

## Peter C. Remondino, MD: the Man and his Library

By George W. Kaplan

San Diego has had many interesting and colorful personalities during its history including Dr. Peter Charles Remondino (1846-1926), the first president of the San Diego Board of Health and co-founder of San Diego's first private hospital. He is best known as the author of a bestselling book on the history of circumcision, with the result that he has been characterized either as a dilettante or a quack. The former is an underestimation of his interests and abilities while the latter is an uncharitable characterization of his views and beliefs. This article reveals that he was neither, but rather a devoted physician, an entrepreneur, and a scholar.

Peter Remondino was born in Turin, Italy, on February 10, 1846, the child of Angelo and Carolina (Ellena) Remondino.<sup>1</sup> The Remondinos traced their lineage back to Mondino de Liuzzi (c. 1270-1326), a professor of anatomy at the University of Bologna who reintroduced the systematic study of anatomy and dissection into the medical curriculum. Prior to that time, anatomy was taught using the second-century



*Dr. Peter C. Remondino, San Diego, c. 1890. ©SDHC #1383.*

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writings of the Greek physician Galen that were based on the dissection of animals, not humans, leading to erroneous assumptions about human anatomy.<sup>2</sup>

Peter Remondino was educated in Italy until the age of eight. In 1854, his mother died and he and his father left Turin. They immigrated to the United States on a ship that also carried a cargo of marble to be used in the construction of the United States Capitol. During his first year in the United States, while living in New York City, Peter attended a private school where he learned to speak English.<sup>3</sup> The following year, he and his father moved to Wabasha, Minnesota, a small farming community located thirty miles northeast of Rochester. Named in honor of an Indian Chief of the Sioux Nation, Wabasha had a mixed population of French Canadians and Native Americans. Angelo Remondino engaged in the mercantile business while Peter continued his education in the territorial district school.<sup>4</sup> In his autobiography, Remondino recalled that a single teacher taught all grades from primary school through college. He wrote, "It was in this primitive Comenian order of an humble one-man taught school wherein individualism—instead of being smothered...thru [sic] too much modern standardization—was encouraged, taught, and unconsciously cultivated, that as a lad, the future physician laid the foundation of his present ideas that education to be efficient should be freer and more sensible..."<sup>5</sup> Remondino learned both the Sioux language and the French vernacular and made use of the large collection of Italian and French books that his father had brought with him from Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Remondino briefly considered taking religious orders but, instead, decided that medicine would be a more appropriate career. As was the practice at that time, he was apprenticed at age fifteen to Dr. Francis H. Milligan, a physician in Wabasha and a graduate of Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. For many physicians of that era, an apprenticeship was their entire medical education.<sup>7</sup> Sometime after Peter began his apprenticeship, Dr. Milligan was called up to provide full time medical care to the Minnesota Battalion in the Sioux campaign of 1862, leaving his practice behind. He did, however, encourage Peter, now left without a mentor, to continue his medical education. As a result, on Dr. Milligan's advice and with his support, Remondino enrolled at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia in 1863.<sup>8</sup>

The curriculum in most nineteenth-century medical schools consisted of a series of lectures delivered over the course of one year and repeated annually. After two years of attending the identical lecture series twice, one would earn the degree Doctor of Medicine.<sup>9</sup> In 1864, because the Civil War was still being fought and medical personnel were needed, Peter left Philadelphia after his first year at medical college to volunteer as a medical cadet in the Union Army. He served in the Battle of the Wilderness and was subsequently stationed in



*The only American citizen to be commissioned as a surgeon by the French government, Dr. Remondino served in France during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). ©SDHC #11712-1.*

Annapolis, Maryland, and later at City Point, Virginia. Upon release from active duty, he returned to Jefferson Medical College for his final year. In March 1865, on the eve of his graduation from medical school, he skipped the traditional graduation dinner and left Philadelphia to re-enter the Medical Corps as an Acting Assistant Surgeon. He was initially stationed at the Hampton General Hospital, Virginia, then re-assigned to the Pennsylvania Heavy Artillery. During that second tour of duty he developed malaria. He later described it as a “terrific congestive chill followed by a fever all of which struck him [sic] like a tornado.”<sup>10</sup>

Discharged from service in November 1865, Remondino returned to Wabasha hoping to recover his health. He joined

Dr. Milligan in a lucrative and rewarding medical practice, but continued to be plagued with recurrences of his malaria and, in his words, “the attending depression of spirits and morale.”<sup>11</sup> Dr. Milligan advised that a change in climate might favorably affect his health. Having become a U.S. citizen in 1870, Remondino decided to go to France to offer his services as a physician to the army of the newly formed Third Republic. The governor of Minnesota and former professors at Jefferson Medical College, among others, provided him with references.

