

## Mother of Invention: Henry J. Kaiser's Inspiration for Building a Health Plan

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Mary Kaiser in wedding dress, 1873; photo from Henry J. Kaiser: *Western Colossus*, by Albert Heiner. Every institution has a story about how it started. For the health care plan now known as Kaiser Permanente, it began with Henry J. Kaiser's mother.

In his last published interview, three and a half months before he passed away on August 14, 1967, Henry J. Kaiser stated "I see the day when no one need die for lack of medical care, as my own mother died in my arms when I was 16 years old."

Mary Kaiser, a practical nurse, was only 52 years old when she died on December 1, 1899.

It was a story told and retold. During World War II medical author Paul de Kruif helped bring Kaiser's novel health plan to national attention in Kaiser Wakes the Doctors. De Kruif described Kaiser's motivation:

It was the lack of a doctor ? who might have saved her life ? that had killed Kaiser's own mother at the age of 49... He was raw about this medical injustice. [Later in life] it offended him that he and his family could command the best medical advice, while millions of human beings were medically kicked around.

Henry Kaiser himself was vocal about his motivation. At a speech he made before a doctor's group at San Francisco's St. Francis Hotel June 9, 1948, he said:

Mother would not go to a hospital as a charity patient because she believed in *giving*, not taking, charity. ... I propose to earn millions of dollars and put millions into hospitals and to devote my life toward helping my fellow citizens who, as my own Mother and Father did, suffer because they cannot pay for the full services they require.



Henry J. Kaiser speaking at dedication of Permanente Foundation Hospital, Oakland, August 21, 1942. More details emerged over time. He later said that Mary's specific condition was Bright's Disease, a constellation of kidney diseases now known as chronic nephritis. In addition to relative poverty (Henry's father also had health problems and was going blind), another complication for her care was that the family lived in small town in rural New York.

Historian Mark. S. Foster's [biography](#) of Henry J. Kaiser points out some inconsistencies in Henry's story. For one thing, Henry was actually 17 years old when his mother passed. And there's no corroborating evidence that Henry was present at her death.

But all origin stories value mission over details, and this one is no different.

According to one of Kaiser Permanente's founding physicians, Morris Collen, MD, Henry Kaiser told the audience at the dedication of the Oakland Hospital in 1942 "My mother died in my arms because she didn't receive adequate medical care, and I vowed that I would do whatever I could so this wouldn't happen to anybody else."

The health plan that Henry Kaiser built has certainly been proof of a son's love for his mother.

Happy Mother's Day, Mary.

*Short link to this article:* <http://k-p.li/2ppktUq>