Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's book, Tales of a Wayside Inn, is a collection of stories in poetic form about a group of men seated in front of the fireplace of an inn relating, each in turn, some of the most interesting stories in the literature of the world. As Longfellow says:

"Around the fireside at their ease
There sat a group of friends entranced"

Gathered together were a musician, a student, a theologian, a Sicilian, and a poet. Longfellow chose real persons as patterns for the characters in his story. For the most part they were his acquaintances or friends. What is of interest here is that Longfellow chose as the poet, Thomas W. Parsons, a dentist.

In his Tales of a Wayside Inn Longfellow presents a realistic characterization of Parsons,

"A Poet, too, was there, whose verse
Was tender, musical, and terse
All these were his; but with them came
No envy of another's fame
Honor and blessing on his head
While living, good report when dead,
Who, not too eager for renown,
Accepts, but does not clutch, the crown."

The Wayside Inn still stands in Sudbury 20 miles west of Boston. It was first built in 1686. Later Henry Ford purchased it and restored it as a museum. There was a room in the Inn known as "The Parsons Room" -- named in honor of the poet-dentist.

Poetry of a high order and dentistry may at first sight seem incongruous. Yet they uniquely blended together in the life of Thomas W. Parsons.

He was born in Boston in 1819, the same year as T.W.G. Morton. His father, after whom he was named, was a
native of Bristol, England. The father had received an M.D. degree from Harvard Medical School in 1818 and practiced dentistry. In fact he was an itinerant dentist, as was the custom of the time. There are numerous announcements from 1814 to 1822 in the newspapers of Worcester, Mass., that a Dr. T. Parsons, Dentist from Boston, would be visiting for a brief period of time.

Thomas W. Parsons, Jr., the son, studied at the Boston Latin School between his ninth and fifteenth years, where he became a devoted student of the classics. In lieu of receiving a college education, he toured Europe with his father for a year in 1836. To the sensitive, imaginative boy, the trip determined the artistic aspect of his life. He had a remarkable gift for language and quickly learned the soft Italian tongue. While in Florence, he became so fascinated by Dante, the great thirteenth-century Italian poet, that he committed to memory the entire Paradise section of Dante's The Divine Comedy as he strolled through the cobblestoned streets. An early enthusiasm for Dante developed into an intense and life-long passion with him for the remaining 55 years of his life.

Dante remains one of the greatest poets of all time. T.S. Eliot said, "Dante and Shakespeare divide the world between them; there is no third." Dante's immortal work, The Divine Comedy is a visionary journey through the horrors of Hell, through Purgatory and finally into Paradise.

Already the forces that shaped Parsons' life become readily evident—the dental background of his father and his own innate sensitivity to the classics and to Dante in particular.

Immediately after his return from Europe he entered Harvard Medical School. While still a student there at the age of 22, he wrote one of his first and greatest poems, "On a Bust of Dante." Later an English critic called it "By very far the finest stanza that ever left America" and by Stedman "The peer of any modern lyric in our time." He attended medical school for one and a half years but left without receiving a degree. Instead he studied dentistry under the likely preceptorship of his father.
He practiced on Winter Street, the fashionable part of Boston. He had among his patients the literary giants of his day in Boston. Though little is preserved concerning his profession, several references to dentistry appear in his letters which have been preserved at Harvard University and at the Boston Public Library.

One of his letters concerns an appointment he had, but unavoidably missed, with James Russell Lowell, the noted poet, essayist and diplomat. Parsons wrote, "I console myself in some degree by the thought that there is no imminent danger in the present condition of the faulty molar and that it might remain for weeks without change." He then asks for another appointment, promising to be "as faithful as the Fates permit." Certainly flowery language for a dentist writing to his patient.

From all appearances he was a successful dentist. When he died he left an estate of $90,000. He did this although not practicing for the last 20 years of his life by travelling extensively abroad and by publishing his books at his own expense.

The blending of dentistry and poetry in Parsons was wittily described by Charles Eliot Norton, author and Harvard professor,

"You ask who Parsons is. He is a dentist by profession (whence he learned the use of the file, and of compression and various other secrets of poetry). He is most retiring and modest in life and well known only to a few. I like him very much and have known him for a long while."

