Henry Clay Lewis, Alias "Madison Tensas, M.D., The Louisiana Swamp Doctor"

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ONE of the most intriguing personalities in Southern medical history of the nineteenth century is Dr. Henry Clay Lewis (1825–1850), whose fame rests not on his accomplishments in medicine, but upon his humorous writings published under the pseudonym "Madison Tensas, M.D., the Louisiana Swamp Doctor." Dr. Lewis's amusing sketches describe his experiences as an apprentice, medical student, and doctor. Some of them were widely circulated in newspapers and anthologies of humor in the 1840's. Most of these sketches were collected and republished along with new ones in his one small book, *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor* in 1850.[1] Dr. Lewis's book was reissued six times, and scholars of American humor have called it one of the best examples of the humor of the Old Southwest.[2]

Despite the widespread popularity of Dr. Lewis's writing, the real name of the author was not known until about seventy-five years after his death in 1850, long after the style in popular humor had radically changed. Though the Library of Congress several years ago attributed *Odd Leaves* to Dr. Lewis on the basis of the testimony of a living relative, documentary evidence of his authorship was lacking until I discovered such proof in Madison Parish, Louisiana, in 1953.[3]

In addition to confirming the fact that "Tensas" and Lewis were one and the same, this documentary evidence showed that Dr. Lewis's writing, hitherto thought to be exaggerated fiction, is largely autobiographical and is predominantly fact thinly veiled as fiction. This discovery enhances the writing

[1] Philadelphia, A. Hart [formerly Carey & Hart] 1850.

[2] *Odd Leaves* was issued by Carey & Hart, or A. Hart, under copy-right dates of 1843, 1846, 1850, and 1852. The dates of 1843 and 1846 are apparently in error, since the Library of Congress deposit copy of the book is dated 1850. T. B. Peterson, Philadelphia, who apparently bought the plates from Hart, issued the book in 1858 and 1881. Quotations herein are from the 1881 edition.

The most extensive discussion of the humor of the Old Southwest, 1830–1860, appears in Walter Blair's *Native American Humor*, New York, 1937, p. 62–101. See also Arthur P. Hudson, *Humor of the Old Deep South*, New York, 1936, and Franklin J. Meine, *Tall Tales of the Southwest*, New York, 1930.

[3] Court Records, Madison Parish, Tallulah, Louisiana.

as medical and social history of the Southwestern frontier, for Lewis's career, though brief, illustrates graphically experiences common in the training and practice of frontier doctors. A brief summary of Dr. Lewis's life and writings sheds new light on one period of American medical and social history.

I

Henry Clay Lewis was born in Charleston, South Carolina, June 26, 1825. According to family tradition, his grandfather, Henry Lewis, married Judith Disraeli in France, and their one son, David, came to America in 1777 with Lafayette and fought in the American Revolution. David married Rachel Salomon in South Carolina. Of the nine children born to this marriage, Henry Clay was the eighth. Two brothers of the family of four brothers and five sisters are important in Dr. Lewis's later life—Alexander, who was fifteen years older, and Joseph, ten years older. Dr. Lewis's parents moved to Cincinnati when he was quite young, and his mother died there in 1831. His father then went to New Orleans where he died of yellow fever in 1839.[4]

In the sketch "My Early Life," one of his most obviously autobiographical narratives, Dr. Lewis tells of his unhappy life as a boy in the household of an older brother (probably Alexander) in Cincinnati. Tired of chores and tending children, he ran away at the age of ten and hid on a steamboat bound for New Orleans. Without money or friends, he was discovered by the cook who put him to work as a scullery boy. During the following year, 1836–37, he worked on steamboats, eventually becoming a cook and then a cabin boy on a packet running from Vicksburg to Yazoo City, Mississippi.[5] In Yazoo City he discovered his brother Joseph, by that time married and a prosperous merchant, who persuaded the boy to leave the river. Joseph promised to educate his younger brother but lost his fortune in the depression of 1837,[6] and young Lewis was forced to work as a common laborer on farms around Yazoo City for the next five years. "My sixteenth birthday [June 26, 1841]," he says, "was passed in the cotton-field, at the tail of a plough. . . ." Dr. Washington Dorsey of Yazoo City, a friend of Joseph's, became interested in the young man and

[4] Information about Dr. Lewis's ancestry was supplied by three surviving relatives: Mrs. Joel E. Spingarn of New York City, and Mrs. Durland Van Orden of New Jersey, both grandnieces of Dr. Lewis, and by Mr. Lewis Einstein, grandnephew, retired American minister to Czechoslovakia and author of books and articles on American history. Mr. Einstein is skeptical about the family tradition which states that David Lewis came to America with Lafayette.

[5] Yazoo City was called Manchester until about 1842 and therefore appears in *Odd Leaves* (p. 32) as "M——." Though I have been unable to find documentary evidence of Lewis's year on the river, his brother's residence in Yazoo City is a matter of record.

