Sofie Herzog: The First Woman Surgeon Breaking Boundaries in Texas

By Rachel Penland

Texas is known for its tall tales and colorful characters who tamed the land. Exaggeration characterizes many of these stories but some are true. Such is the case with the state's first female surgeon, Dr. Sofie Herzog, a legend in our region.

Sofie Deligath was born in Vienna, Austria, on February 4, 1846. Her family consisted of twenty-one prominent and successful doctors and surgeons, including her father. Sofie married another successful surgeon, Dr. August Herzog, at the tender age of fourteen. Over the next few years she gave birth to fifteen children, including three sets of twins. Sadly eight of her children did not survive to adulthood. During this time her husband accepted a position at the U. S. Naval Hospital in New York, moving the family to the states.²

While living in New York Sofie decided to study medicine, but at the time women in this country did not have equal access to a higher education, especially in the professions. Realizing this would hamper her efforts to become a doctor, she returned to

Vienna to study and in 1871 received her midwifery certificate. Dortha Pekar, a historian and expert on Dr. Sofie Herzog, notes that Sofie considered the day she received her midwifery certificate to be the day that she began to practice medicine.³ When she returned to the United States, she began seeing patients and in 1894 went on to graduate from the Eclectic Medical College of the City of New York. Listed as both a midwife and a physician in the 1886-1887 Hoboken, New Jersey City Directory, Sofie practiced medicine in New Jersey for nine years during which time her husband passed away leaving her alone with an empty nest.

The series of events that brought Sofie Herzog to Brazoria, Texas, began with her youngest child, Elfriede Marie. A young school teacher, she met Randolph Prell of Brazoria in Philadelphia and married him in Hoboken on January 22, 1894. Elfriede and her new husband relocated to Texas, where Randolph worked as a merchant. Sofie eventually joined them to experience something new and to be closer to her daughter and grandchildren.⁴



Dr. Sofie Herzog wearing her necklace created from bullets she extracted from wounded patients.

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Brazoria was known for its rough and rowdy gunslingers, with people frequently getting shot and needing care. Neither the town

of Brazoria nor Brazoria County had a

physician at that time, so when word got around that a Dr. Herzog was coming to town, the townspeople were ecstatic and eagerly awaited the new doctor's arrival. Their enthusiasm quickly died, though, when it became known that Dr. Herzog was actually a woman. Sofie moved to Brazoria, Texas, in February of 1895 or 1896 and settled into life at the Prell house, where she began practicing medicine right away. Sofie and her son-in-law got along well until he came home to find a man covered with red dots being treated in his living room. The patient had small pox, and Randolph, concerned about the safety of his wife and children, became furious. He threw the man out of the house and told Sofie that under no circumstances was she to continue treating sick people in his home. Sofie agreed with her son-in-law's assessment and built a three-bedroom

house close by to serve as her treatment space and personal quarters. Naturally, this created interesting gossip for the townspeople of Brazoria.⁵

Now independent, Sofie began to upset the social norms of the era. Brazoria County is well known for its rainy seasons that come and go seemingly at random. The rains caused massive amounts of mud to be churned up by the multitude of wagon wheels and horses' hooves, resulting in endless problems for Sofie when she rode out at all hours to tend to her patients. At times her horse and buggy collected brown mud up to the seat. This difficult travel eventually convinced Sofie that her attire and mode of transportation needed an update. She disposed of the buggy and began riding her horse wherever she needed to go. Because riding astride was easier than riding sidesaddle, Sofie had a local tailor create a split skirt for better mobility.⁶

Most of the social elite living in Brazoria initially disapproved of Sofie's nonconformity. Sofie must have been a strange sight to behold walking down the street or riding



Dr. Sofie literally "set up shop" in Brazoria County, not only treating patients but also selling her own medicines and other objects in her office.

about town. With her curly hair cut as short as a man's, she proudly wore a man's top hat and her split skirts. Herzog was forty-nine years old when she began treating the citizens of Brazoria County, and she had an endless amount of energy and enthusiasm for her work. She eventually won over the people of Brazoria and became known forevermore as Dr. Sofie.⁷

By the 1890s a few male doctors had come to the area and the majority of the gunshot victims were taken to those doctors first. On the other hand, the patients who seemingly had no hope of recovery were transported to Dr. Sofie. She became an expert at extracting bullets and news of her prowess spread far and wide; soon more gunshot victims went to see Dr. Sofie. She had learned from experience that when tending a gunshot wound, probing inside for the bullet caused more trauma to the area and could possibly kill the patient. She discovered that if she elevated the patient, gravity, as she liked to say, would "bring the bullet to her." Her unconventional method proved effective, saving many patients from potentially deadly gunshot wounds.8 Sofie quickly collected twenty-four bullets from her patients. To celebrate her success she had a special necklace made with the lead slugs separated by gold links, which she regularly wore.

Dr. Sofie is also known for treating patients from all walks of life regardless of their skin color and personally delivered dozens of African American babies up and down the Brazos River.