For a dentist in Parsons' era to have literary tastes, to be a writer or a poet was not altogether unusual. The mid-and late nineteenth-century was the age of the whole man whose knowledge of the world was wider than that of his profession alone. This is exemplified by an address which the president of the Massachusetts Dental Society, Dr. Robert Andrews, delivered in 1876 advising his colleagues,

"We should be so cultured that people could not tell our work by our conversation; for a narrow education gives one knowledge of nothing but one's
An interesting anecdote involving Parsons and his office was described by Edwin Booth, the famous actor.

"I was in a drug store in Boston one day, when an active nervous man came in and said to the druggist in a loud whisper, 'Is that Edwin Booth?' 'Yes,' answered the druggist. 'Do you know him?' 'I do.' 'Please introduce me,' said the man. And after being a compulsory listener to this preliminary, I was presented to Dr. Parsons. He showered me with compliments which amused me by their exaggerated sense of my importance. Then he invited me to his office and I accompanied him there. No sooner was I seated in his big dental chair than he rushed to his desk and drew out a manuscript poem, which he thrust into my hand with a modest request that I should read it aloud. It was written in a blind hand, and I could hardly decipher the words. I begged him to excuse me, and assured him that I was a very poor reader, that I never trusted myself to read anything unless I had studied it carefully. He seemed disappointed but his face brightened up presently and he said 'Will you listen to me read it?' 'Yes, of course,' and he proceeded to recite with much fire and energy, his splendid poem, "Dirge for One Who Fell in Battle." I praised the poem as it deserved, and an acquaintance begun in this singular manner, strengthened into a warm and enduring friendship."

In 1843, Parsons published The First Ten Cantos of the Inferno of Dante Alighieri, Newly Translated into English Verse." Thus, at the age of 24, he became the first American to translate any of The Divine Comedy." Characteristically, he published this volume anonymously. It was not until 24 years later that his version of the Inferno was completed and published. To a publisher who attempted to hasten him, he replied, "I expect to be a student of Dante through all eternity and therefore I cannot afford to be hurried by the exigencies of your house." In one of his sonnets he says,

"Friends must be patient when I do these things
Wasting an hour that might be better given
To work - in following Dante far as heaven."
Little wonder then that it has been suggested that with his long, lean figure and his deep eyes and prominent nose he bore a certain resemblance to his idol. There are few things in literature more remarkable than this loyalty of his, this absolute consecration of one soul and mind to the interpretation of another.

Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, the physician-writer, said of him,

"Dr. Parsons is as true a poet as we have among us... to his life-long devotion to Dante, by the absorbing study he has given him, I attribute the facility of his style, the exquisite art that characterizes his work. He has written some poems finer than any other American poet has written."

Holmes also wrote to Parsons as follows,

"Your Dante, I judge from all that I have heard and read will carry your name to posterity coupled with a noble and monumental achievement."

But our poet-dentist never really achieved the full recognition he richly deserved, one reason being that he did not command the attention of a large public. He was a "poet for poets" rather than for the people. He was a literary craftsman who took such pride in his work that he labored over it slowly, rewriting and polishing, sometimes changing poems even after they had been published. Though he wrote his poems with infinite care, he was surprisingly indifferent to their subsequent fate. More often than not he sent his poems to newspapers and to obscure periodicals.

A Rochester, New York, newspaper published his poem, "A Song for October" with this preface: "This beautiful little poem which is floating anonymously in our exchanges bears unmistakable marks of a higher genius than is often manifested in newspaper verse. Does anyone know who is the author?"

However, his poem "The Sculptor's Funeral" appeared in the first volume of The Atlantic Monthly in 1858 and was followed by 25 poems over the years.
His collections of poems appeared as follows: *Poems* (1854), *The Magnolia* (1866), *The Old House at Sudbury* (1870), *The Shadow of the Obelisk* (1872) and *The Willey House and Sonnets* (1875). In addition, he published a book of common prayer called *Circum Praecordia, the Collects of the Holy Catholic Church As They Are Set Forth by the Church of England* (1892). This last volume attests to his profound religious feeling. He was a member of the High Episcopal Church party, "as nearly a Roman Catholic as he well could be without absolutely stepping over the dividing line." Posthumously appearing in 1893 were two volumes *Poems* and *Translation of Dante's Divine Comedy into English Verse*.