[6] The Chancery Court Records, Yazoo City, show that Joseph Lewis was a member of the mercantile firm of Cusack, Lewis, and Dobbs as early as November 1836, and that he owned several business and residential lots. His firm went broke in 1837 and he sold much of his property.

asked him to become his apprentice. On New Year's Day, 1842, young Lewis proudly became "a student of medicine." Far from being an inexperienced youngster away from home for the first time, young Lewis had been, he said, "a cotton-picker, plough-boy, gin-driver, gentleman of leisure, cabin-boy, cook, scullion, and runaway. . . ."

II

Details of Lewis's apprenticeship exist almost entirely in his humorous sketches. Though Dr. Dorsey was only twenty-nine years old in 1842, he seemed much older to his apprentice. Evidently a popular physician, his name appears in the columns of *The Yazoo Democrat* as a member of political committees (often with Joseph Lewis) and as a member of the library committee. He once gave $100 toward construction of a Catholic church in the town, though he was not a Catholic. He was better equipped than many doctors of the day to provide educational facilities for apprentices, for he owned a medical library of one hundred and forty volumes and a set of unbound medical journals. He also owned Franklin's *Works* in ten volumes and the *Madison Papers* in three.[7] Lewis described Dorsey as having a "burley form" and as being "precise and particular," though capable of enjoying a joke.

Dr. Dorsey shared an office with other doctors in a building which included various consulting rooms and sleeping quarters for the apprentices. In one of the sketches Lewis describes part of the office:

> The room in which we were was the operating one of the office, where patients were examined, and surgical operations performed. It was furnished with all the usual appliances of such an establishment. In the middle of the room, securely fastened to the floor by screws, was a large arm-chair, with head-board and straps, to confine the body and limbs of the patient whilst the operator was at work, in such cases as required it. On either side of the house, driven into the wall, were a couple of iron bolts, to which were fastened blocks and pulleys, used when reducing old dislocations, when all milder means had failed. (p. 83–84)

Lewis slept in a back room and took his meals at Dr. Dorsey's residence. In the office also were the medicines,[8] and one of Lewis's first tasks was to memorize a formidable list of medical names. He later turned this task into one of his most amusing sketches, "Getting Acquainted with the Medicines." He tells of his horror upon discovering that an indigent Choctaw Indian drank from a bottle marked "poison" while he was not looking. Fearing that the Indian was

[7] Inventory of Personal Property of Dr. Washington Dorsey, Chancery Court Records, Yazoo City. Dr. Dorsey's medical library was valued at $250.00.

[8] Ibid. These records show that Dr. Dorsey owned medicines valued at $173.14 at his death in 1845. Among the memorials to Dr. Dorsey published in *The Yazoo Democrat*, October 8, 1845, is a report of the "Meeting of the Physicians" expressing regrets. Dr. B. R. Wilkinson, Benton, Miss., acted as chairman and Dr. H. B. Kidd, Yazoo City, was secretary. Drs. James and Barnett, presumably of Yazoo City, were mentioned. Some of the Yazoo City doctors may well have shared the office with Dorsey. Lewis refers (*Odd Leaves*, p. 39) to a "Dr. B." and "Dr. L."

poisoned and being unable to locate the doctor, Lewis called in all the apprentices who soon were in a fight because they could not agree on what to do for the Indian. When Dr. Dorsey returned, he explained that the "poison" was merely his whiskey which he had so labeled to keep the apprentices out of it.

In his "The Doctor in the Old South," William D. Postell states that the apprentice "made the rounds with his 'master,' learned to mix powders and make pills, bleed, cup, pull teeth, and do bedside nursing."[9] Lewis appears to have done most of these things. For example, in "Cupping on the Sternum," his first published piece, written while he was in medical school, Lewis says:

> I had been a student of medicine about three weeks, and had got as far as cupping, cathartics, and castor oil, in the noble science of physic, when. . . I received a note from my preceptor which ran thus:—
>
> Mr. L.—You will please take the large cups and scarificator, together with a large blister, up to Mr. J., and cup his negro girl Chaney very freely over the *sternum*; after you have cupped her, apply the blister over the same, as she has inflammation of the lungs.[10]

The apprentice, ignorant of the terminology, applied the remedy on what he considered the "sternum" with the obviously amusing results.

Another sketch, "The Day of Judgment," shows that Lewis went on calls with Dr. Dorsey and did bedside nursing. A planter returned from New Orleans with measles but feared that he had the dreaded smallpox. Dr. Dorsey calmed the patient with "a liberal administration of the brandy bottle" and left Lewis to attend the man through the night.

> . . . I strutted about [Lewis says], proud in the consciousness of being attending physician It being my first appearance in that capacity, you may imagine that the patient did not suffer for want of attention. I wore the enamel off his teeth by the friction produced by requiring the protrusion of his tongue for examination, and examined his abdomen so often to detect hidden inflammation, that I almost produced, by my pommeling, what I was endeavoring to discover. In spite of the disease and the doctor, the case continued to improve. . . (p. 60)

The rumor of smallpox had spread by the next morning and the alarmed citizens besieged the apprentice with requests for vaccinations. The poverty-stricken apprentice was not averse to making some money.

