brazoria area, local officials immediately hired Dr. Sofie. That caused quite a ruckus back East. There had never been a woman railroad surgeon, and that was the way they wanted it. The officials sent Dr. Sofie a nice little telegram that said they would “understand” if she resigned since the position was not suitable for a lady. Dr. Sofie fired back a telegram assuring them that she needed no special treatment because of her gender, and they were welcome to fire her if she did not perform her duties. Apparently she never gave them any cause to fire her as she kept the position until she suffered a paralytic stroke a few months before her death.

Dr. Sofie apparently decided her skill at removing bullets was the main reason she was accepted as a surgeon, so she began saving the bullets she removed. She called them her “good luck pieces” and eventually had 24 (or 26) of them made into a necklace which was one of her most prized possessions.

During her thirty years in Brazoria Dr. Sofie built a hotel; bought and sold real-estate; opened a free library, and is rumored to have quietly given financial aid to deserving

students who could not otherwise afford college. She also built an Episcopal Church after a dispute with a priest over the condition of the Catholic Cemetery.

Dr. Sofie liked to keep on “the cutting edge” of technology. She drove one of the first automobiles in Brazoria County and when telephones began to be installed in Galveston, she had one installed in her office in Brazoria. In 1913, at the age of 67 she married Col. Marion Huntington of Ellersly Plantation. Shortly before the wedding a prenuptial agreement drawn up giving each of them total control of their separate property—the agreement which was filed at the courthouse sounds just like those filed today. In case the prenuptial wasn’t good enough, Dr. Sofie filed deeds giving most of her real estate to her daughter Elfreide on the same day that she filed the prenuptial! Dr. Sofie also kept up with developments in medicine. She belonged to 5 medical societies and seldom missed a meeting of any of them. With her European training, she often took issue with other members of the societies—and was said to always do a very good job of stating her side of the case!

Since women doctors were still a novelty, she was generally the center of attention at conventions—and often the newspapers in the towns where the conventions were held wrote stories about her. While some doctors criticized her over this, she seemed to enjoy the publicity—and while many of those doctors who complained put ads in the local newspapers, Dr. Sofie does not appear to have ever paid for advertising!

THE DIRECTORY OF DECEASED PHYSICIANS lists her “type of practice” as “Eclectic,” defined as “selecting from various sources...” Everything about Dr. Sofie was Eclectic! Her office was filled with rattlesnake skins, animal heads, antlers, alligators—one of them 13 ½ feet long—and diplomas, beautiful artwork, lace, and bric-a-brac. The room included a pharmacy that sold postcards and loaned out books. It also featured a piano. She wore beautiful jewelry and a very masculine hat. She collected walking canes from all over the world and malformed fetuses in bottles from some of the miscarriages she attended. Dr. Sofie’s life was even more eclectic. She combined the role of wife and mother with a demanding career generally reserved for men—and she did it with such style that she became a legend in her own time.