Hailing from a family who valued republican principles and constitutional government, Remondino proudly served the Third Republic during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71).<sup>12</sup> After meeting with Leon Gambetta, a liberal French politician, Remondino was assigned to a volunteer force fighting in the south, between Tours and Paris. By the end of the conflict, he had become army surgeon of Fort St. Adresse, the principal fortress of Le Havre, with a rank of captain. The only American citizen to be commissioned by the French government as a surgeon, he later received the Medal Militaire from the French Army for his service as a volunteer. After the war, he spent two months in England visiting clinics in London before traveling through Switzerland and Italy to visit universities. He remained relatively healthy for the duration of his stay in Europe.<sup>13</sup>

Soon after his arrival in San Diego, Remondino discovered that one of the few physicians in the city was a classmate from medical school, Dr. A.J. Gregg, who convinced him to abandon his ranching plans and return to medicine. In



*Dr. Remondino arrived in San Diego in 1873, seeking recovery from ill health caused by malaria. This photo shows Fifth Avenue, south of Broadway, 1876. ©SDHC #1431.*

1874, Remondino opened a medical office on the first floor of the Fisher Opera House on Fifth Avenue between B and C Streets. During his first year in San Diego he witnessed a robbery at the Customs House and, as a public-spirited citizen, testified at the trial. He presented lectures to the San Diego Academy on anatomy and physiology, and to the San Diego Lyceum of Natural History on “Elements of Natural History.”<sup>16</sup>

Given his previous military experience, Remondino’s practice was weighted toward surgery. Gunshot wounds were an occasional occurrence in his practice and at least two of his cases were reported in the local newspaper. In 1875, he treated William Gregg (unrelated to Dr. Gregg) after a shootout on Fifth Avenue and D Street that resulted from a difference of opinion about a lawsuit. In 1877, Dr. Remondino was called to treat G.F.W. Richardson whose thigh was shattered by a gunshot wound in an altercation with the superintendent of the water works; the wound was severe enough to necessitate amputation.<sup>17</sup> Remondino’s reputation extended beyond the confines of San Diego; he was once called to Ensenada to operate on a patient with a cyst of the pancreas caused by *Ecchinococcus*, a parasitic tapeworm that sometimes affects



*In 1874, Dr. Remondino opened a medical office on the first floor of the Fisher Opera House, located on Fifth Avenue between B and C Streets. ©SDHC #6190.*



Together with Dr. Thomas C. Stockton, Dr. Remondino established the first private hospital in San Diego near Columbia and F Streets in downtown San Diego. The building later became the Arlington Hotel. Photo c. 1890. ©SDHC #672.

shepherders.<sup>18</sup> He also was appointed editor of the *National Popular Review* by Nathan Smith Davis, MD, a Chicago physician who was one of the founders of the American Medical Association. Its main topics were preventive medicine and applied sociology, subjects on which Remondino was regarded as an authority. He served as editor of the journal for three and a half years.<sup>19</sup>

Due to his own experience with malaria, Remondino became very interested in sanitation, longevity, and the relationship of climate to health. He wrote and subsequently published several books on these topics, including *Longevity and Climate* (1890); *The Adventures of John Henry Smith* (1891), a novel with a medical and climatic theme; *The Mediterranean Shores of America* (1892); and *The Modern Climatic Treatment of Invalids with Pulmonary Consumption in Southern California* (1893). He wrote one article, "On the Relation of Pugilism to Longevity," in which he reviewed the lives and deaths of leading boxing ring celebrities, and another entitled "Savage Life of San Diego County," a study of local Native American tribes. Interested in many clinical problems, he published works on impotence, incontinence, uremia, venereal disease, drug addiction, influenza, empyema, parasitic pancreatic cysts, and suicide.<sup>20</sup>

Remondino served as the first president of the San Diego Board of Health (1875-76) and county physician for several consecutive terms. He was known to be vocal in his opinions and participated in many debates at early medical society meetings. He was especially outspoken about charlatanism, commercialism, and hypocrisy in medicine and used the *National Popular Review* to voice his opinions.<sup>21</sup> Remondino was named president of the San Diego Medical Society, president