> Charging a dollar for each operation, children half price, I was reaping a harvest of small change, when the virus gave out, and plenty of calls still on hand. Knowing that there was no small-pox in the first instance, and apprehensive that the fears of the good folks, unless they imagined themselves protected, might produce bad effects, I committed a pious fraud, and found on the back of my horse, which fortunately had been galled lately, an ample supply of virus. (p. 60–61)

Though this may be humorous exaggeration, Lewis was capable of such a "pious fraud," as official records show. Among papers relating to Dr. Dorsey's estate is a bill for Dr. Dorsey's medical services to Joseph Lewis's family for

[9] *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 51: 393, July, 1952.

[10] *Spirit of the Times*, 15: 25, Aug. 16, 1845. This sketch was introduced as a "Leaf from the Life of a Medical Student," and was signed "H.C.L., Yazoo City, Miss."

the period 1842–1844 which bears the statement, "rec Payment, W. Dorsey, pr. H. C. Lewis." Joseph marked out a charge for vaccination of his wife and three children under date of March 2, 1843. He wrote a letter to the curator of Dorsey's estate enclosing the bill and stating that he refused to pay the lined-out item, because "my Brother done [sic] it more out of fun than anything else and Dr. Dorsey ordered him to deduct it. . . ."[11] Evidently apprentice Lewis had, as a joke, vaccinated his sister-in-law and her children with some harmless fluid.

Lewis's apprenticeship obviously followed the general pattern of beginning medical training as outlined by Postell in "The Doctor in the Old South." Lewis seems, however, to have served a longer apprenticeship than was usual, for his autobiographical references indicate that he started his service with Dr. Dorsey on January 1, 1842, and he is not shown as a medical student at Louisville until the fall of 1844. Since both Lewis's brother and Dr. Dorsey experienced serious financial reverses in the later 1830's and early 1840's, it may be that there simply was not enough money to send Lewis to medical school until 1844. However that may be, his apprenticeship was apparently seldom dull, though he sometimes complained of lack of clothes and money.

III

In the early autumn of 1844, nineteen-year-old Lewis journeyed to Louisville, Kentucky, to begin his two years as a medical student at Louisville Medical Institute. He traveled by steamboat down the Yazoo River to Vicksburg, thence up the Mississippi and the Ohio to the city at the Falls of the Ohio. Doubtless the journey aroused memories of his life on the river nine years earlier. The Mississippi was still muddy and treacherous, but travel on the river had changed. Steamboats, some of them unbelievably luxurious, jostled each other on the river and set the slow keelboats and flatboats a-bobbing in their wake.

The young man on one of those north-bound steamers that autumn had changed also. Nine years before he had been a precocious boy, a mere servant who was certain to be reprimanded for the moments he stole from his work to read books and whose ambition for an education seemed unattainable. Now, a tall, carefully dressed young man with a fuzz of a mustache, he was a dignified medical student, a passenger who could relax and enjoy the trip.

Louisville had also changed in the nine years. Now a thriving metropolis of 40,000 people, it could boast, among other things, of being the home of the largest medical school in the West, the Louisville Medical Institute, soon to become the Medical Department of the University of Louisville. Only eight years old in 1844, the Institute had grown rapidly to an enrollment of over 400 students, a larger enrollment "than any two schools of the West or South and but few

[11] Chancery Court Records, Yazoo City, Miss.

less than any one of the old established schools of the East."[12] The accessibility of the city to steamboats doubtless contributed to the growth of the school, but its unusually competent faculty also attracted students. Lewis had the good fortune of attending the school when its faculty was at its strongest, before the quarrels of 1849 almost wrecked the school. He began his first four-month session in November 1844, attending probably all of the six daily lectures. The faculty shown in the 1844–1845 catalogue then included:

Jedediah Cobb, Professor of Anatomy, and Dean of the Faculty
Charles Caldwell, Professor of the Institutes of Medicine and Medical Jurisprudence
Samuel D. Gross, Professor of Surgery
Henry Miller, Professor of Obstetrics and Diseases of Women and Children
Charles Wilkins Short, Professor of Materia Medica and Medical Botany
Lunsford Pitts Yandell, Professor of Chemistry and Pharmacy
Daniel Drake, Professor of Pathology and Practice of Medicine
George W. Bayless, Demonstrator of Anatomy, and Dissector in Pathological Anatomy.

Of these professors, some important in nineteenth century medicine, the famous Dr. Drake made the most lasting impression on Lewis. Though Drake is never mentioned by name in Lewis's writing, it is easy to penetrate the thin veil the author throws over this great professor's name. It is also possible to identify several of the other professors in Lewis's sketches.

The parallel between the early lives of Professor Drake and his student is striking, although Lewis was probably never aware of it. Both had, for instance, struggled against almost impossible odds to obtain an education. Dr. Drake's *Pioneer Life in Kentucky*,[13] a series of letters written to his kin, describes vividly his pioneer upbringing in frontier Ohio, his apprenticeship to Dr. Goforth in Cincinnati, and his struggle for recognition as a doctor and teacher. The same kind of persistence is shown in Lewis's early life: he saved money from his meager salary of eight dollars a month while working on the riverboats to buy books, and he carried on his self-education while working in the cotton fields in Mississippi. Both the professor and his student were unusually ambitious and both thirsted for fame, as their writing clearly shows.