A well-educated woman, Dr. Sofie took an interest in anyone who was willing to learn or better themselves. Rumors and stories suggest that Sofie helped African Americans living in Brazoria learn to read and write. At one of the events honoring her, Pekar explains, an African American man, believed to be 109 years old, got up to speak about Sofie Herzog, who had been his doctor and possibly helped to educate him. He spoke fondly of her,

with great respect and esteem, even shedding tears. If Sofie thought people had potential she helped them, including assisting students attend college.⁹

Dr. Sofie had a variety of interests. She dabbled in real estate, buying The Jefferson Hotel, which she successfully ran for many years while still managing to treat patients. Dr. Sofie opened a bigger clinic near the railroad tracks that had been added in the area. She ran her own pharmacy and took great pleasure in mixing medicines at the office. Never missing a business opportunity, she also sold bric-a-brac in her clinic, such as post cards and other odds and ends. Because she owned hundreds of books, Sofie became the town's first librarian, lending out her personal collection to readers on the promise that the books be returned. She built Brazoria's Episcopal church after a dispute with the local Catholic church over the terrible condition of the community's Catholic cemetery.

Weird oddities of the medical field intrigued Sofie, and she collected specimens and other interesting objects in jars of alcohol to display in her office. The main display allegedly held a human fetus that sported two heads and three arms. Dr. Sofie was vastly interested in the local Texas wildlife, so to go along with the other strange items dotting the office walls, she began to acquire taxidermied animals. For example, she kept an eight-foot-long stuffed alligator in one corner of her office and carried an alligator purse with the feet still attached. She even skinned a few snakes herself to display.

Sofie remarried at the age of sixty-seven to seventy-yearold Marion Huntington, who owned Ellersly, a plantation on the outskirts of town. She commuted to and from her home to her office every day in one of the area's first automobiles, a Ford Roundabout.¹⁰

Dr. Sofie Herzog actively participated in five different medical societies and reportedly never missed a conference. The South Texas Medical Society invited her to speak at its conference just twenty-two months after



Dr. Sofie influenced Brazoria County through more than her unique and effective medical techniques. She also owned and operated other business ventures such as the Jefferson Hotel, pictured above.

her arrival because her method and her success rate at removing bullets caught the society's attention. Later four other medical societies invited Dr. Sofie to speak at their conferences regarding her unique improvements to medical practice. The societies' members were intrigued by Sofie's insistence on using only one clean and sterilized finger if she absolutely had to dig for a bullet because this kept the wound free of germs and limited the impact to the delicate tissue being prodded. By 1897 Dr. Sofie had become the first female member of the South Texas Medical Society and also the first woman to be elected as its vice-president.¹¹

In the early twentieth century the railroads began laying track through South Texas, including Brazoria County, which was a tough and risky job for the workers and resulted in many injuries. In 1905 the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway expanded in the area, and the influx of people drastically increased Sofie's patient load. She raced out to see to her patients at all hours of the night, and news of her work reached the railroad commission board. When asked about Dr. Herzog, the railroad offi-

cers gave a glowing report; and just like that Dr. Sofie was hired, becoming the first female railroad doctor. Nevertheless when the railroad commission realized that Dr. Herzog was a woman, they balked and hurriedly sent Sofie a telegram stating that they would understand if she quit because the job was not fit for a lady. Furious, Dr. Sofie fired back with a heated telegram of her own, saying that they could fire her when she was unable to do her job. Her prowess as a physician kept her employed with the railroad until she suffered a massive stroke at the age of seventy-nine.¹²

Dr. Sofie Herzog was an amazing woman. A mother, grandmother, and wife who liked to knit and crochet, she was a woman working in what was considered at the time a man's profession. She did it with grace, poise, and a lot of confidence. Turning society's norms upside down by refusing to listen to the nay-sayers, she fought to achieve her goal — to be the best doctor possible — and she succeeded beautifully. Sofie Herzog paved the way for other women to realize their dreams. She brought new practices and procedures to the medical field and offered care to the sick and injured.¹³

Dr. Sofie can be seen as an early feminist. She pushed her way into two colleges to study medicine and later opened clinics in New York and Texas. She made a fortune from investing in real estate after moving to Brazoria, all the while serving as the best doctor in the area. Sofie gained respect from the all-male medical societies because of her hard work and determination. She endured the slander and gossip from townspeople, who first thought she was ill-suited to her profession, and stood up to the railroad to keep her job. Dr. Sofie made a name for herself in the 1800s when it was a man's world, becoming a role model for young girls and women.¹⁴

Dr. Sofie enriched the life of anyone who came into contact with her; she was energetic and lively in every aspect of her life. She brought a much needed profession to Brazoria and spent her life trying to help others in any way she could, bringing hope to the townspeople. Dr. Sofie worked until the day she died on July 21, 1925, just before her eightieth birthday. Mourned by all who loved her, she was laid to rest wearing her ever-present bullet necklace. She is still remembered fondly and has become a legend in Brazoria, Texas, with her stories being passed down through the generations.¹⁵

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This Brazoria Heritage Society exhibit represents Dr. Sofie's unique bullet removal technique.

Photo courtesy of the author.