*Sophia Ann Earle, from a distinguished English medical family, married Dr. Remondino and turned their home into a gathering place for people interested in music and the arts. ©SDCH #11712-3.*

of the Southern California Medical Society, and vice president of the California Medical Association. He served eight years (two terms) as a member of the State Board of Health and for thirty-five years as a member of the Board of U.S. Pension Examiners. He also held posts as Surgeon to the California Southern Rail Road Company, the U.S. Marine Hospital, and the Pacific Coast Steamship Company. He also occupied the chair of the History of Medicine and Medical Bibliography in the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Los Angeles, now the University of Southern California.<sup>22</sup>

In 1879, Remondino established the first private hospital in San Diego in conjunction with Dr. Thomas C. Stockton. The hospital faced a plaza near Columbia and F Streets and had a capacity of 50 beds. After a few years, however, the owners realized that they could not compete on a cost basis with the city infirmary, the only other hospital in the city. Remondino sold his share in the hospital to Stockton; less than a year later, the hospital was converted into a hotel.<sup>23</sup>

Remondino may be best known for *The History of Circumcision from the Earliest Times to the Present* (1891).<sup>24</sup> The book was very popular; its first printing in 1891 sold over 50,000 copies resulting in a second printing in 1900. Reportedly over a half million copies were sold. It was reprinted in 1974, 2001, and 2008. At 346 pages, this tome was considered to have almost singlehandedly popularized circumcision in the United States at a time when the intact foreskin was the norm and circumcision was an aberration.<sup>25</sup> Remondino performed the surgery on adult men many times. He wrote, "In adults with a very narrow, thin, not overlong prepuce, a very good result often follows...I have repeatedly performed it on lawyers, book-keepers, clerks, and even laboring men, who have gone from the office to the courts, counting rooms, or stores without the least resulting inconvenience or loss of time."<sup>26</sup> He was such an enthusiast for circumcision that some called the operation "Remondino's Procedure."<sup>27</sup>

In 1877, Remondino met Sophia Ann Earle, the niece of a retired Anglican bishop and the granddaughter of Sir David Earle, one time president of the Royal College of Surgeons. Born in Devonshire, England, her ancestry included Sir Walter Raleigh and John Hunter, the seventeenth-century anatomist and surgeon.



*Dr. and Mrs. Remondino lived with their four children at Fifth Avenue and Beech Street on what is now known as Cortez Hill. ©SDHC #2904-15.*

Sophia, a teenager when she met Peter, was initially uninterested in a man twenty years her senior, but Remondino pursued her until she finally agreed to marry him. They had four children, two girls and two boys. Their home, one of the first constructed on Cortez Hill at the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and Beech Street (one block north of the current El Cortez Hotel) was a gathering place for music and the arts. They annually hosted two large receptions in their home.

Remondino developed one of the largest and finest private medical libraries in California. He began purchasing the nucleus of his library at the end of the Franco-Prussian War, when he visited major medical centers in England, Italy, and Switzerland. On a subsequent trip to Europe, he purchased another 3,000 volumes and made contact with a number of book dealers who subsequently supplied him with still more volumes for his library. Later, he used an agent in Paris to facilitate acquisitions. Dr. Remondino related that there were many times in his early practice when he skipped meals to afford another volume for his library. His collection included works on travel, biography (there were nearly three shelves dedicated to Napoleon), the military, history, ethnology, archaeology, religion, mythology, the social sciences, fine arts, opera, the great works of literature, music and the sciences.<sup>28</sup>

The library grew to roughly 15,000 volumes and included approximately 3,000 medical volumes from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century including Mondino's *Anatomy*; a French translation of Hippocrates; and the works of many notables in the history of medicine and surgery including: William Beaumont, a surgeon in the U.S Army known as the father of gastric physiology; Henri De



*An entrepreneur, Dr. Remondino remodeled the St. James Hotel at the corner of Sixth Avenue and E Street in 1886. He kept his library there until he built floor-to-ceiling bookcases in his home. Photo, 1909. ©SDHC #12.*

Mondeville, a medieval French surgeon; Hieronymus Brunschwig, a sixteenth-century German surgeon who first wrote about gunshot wounds; and the eighteenth-century French surgeon Henri François Le Dran who did pioneering work on cancer and shock.