Drake's ability as lecturer and orator probably impressed Lewis when he

[12] William Frederick Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States Before the Civil War*, Philadelphia, 1944, p. 300. See also Dr. Irvin Abell, "The Medical School of the University of Louisville, Its History and Its Contribution," *A Century of Municipal Higher Education: A Collection of Addresses Delivered During the Centennial Observance of the University of Louisville, America's Oldest Municipal University, March 31 to June 8, 1937*. Chicago, 1937.

[13] *Pioneer Life in Kentucky, 1785–1800*, edited with an introduction by Emmett Field Horine. New York, 1948.

first heard him at the Institute. Drake's ability was well known. One of his students had said of him in 1835:

> [His] style of lecturing is easy and pleasant; and for the purpose of riveting more closely the attention of all within his hearing, he will often stop, and under pretext of ignorance, ask some one present information respecting some anatomical fact. His lectures are not unfrequently spiced with wit and humor.[14]

Another of his students stated that Drake "was never dull. His was an alert and masculine mind. His words were full of vitality. His manner was earnest and impressive. His eloquence was fervid. . . ."[15] Drake himself once attributed his strong voice to a boyhood task of shouting at crows to keep them out of the cornfield: "To the corn field hollowing[16] of those days," he wrote, "I may, perhaps, ascribe the strength of lungs & larynx which, after the lapse of 55 years, enables me to lecture longer & louder than any of my colleagues; although, with one exception, they are so much younger."[17] In a letter written in December 1845 (Lewis's first year at the Institute), Drake spoke of his "loud & tireless voice; which I am sure you would say still inheres with me, if you had been within a hundred yards of the Institute, during my lecture this morning."[18] In an age of oratory, Lewis, like many other students, must have been impressed by Professor Drake's histrionic ability.

Doubtless, too, Lewis was impressed by Professor Drake's commanding appearance, of which his colleague, friend, and biographer, Dr. Gross, has left such a vivid description.[19] Lewis was also aware of Drake's tireless research which eventually produced his monumental *Diseases of the Interior Valley of North America.* In the sketch "Frank and the Professor," the professor, obviously Drake, reads a passage about "swamp fever" to a student.

It was not, however, Professor Drake's oratory or his writing that received the most attention in Lewis's humorous writing; it was, rather, his weakness for the fair sex and his activities in the Physiological Temperance Society. These subjects, natural topics for student gossip, were inherently more humorous and therefore receive greater emphasis, although the very interest in Drake from this standpoint reveals that the professor had made a deep impression on Lewis. The sketch "Frank and the Professor" describes a professor's embarrassment when a distressed young woman demands admission to his apart-

[14] Ibid., p. xxiii–xxiv.

[15] Ibid., p. xxiv.

[16] For a most interesting discussion of this peculiar Southern custom, see Ray B. Browne, "Some Notes on the Southern 'Holler'," *Journal of American Folklore,* 67: 73–77, Jan.–March, 1954.

[17] *Pioneer Life in Kentucky,* p. 51.

[18] Ibid., p. 237.

[19] Daniel Drake, *Practical Essays on Medical Education and the Medical Profession in the United States,* 1832, introduction by David A. Tucker, Jr., Baltimore, 1952, p. xv. See also Mary Louise Marshall, "The Versatile Genius of Daniel Drake," BULLETIN, 31: 4, Oct. 1943.

ment at night while he is reading an extract from his manuscript to a student. The professor is "a widower, and writing a book" from which he reads "a description of Mississippi augur." Since the student of the sketch chooses to regard the young lady's visit as an assignation, Lewis says of the professor that he will "always hereafter write his name without the first letter," that is, *rake*. In addition to these thinly veiled references to Professor Drake, the episode is related by "Frank," described as an Irishman, a "Southern acquaintance," and a casualty in the Mexican War. Francis J. McNulty of Vicksburg was listed as a student at the Institute at the same time Lewis was there, and the records of The Adjutant General, Washington, D. C., show that McNulty enlisted in Vicksburg during the Mexican War and was killed at the battle of Buena Vista.

Evidently, then, the sketch is built around Professor Drake and Francis McNulty. Quite probably, however, the incident may well be largely fiction, for Dr. Drake's devotion to the memory of his beloved wife, emphasized by all his biographers, and his temperate life suggest little basis for the title of "rake" which Lewis gives him. Even so, Drake was not averse to the attractions of women. He wrote once:

> I find that an admiration for the sex was among the earliest sentiments developed in my moral nature. It has swayed me through life, and will, I suppose, continue to govern me to its close. When that solemn event comes, I hope to see female faces round my bed. . . [20]

This was written to his daughter, however. It may be that Drake's reading of Chesterfield's letters and his natural gallantry, made him more than usually polite to women—a characteristic which students could and would distort.