Thomas Parsons was a shy, reserved man who, as has been said "carried his solitude with him into the street." He has been characterized as a "Hamlet of verse," as being out of joint with the time in which he lived, as though he should have lived in Dante's age.

His books were privately printed, mostly through the efforts of his wife who shared his literary interests. In 1857, he had married Anna Allen. She was his constant companion until she died in 1881. The marriage was childless.

Parsons travelled widely in England and Europe. In London, he met Gladstone and the Archbishop of York and said, "After such quiet people, I am somewhat dreading the rough and tumble of Winter Street." There is evidence that he practiced dentistry in London during his 14-month stay there in 1871-1872.

An interesting anecdote of an occurrence near the end of Parsons' life is told by Joseph Chamberlain, a newspaper editor.

"It was on a rather hot evening in early summer in the year 1886 at about eleven o'clock, as I remember, when, as I was poring over some editorials a man of remarkable appearance entered my room. He was tall, lean, a little stooped, and apparently about 65 years old. His face was long, his nose prominent; a Dante with a gray moustache. He was dressed in black, and in a somewhat old fashioned way, with a rather
long coat, and he carried a tall hat in his hand. His face was eager, flushed, and his deep eyes had an expression of exaltation. He is gone long and long now; the world knows that he was a gentleman as well as a poet; and I say this without hesitation and without a thought of derogation, that his exaltation was the result, not only of emotion but of wine, for this was evident. There was no shame in this. His habits were those of graceful and gentlemanly conviviality. I rose with an instinctive homage. The man bowed and said: 'I am Dr. T.W. Parsons, I wish to write for your paper some verses in honor of my old friend, Dr. Bethune, who was buried today.' I knew who he was then. Dr. Parsons, the author of the noblest rhymed English translation of Dante's Inferno. 'We shall be honored sir,' I said. 'You have not yet written the poem?' 'No sir. I will write it now, if you will kindly give me pen and paper.' I took him to the lighted library in the adjoining room and brought pen and ink. The poet with some difficulty sat down. I left him. It seemed to me that not more than 20 minutes had passed before he brought to me, rather roughly written on a single sheet of paper a poem on 'Dr. Bethune.'"

"Thou and I,
Dear Doctor, ask a little mound,
And space to bid the world good by!"

Although Thomas Parsons never received a dental degree, Harvard conferred an honorary M.A. degree on him in 1853 in recognition of his poetic accomplishments and his role as a New England poet laureate. He was also elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His poems are represented in the *Oxford Book of American Verse.*

The last 20 years of his life were devoted entirely to his writing. He spent much of his time at the Wayside Inn and at his home on Beacon Hill in Boston. He died on September 3, 1892 at the age of 73 at the home of his sister in Scituate, Mass.

Many tributes were paid to Parsons by the men of letters on his day. No other tribute equalled that of Thomas.
Bailey Aldrich, himself a poet, who wrote of him, "Dr. Parsons' lighter lyrics have a grace and distinction which makes it difficult to explain why they failed to win wide liking. That his more serious work failed to do so is explicable. Such austere poetry is not the taste of the mass of readers: but such poetry, once created, becomes a part of the material world; it instantly takes to itself the permanency of mountains, prairies, and rivers; it seems always to have existed."

Fifty years after his death, The Rev. John van Schaick, Jr. writing in The Christian Leader said,

"They tenderly buried the body of the old man with honors. In Mount Auburn Cemetry in Cambridge, Mass. They praised his writings in the newspapers and they all went about their business. Soon T.W. Parsons was pretty much forgotten. Curiously, however, all through the half-century since he died his name has kept coming up, and almost always it has been on the lips or pen of the most cultured and discriminating people. He was no mediocrity. He was a 'poet of poets' and the poets have given him his honored place in literature."

It is time that the dental profession granted recognition and honor to this unusual and talented colleague.

9 Walnut Street

---

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF THE HISTORY OF DENTISTRY
Annual Meeting -- November 6, 1964
San Francisco, California
Plan to be there.

45