These volumes were initially kept at the St. James Hotel but were eventually housed in floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in several rooms of Remondino's home. Some were stacked in piles in the middle of rooms and still more overflowed into the basement and the attic. Remondino sometimes worked in the living room while his wife played classics on the phonograph. At other times, he would hide away in his library with a scarf about his head to shut out sound. In his later years he actually hired a librarian and secretary, Jeanette Barry, to care for the collection and make volumes available to him as he wrote. It was said that he actually knew the exact location of each of the volumes and, when necessary, would use opera glasses to scan the shelves.<sup>29</sup>

His library reportedly proved useful in less traditional ways as well. In 1888, there was a smallpox epidemic in San Diego. Remondino was consulted by the City Health Officer Chester L. Magee, MD, about a case of presumed hemorrhagic smallpox. The patient lived in a large apartment house which Remondino and



Magee recommended be quarantined based upon their diagnosis and the extreme danger of contagion associated with smallpox. The other tenants of the house fled, leaving it vacant. The patient died. An autopsy performed by a physician of the “eclectic school” (a non-traditional branch of medicine that used only herbal remedies and physical therapy) concluded that the patient did not have smallpox. The owner of the apartment then sued for \$50,000 in damages. Dr. G.L. Cole of Los Angeles was called to testify at the trial. Remondino met Dr. Cole at the train station with a team of chestnut horses and a coachman and took him to the St. James Hotel where his library was then housed. There were many volumes on smallpox spread across a table in the library. Reportedly Remondino said, “Dr. Cole, if there is anything you don’t know about smallpox you will find it discussed in these books. If you are satisfied with what you know, let’s sit down and discuss the problem.” Although the ensuing trial was heated and acrimonious it resulted in a judgment of nonsuit against the defendants based largely upon Dr. Cole’s testimony.<sup>30</sup>



Remondino's celebrated library. ©SDHC #2905-C-2.



*Dr. Remondino was a prolific writer who published dozens of medical books dealing with medical disorders. He may be best known for *The History of Circumcision* (1891). ©SDHC #85:15272.*

Remondino also had a large collection of weapons—over 250 items—that included guns, swords, sabers, lances, and armor. He had planned to produce a history of the portable arms of the U.S. Army and Navy that would demonstrate the expected type of wound produced by each weapon, but he never completed the volume. Another unfinished project was a 60-70 volume history of medicine organized both topically and chronologically with a cross index that would allow survey of any subject instantly. The notes that he had accrued in the course of his research occupied five large filing cases.<sup>31</sup> He also planned to compile an illustrated history of Mary Magdalene that would include over 600 paintings and statues. In the process, he gathered together copies of every known Mary Magdalene painted or sculpted. He also acquired a large stamp collection that he donated to the San Diego Lyceum of Natural Sciences in 1874.<sup>32</sup>

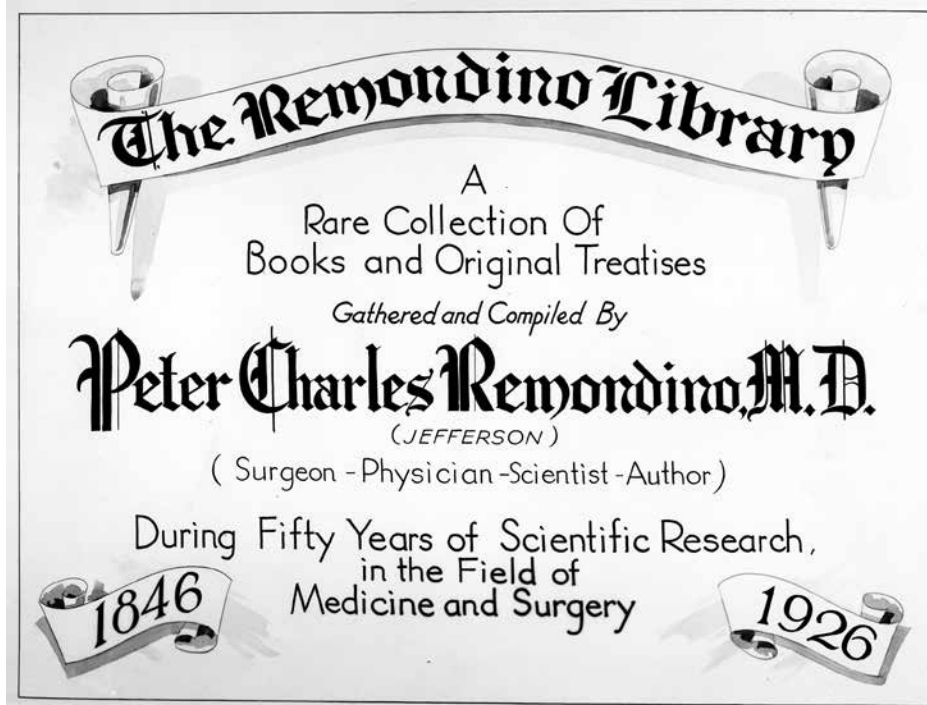
Dr. Fred Baker, a San Diego physician, described Remondino as a scholar, a bibliophile, and an omnivorous reader with memory of remarkable accuracy such that he could quote at length from almost anything he had ever read and could even recall references immediately.<sup>33</sup> He “upheld the finest traditions of his calling by paying devoted attention to many cases when little or no monetary remuneration for his services could be expected.”<sup>34</sup>