The other phase of Drake's character which Lewis turns to humorous purposes was the professor's association with the Physiological Temperance Society. Drake organized the Society at the Institute in 1841, and his own writings show that he was an ardent supporter of the organization, frequently appearing as the main speaker at meetings. In *Practical Essays*, for example, Drake stressed "intemperance" as "a prevailing vice of the profession" of medicine. Though he was no total "abstinenter," Drake recommended moderation for all.[21] In noting student deficiencies, Drake said that many students coming to the city from the backwoods were "seduced by the allurements of great cities." Evidently Drake made his stand on temperance known to his classes, for Lewis's references to "old D——" and his lectures to the "P.T.S." imply that students were careful not to let "old D——" know that they drank and smoked cigars. Lewis's fondness for brandy and cigars disqualified him for membership in the P.T.S. Had he known the early history of "old D——," he certainly would have had much more material for his satire of the professor

[20] *Pioneer Life in Kentucky*, p. 35.
[21] Ibid., p. 42.

and temperance societies generally. In one of Drake's letters, for instance, he wrote:

I had to... deliver in the University before our Physiological Temperance Society a lecture [an hour and a half long] on the diseases produced by excessive drinking. I took care not to tell the audience that I once engaged in selling whiskey to a whole neighbourhood, and felt very glad when I saw a boy coming with his junk bottle or half gallon jug.[22]

The occasion of the professor's defection was part of his pioneer past: his father once took a barrel of whiskey in part payment for a horse, and young Daniel had to help sell the liquor.

Although Lewis refers most often to Dr. Drake in his writing, others of his professors are alluded to in the sketch "Being Examined for My Degree." The introduction to this sketch satirizes the attitudes and activities of a typical medical student during his two years at medical school. In his first year this typical student was most interested in having a good time.

At the commencement of the lectures [Lewis says] he purchases a blankbook, for the ostensible purpose of taking notes of the lectures; but unwittingly his fingers instead of tracing the chirographical characters, are engaged in caricaturing the professor... (p. 37)

That this is not entirely fiction is substantiated by William D. Postell's study of F. B. Coleman's notebook at Transylvania University in the 1830's. Coleman sketched his professors in his notebook, one of whom was the mercurial Dr. Charles Caldwell who later taught Lewis.[23]

The first year medical student, according to Lewis, "devotes the midnight hour to dissecting—pigs-feet, grouse, and deviled bones, or the delicate structure of the epicurean oyster." And "He strengthens his voice by making the short hours of the night-clad streets alive with the agreeable annunciation... that he 'will not go home till morning.'" When picked up by the police, the typical student gave his name as "John Smith" and was "let off by the kind-hearted mayor the next morning, on paying fees and promising to amend." (p. 121–122)

But the second year of medical school was an entirely different matter, according to Lewis. Faced with passing an oral examination before each member of the faculty individually (Lewis had to face seven), the medical student abandoned all levity and devoted himself to his studies, attempting to make up for lost time. Lewis gives the impression, probably exaggerated, that he had a great deal to make up. He says that his fighting, evidently with other students, had not especially recommended him to the faculty as "a quiet, studious gentleman." When in late February, 1846, the day came for his oral examinations, Lewis says that he had hit upon a plan to get by the examinations for which he felt unprepared.

[22] Ibid., p. 85.

[23] William D. Postell, "F. B. Coleman, A Medical Student of the 1830's," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 18: 179, July 1945.

We were to be examined in separate rooms; our class, consisting of seven members, by as many professors, fifteen minutes being allotted to each professor in which to find out the qualifications of the candidate.

I have already indicated the course I intended to pursue in my examination—impudence and assurance was a new method for a candidate, and might succeed where the old plan would be nearly certain to fail. (p. 23)

The "impudence" referred to was Lewis's scheme to play upon the individual professor's obsessions or quarrels with other professors. The "assurance" was his bold manner of putting over the scheme. Dr. Drake, the "rake," was caught by an unexpected entrance in the act of putting on a pair of false calves to make his spindly legs more appealing. Dr. Cobb was maneuvered into an exposition of his pet theory and used up his fifteen minutes berating the chemistry professor for not agreeing with him. Dr. Short's deafness prevented his hearing Lewis's purposely low-pitched voice, but he passed the candidate rather than admit that he could not hear well. Dr. Gross, professor of surgery, saw through Lewis's scheme but passed him because of his knowledge and his cleverness. Dr. Yandell, incensed by a pamphlet Lewis brought opposing his pet theories, used up his fifteen minutes berating the author of the pamphlet. All these professors agreed to vote for Lewis. He earned the other two votes as well and received his degree, "giving me," he says, "a free permit to kill whom I pleased without the fear of the law."

This burlesque of the final examination, exaggerated as it doubtless is, reveals vividly the procedure in general use at the time in medical schools. What is more, it reveals that the faculty at Louisville was beset by the same kind of professional jealousy and quarreling that handicapped most medical faculties of the time. Evidently the Louisville school was faced with the same financial problem that harrassed other similar schools and had to pass a great number of candidates for the degree in order to obtain the fees students paid upon graduation. Norwood calls this system "vicious," since the graduation fee, from $15 up, "went into the pockets of the professor-examiners." Since unsuccessful candidates did not pay the fee, "the pecuniary profit," Norwood says, "had a very definite bearing upon the decision of the examiners."[24] Despite this situation, Lewis's later record as a doctor shows that he was, however, entitled to the degree, according to the standards of the time.

Lewis's sketch "The Curious Widow" reveals some information about student living conditions in Louisville. He lived in a boarding house during his stay in Louisville, probably one of those mentioned in the college catalogue of 1844: "Good boarding, including lights, fuel, and attendance, in highly respectable houses, has been furnished during the present session at from $2 to $3 a week." This charge, according to Norwood, was about average.[25] Lewis roomed with "two other students from the same section of country," one of whom may have been Francis McNulty. The humor of "The Curious Widow" turns on

[24] *Medical Education in the United States*, p. 390.

[25] Ibid., p. 395.

the scheme the students evolved to prevent their landlady from prowling through their personal belongings while they were away at class: they wrapped the severed face of a Negro cadaver in a package and left it for the prying widow to open; they watched in hiding while the widow unwrapped the grisly object, but the joke turned on them when she became hysterical and the police came to investigate the noise.

Lewis had at least one romance while in medical school. The affair and its catastrophic end are humorously described in "Stealing a Baby." The prospective father-in-law, who had a dislike for Southerners in the first place, was horrified to find that Lewis, who had been courting his daughter surreptitiously, had stolen the cadaver of a Negro child from the Institute's morgue for private dissection. The "Lucy" of this sketch may have been the inspiration for Lewis's poem, "The Dark Yazoo," published in the *Louisville Journal* and later reprinted in his hometown paper, *The Yazoo Democrat*, in February, 1845. The ballad "Lucy Neal," on which the stanzaic pattern of Lewis's poem is based, tells of the lover's loss of Lucy to a "dashing soldier" through the agency of Lucy's "stern old father."[26]

During Lewis's last year at Louisville, he received practical training at the Louisville Marine Hospital, in accordance with the announcement in the college catalogue: "Students of the Institute have the privilege of attending the practice of the Louisville Marine Hospital free of charge. . . ." In the sketch "Cupping an Irishman," Lewis states, "During my last year's attendance on the lectures, I became the inmate, for the purpose of walking the wards, of a certain marine hospital, situated on a certain western river. . . ." (p. 113) Later in the sketch he mentions two "Kentucky nurses" of the hospital, which tends to confirm that the hospital was in Louisville. In another sketch he states, "Twice a week the class of medical students attended clinical lectures at the hospital, which was situated in a retired part of town. . . ." (p. 132)[27]

Lewis graduated from the Louisville Medical Institute either in late February or in early March, 1846. Though regulations of the Institute required candidates for the degree to be twenty-one years old, Lewis actually was not twenty-one until June of that year. His triumphal return to Yazoo City was somewhat shadowed by the death of Dr. Dorsey four months previously, in October, 1845. He returned to Mississippi with the intention of taking over his former preceptor's practice. But fate ruled otherwise.

[26] *The Yazoo Democrat*, 1: 28, Feb. 18, 1845. Popularity of Lewis's poem may have caused the editor to print the ballad "Lucy Neal," December 3, 1845.

[27] Though Lewis indicates that he worked at the Louisville Marine Hospital in late 1845 and early 1846, Norwood (*Medical Education*, p. 300) states: "In 1820 the Marine Hospital was established. . . . In 1847 the City was paying $500 per annum for the privilege of sending its infirm to the Hospital. This institution was, however, not being used for teaching purposes, in spite of the fact that its presence in Louisville had been argued as one of the reasons for instituting a medical college there. The faculty hopefully announced the next year [1848] the prospect of being able to use the Louisville Marine Hospital."

IV

In "Seeking a Location" Lewis tells of his return to Yazoo City with his "new-fledged honours and 'sheepskin' " only to discover that his old neighbors were unimpressed with his title and still called him by his first name. Even worse was their failure to give him a chance to prove that he was a doctor. Though he rented an office, had his name "emblazoned on a sheet of tin," and sat down to wait for calls, he soon realized that the other doctors of the town were getting all the calls. He merely waited. Shortly, however, he heard of a location in northeast Louisiana. Immediately he took a steamboat to Vicksburg, transferred to an up-river boat, got off at Milliken's Bend in Louisiana, borrowed a horse, and rode inland to an isolated community deep in the swamps along the Tensas [Tin'-saw] River. Though he was almost drowned twice in crossing bayous (accidents which startlingly forecast the manner of his death four years later), he decided to settle among the "swampers," who, he said, looked sickly enough to make his business profitable. He immediately went back to Yazoo City and collected his books and medicines and returned to Madison Parish to begin his career as "the Louisiana Swamp Doctor."