Physically Remondino was 5’8” tall with a large head, high forehead, and bushy black hair that turned white with age. He had a heavy “beetled” brow

with deep-set hazel eyes, a prominent nose and a medium mouth with a Roman chin. His face was full and his complexion florid. His torso was long and bulky while his legs were short and his feet small. Some described him as picturesque, intellectually audacious, egocentric, genius and eccentric. He was known to have trained crickets. He would often venture out for an evening walk in a blue French military cloak with one side thrown over a shoulder to show the inner red lining while wearing a Derby hat and carrying a cane. He had a cheerful, sunny disposition and was sympathetic and understanding to patients. His watchwords to his patients were "be cheerful."<sup>35</sup>

Remondino was progressive and entrepreneurial. He was one of only two physicians who were subscribers to the telephone system in 1881. In addition to building the first private hospital in San Diego, he saw the need for an excellent hotel to accommodate visitors to the city; the Horton House apparently had seen better days. He purchased the Santa Rosa Hotel at the corner of Sixth Avenue and E Street, remodeled it by adding a \$25,000 addition, and renamed it the St. James Hotel in 1886. At five stories tall, it was the city's first skyscraper.

Remondino was justifiably proud of his library and had planned to bequeath it to a local library but it is not clear which one. Reportedly, he presented a set



A card memorializes the extensive Remondino Library. ©SDHC #2905.



*John Scripps bought the Remondino Library and donated it to The College of Medical Evangelists, now Loma Linda University. This photo c. 1959 shows the gift and presentation of a Latin Bible printed in Venice in 1483. Courtesy of Loma Linda University.*

of volumes of his own writings to that library; a few months later he found the volumes that he had donated in a used bookstore marked “discarded” and changed his mind about the fate of his collection. After his death the family wanted the library to remain intact. It was offered to several medical schools but they were all ambivalent because of the restriction. A cousin of one of Peter’s sons-in-law reportedly interested John Scripps of La Jolla in the collection. Scripps bought the collection and—with the aid of Jacob Zeitlin, a Los Angeles rare book dealer—arranged for its subsequent donation to The College of Medical Evangelists (now Loma Linda University) where it currently resides.<sup>36</sup>

The doctor retired from practice in his late 60s, only briefly resuming his practice in 1918 during the influenza pandemic. He took charge of an improvised hospital located in the Mission Brewery near Five Points where most of the patients, Italians, were being treated with garlic and red wine. In 1922 Remondino was injured in an automobile accident at Tenth Avenue and B Street in which he sustained cuts about the head and face. At age 78, he sustained a stroke and developed cardiac failure but remained alert. He continued his literary work

from his bed until a second stroke resulted in his death two months before his 81st birthday.<sup>37</sup>

Remondino was an interesting individual who had an important impact on San Diego medicine and the community at large. Whether from a sense of duty or the desire for adventure, he served in two different wars and gained invaluable surgical experience as a result. His intellectual curiosity took him from a one-room schoolhouse to the city of San Diego where he became the author, and collector, of books that had a significant effect on public attitudes, both then and today. His legacy is evidenced through the collection of books that now resides at Loma Linda University.

## NOTES

1. Peter Charles Remondino, *Autobiography*, San Diego History Center, P.C. Remondino Papers MS 4, Box 1, Folder 1; See also Peter Charles Remondino *Autobiography* (1846-1926), <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/bio/remondino/ch1.htm> (accessed June 30, 2015).
2. Ralph Hermon Major, *A History of Medicine*, 2 vols. (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1954), 1:195.
3. Press Reference Library, *Notables of the West*, 2 vols. (New York: International News Service, 1915), 2:343.
4. Theodore Strong Van Dyke, T.T. Leberthon, A. Taylor, *The City and County of San Diego* (San Diego: Leberthon & Taylor, 1888), 187.
5. Remondino, *Autobiography*, pt. 1.
6. Clarence Alan McGrew, *City of San Diego and San Diego County: The Birthplace of California*, 2 vols. (Chicago and New York: The American Historical Society, 1922), 2:12.
7. L.B. Arey, *Northwestern University Medical School 1859-1959: A Pioneer in Educational Reform* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1959), 10-11.
8. Remondino, *Autobiography*, pt. 2; Press Reference Library, *Notables of the West*, 2:343.
9. Arey, *Northwestern University Medical School*, 10-11.
10. Remondino, *Autobiography*, pt. 3; McGrew, *City of San Diego and San Diego County*, 15-16; Press Reference Library, *Notables of the West*, 2:343.
11. Remondino, *Autobiography*, pt. 4.
12. The Remondino family had moved from Austrian-controlled territories in northern Italy to Piedmont "where there existed a constitutional enlightened and liberal form of government." Remondino, *Autobiography*, pt. 1.
13. Remondino, *Autobiography*, pt. 4; Press Reference Library, *Notables of the West*, 2:343; Van Dyck, et al., *The City and County of San Diego*, 188.
14. Remondino, *Autobiography*, pt. 5.
15. Remondino, *Autobiography*, pt. 5.
16. *San Diego Union*, July 18, 1874; *San Diego Union*, January 3, 1875; *San Diego Union*, October 1, 1875.

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19. Remondino, *Autobiography*, pt. 5; Arey, *Northwestern University Medical School*, 10-11.
20. Press Reference Library, *Notables of the West*, 2:344. Some of Remondino's published and unpublished works can be found in SDHC, MS 4, P.C. Remondino Papers, and UCLA Library, Department of Special Collections, 658, P.C. Remondino Papers. See also, Linda E. Miller, "San Diego's Early Years as a Health Resort," *The Journal of San Diego History* 28, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 232-47.
21. F[red] Baker, P.C. Remondino [obituary], in California Medical Association, "News," *California and Western Medicine* 26, no. 2 (February 1927), 233.
22. Van Dyck, et al., *The City and County of San Diego*, 189; Press Reference Library, *Notables of the West*, 2:343.
23. Van Dyck, et al., *The City and County of San Diego*, 189; Miller, "San Diego's Early Years as a Health Resort," 236-38.
24. P[eter] C. Remondino, MD, *The History of Circumcision from the Earliest Times to the Present: Moral and Physical Reasons for its Performance, with a History of Eunuchism, Hermaphroditism, Etc. and of the Different Operations Practiced upon the Prepuce* (Philadelphia and London: F.A. Davis, 1891).
25. "History of Circumcision," <http://www.historyofcircumcision.net> (accessed June 30, 2015).
26. Remondino, *The History of Circumcision*, 307. San Diego has played a seminal role in the debate over the merits (or lack thereof) of circumcision. David Gollaher, PhD., a resident of San Diego became interested in the subject and produced a scholarly work, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). The author of this article was a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Task Force on Circumcision whose report in 1999 satisfied neither the pro-circumcision nor the anti-circumcision contingents. Matthew Hess, another San Diegan, produced an anti-circumcision comic book, *Foreskin Man*, and was a driving force in the attempt to ban circumcision in San Francisco and Santa Monica.
27. Arey, *Northwestern University Medical School*, 10-11; Baker, P.C. Remondino [obituary], in California Medical Association, "News," 233.
28. Samuel T. Black, ed., *San Diego County, California* (Chicago: S.J. Clark, 1913), 31-32; P.C. Remondino, *Catalogue of the Remondino Library* ([San Diego?]: 1936).
29. Cyril B. Courville, *On the Growth of a Library* (Los Angeles: Friends of the White Memorial Medical Library, 1947), 20, 21, 23.
30. *Ibid.*, 19-20.
31. Press Reference Library, *Notables of the West*, 2:344; Baker, P.C. Remondino [obituary], in California Medical Association, "News," 233.
32. Peter A. Ottaviano, "The Fever of Life: The Story of Peter Charles Remondino," master's thesis, University of San Diego, 1992, 15.
33. Baker, P.C. Remondino [obituary], in California Medical Association, "News," 233.
34. McGrew, *City of San Diego and San Diego County*, 1:113-114.
35. Courville, *On the Growth of a Library*, 23-24; Baker, P.C. Remondino [obituary], in California Medical Association, "News," 233.
36. Courville, *On the Growth of a Library*, 24.
37. *Ibid.*, 24.