To the young doctor from the hill country around Yazoo City, Madison Parish in 1846 appeared to be a continuous swamp. His description of the area is historically accurate:

> The lands were composed of rich alluvial, deposited by the turbid waters of the Mississippi and protected by embankments termed 'levees,' . . .
>
> The tillable land, varying in breadth from one hundred yards to several miles, lay upon the water-courses, which ramified the surface of the country, and formed, when swollen by rains or overflow, a perfect network of watery communications. The land between the tillable or cane ridges, was low swamp, almost quagmire, never thoroughly dry, and almost impassable nine months out of the year. (p. 112)

The parish in 1840 had a population of 5,142 people, according to the U. S. Census Report, but by 1846 the fertile soil had attracted many additional planters from Mississippi and elsewhere, so that the population had jumped to 8,773 by 1850. Most of the land along the Mississippi River and the banks of the meandering bayous and rivers inland supported cotton plantations, running back in the shape of a rectangle from landings on Walnut, Brushy, or Roundaway bayous, or the Tensas River. Thousands of bales of cotton were shipped annually to New Orleans on the flatboats, keelboats, yawls, and steamboats which thronged these inland waterways. Land transportation was, on the other hand, limited to trails and horse-paths which followed the cleared land along the streams and was impossible in high water.

Lewis's first location on the Tensas River in Madison Parish—from which he adopted his penname—was deep in the heart of the parish, about twenty-four miles due west of the Mississippi River at Milliken's Bend. It was a fron-

tier area, not so well developed as the area of the larger plantations immediately to the east and south, as his description shows:

> My residence is as humble as my pretensions or my dress, being composed of split trees, and known in American parlance as a 'log cabin.'
>
> A lazy sluggish '*bayou*'—as all the small water-courses in this country are Frenchifically termed—glorying in the name 'Tensas,' runs, or rather creeps, by the door, before which—on the margin of the stream—stands one of those grand alluvial oaks which could canopy an army. (p. 139)

From this primitive dwelling and office Lewis made his first professional visit, so graphically described in "My First Call in the Swamp." In "The City Physician versus the Swamp Doctor," Lewis contrasts his practice in the swamp with that of the typical city doctor. The Swamp Doctor's calls are made through the uncharted swamp, where his "midnight ride is often saluted by the scream of the panther;" he travels either in a canoe, on foot in mud boots, or on a horse, traversing, "unmindful of exposure or danger, the sullen slough or the angry river." His "drug store at the saddle" is his saddle bags. His amusements are an occasional "barbacue [sic] or a bran [sic] dance."[28]

Many of Lewis's sketches are devoted to his patients, who ranged from impoverished Virginia gentry, small planters, "squatters," and bear hunters, to Negro slaves. "The Man of Aristocratic Diseases" caricatures, for example, the Virginia planter, removed to Louisiana to recoup his fortune, who has a horror of having a disease other than one with which some distinguished ancestor died; ironically, he died of apoplexy when he discovered he had malaria. In "The Indefatigable Bear-Hunter" he describes an amputation he performed in a cabin deep in the swamp. The hunter's leg, mangled by a bear, was removed with two bowie knives, one notched for a saw. The hunter, drunk with brandy, sang a "bear song" during the operation. The doctor made a wooden leg for the patient, and the remainder of the tale, told by the hunter in dialect, recounts how the hunter, despite the handicap of a wooden leg, killed another bear in close combat with splinters of the wooden leg. "How to Cure Fits" describes the cure Lewis used to show her owner that a slave woman's "fits" were staged to keep her from having to work in the cotton fields; the cure—threatening to throw her from a bridge into a bayou. "Struggle for Life" is a spine-chilling tale of Lewis's being lost in the swamp with only a drunken slave as a guide; the slave attempts to kill him for a bottle of brandy.

Exactly when Lewis left the settlement on Tensas River and moved to Richmond, the parish seat, I have been unable to determine. Richmond,

[28] Everett Dick, *The Dixie Frontier: A Social History of the Southern Frontier from the First Transmontane Beginnings to the Civil War.* New York, 1948, p. 131: "One type of dance was known as a bran dance. Modern usage in an attempt to recall bygone days has mouthed this into 'barn dance.' It was often held in a newly completed cabin if the floor was smooth enough. Otherwise, it was held in the woods. A plot of ground was smoothed off and a quantity of bran or sawdust was spread over it to make it more elastic."

established in 1839, was located at the junction of two of the principal navigable bayous of the parish, and in the 1840's boasted a court house, newspaper, several stores, several doctor's and lawyer's offices, a saloon, a tavern, and perhaps a church.[29] In Richmond, Lewis became the partner of Dr. George D. Shadburne, graduate of Transylvania University, 1839. Shadburne was married to Sybil Stanbrough, daughter of a wealthy planter in the parish. Tradition in Madison Parish states that both Lewis and Shadburne were given to fancy clothes, horse racing, and *joie de vivre*. Official records partly confirm this tradition, for they show that Lewis was once indicted for brawling, probably on election day, and that Shadburne won money betting on horse races.[30]

Lewis had been periodically publishing his humorous sketches in the *Spirit of the Times*, a New York weekly newspaper, since his arrival in Madison Parish in 1846, and had included his penname and location in each—"Madison Tensas, M.D., Madison Parish, La."[31] It seems likely that he did not start collecting and compiling his sketches for a book until after he moved to Richmond. The book was published by A. Hart (successor to Carey & Hart) in Philadelphia in February, 1850, and in May, Lewis turned over to a bookseller in Vicksburg twelve copies of the book, copies obviously furnished by the publisher for him to place locally.[32] The book was dedicated to two prominent citizens of Madison Parish, William S. Parham, state legislator, and Alfred J. Lowry, plantation owner and local official. Since Lewis published the book under his penname, it is doubtful if most of his patients, even if they saw the book, knew that their doctor was the author. Though the sketches in the book are doubtless based on actual experiences, they are dramatized and exaggerated in the manner of the frontier humor so popular at the time. Lewis follows the general style and content of the writing of other important figures in the field of Southwestern humor, such as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Johnson J. Hooper, and William T. Thompson.[33] Though Lewis creates no single figure of the stature of Thompson's Major Jones of Pineville, Georgia, or Hooper's Simon Suggs of Alabama, his more frequent use of dialect for characterization and local color makes his Louisiana sketches an integral part of the writing of the Southwestern frontier.

[29] Advertisements, *Richmond Compiler*, Richmond, Louisiana, 1841–44. Court Records, Madison Parish, Tallulah, Louisiana.

[30] Court Records, Madison Parish, Tallulah, Louisiana. *Alonzo Snyder Papers*. Department of Archives, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

[31] See *Spirit of the Times*, 16: 43, Dec. 19, 1846; 17: 14, May 29, 1847; 17: 32, Oct. 2, 1847; and 17: 51, Feb. 12, 1848. Two sketches from his book were reprinted in the *Spirit*, both in 20: 9, April 2, 1850.

[32] Among the papers of Lewis's succession in the Court Records of Madison Parish is a bill presented to the estate by O. O. Woodman, apothecary and bookseller of Vicksburg, which shows that Lewis turned in to Woodman on May 10, 1850, "12 Swamp Doctor" for a credit of six dollars.

[33] See Blair, *Native American Humor*, p. 62–101.

According to the court records of Madison Parish, Dr. Lewis died August 5, 1850, at the age of twenty-five. The Vicksburg *Weekly Whig* on August 14, 1850, carried a brief notice of his death. *The Yazoo Democrat*, Yazoo City, Mississippi, carried an obituary on August 15, which reads in part:

> He had been out on a professional visit to the Swamp, and on returning home and not finding a boat in readiness to set him over, he attempted to swim his horse across the bayou [Roundaway or Brushy] and was drowned before assistance could be extended to him.

Local tradition states that Lewis was returning from Milliken's Bend and had ridden most of the way through the overflow waters from swollen streams. Though warned that his horse was too tired to carry him through the backwater from the flooded bayous around Richmond, he rode on and was drowned when the exhausted animal became tangled in the willows. Evidently his body was not recovered immediately, for among the bills presented to his estate was one including a dollar charge "For Lanthorn lost in search of the body." His burial place is not known, but presumably it is at the site of Richmond, though now no trace is left of the cemetery.[34]

Lewis's popularity as a physician may be inferred from the inventory of bills owing to his estate. His part of seventy-two separate accounts amounted to $3,563.87. He owed $1,351.01 on eleven different notes and accounts. His personal property sold at auction a month after his death included two horses and saddles, medicines, surgical instruments, medical bags, a miscellaneous library, a medical library, "a medical French library," a law library—and "one-half interest in a Rifle gun and fiddle." Dr. Shadburne, presumably owner of the other half interest in the gun and fiddle, was appointed curator of Lewis's estate and worried with it several years before requesting release. The final account was filed in March, 1859, nine years after Lewis's death.

Dr. Lewis's brief career is unique. In his avocation, humorous writing, he ranks among the best of the Southwestern humorists. Of the non-professional writers—lawyers, editors, actors, and journalists—whose writings make up the body of Southwestern humor, he is the only doctor who exploited so extensively and artistically his personal experiences. No others of the Southwestern humorists achieved status as a major writer in that field at such an early age. The artistry with which he maintains the Swamp Doctor pose throughout his writing—carefully building up the impression that he was an old, experienced physician writing of his youth—shows that had Dr. Lewis lived his allotted three-score years and ten he might well have become the leading writer in the school of Southwestern humor.

[34] Richmond was completely burned by Union forces during the Civil War siege of Vicksburg in 1863 and was never rebuilt. It was located two miles south of the present parish seat, Tallulah. Mr. Francis Ward, local historian, pointed out to me in 1953 the location of the Richmond cemetery, now a cotton field.

In his profession, frontier medical doctor, Lewis was of that stalwart breed whom Flexner describes as fighting "on two frontiers: riding the wilderness of a new continent, they explored the mysteries of the human body." To which he adds: "The settler in the most isolated log cabin could count on the ministrations of a doctor who had hanging from his saddle besides the bags of medicine, a musket and an ax."[35] Ironically, fate denied Lewis the fame and fortune of which he dreamed, denied him, in fact, the peaceful departure from this life which he, in his pose as the aging Swamp Doctor, envisioned:

> . . . the swamp doctor sinks in the blissful luxuries of death; no more to undergo privation and danger, disease or suffering. He hath given his last pill, had his last draught protested against; true to the instincts of his profession, he, no doubt, in the battling troop of the angels above, if feasible, will still continue to *charge*. (p. 25)

[35] James Thomas Flexner, *Doctors on Horseback*. N. Y., 1937. p. ix.