



## A beguiling smile

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Figure: Photo of girl, unknown, a patient of Dr. Harvey Cushing  
Source: Yale University, Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library

Her smile is mischievous, beguiling, as if she knows secrets. Her hair is braided in uneven pig-tails. Her hand is held to her chest, a Napoleonic gesture. She seems a happy, lively girl of 9 or 10 years. There are only hints of illness - a subtle facial droop, a hospital gown – but the photo could

otherwise have been taken for her school yearbook. A woman (a nurse?) peeks from behind the backdrop.

The young girl gazes at us with tired eyes from a different era. One eye stares straight at the camera, alive. The other peers off to

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the side, partially obscured by a lagging lid. The girl's name, her diagnosis, her story, have been lost to time. Taken in the early 1900's, the photo was included in the medical record for Dr. Harvey Cushing, the pioneer of modern neurosurgery.

Before CT scans and MRIs, the photograph was a routine part of the medical record. Dr. Cushing fastidiously recorded his patients' disease course – before surgery, immediately afterwards, and along the path to recovery, or demise.[1] He was methodical, meticulous, exacting, in recording the progress of disease. Yet, this photo is more than a cold, clinical representation of illness. The child is caught in mid-laughter. There is movement, artistry, life. It is a photo that invites us into her story and begs many questions. What was her diagnosis? Why was she a patient of Dr. Cushing? Did she suffer? Did she live?

This photo was one of thousands that belonged to Cushing's celebrated Tumor Registry, which includes microscopy slides, surgical records, 15,000 patient photographs, and more than 700 whole brain specimens in gallon-sized jars. The photo was taken from a glass plate negative using a large format camera in the daguerreotype style of the mid-19th century, which preserves the crisp, clean lines and lively style. The photographer would have been hidden under dark cloth focusing on an upside down and backwards image of the patient, a slow, deliberate process with the subject staring into the lens. Asking the subject to smile was probably not part of the process. Was this the only photo

taken of this child?

Our modern imaging fails to capture what is so evident in these photographs – the suffering, anguish, worry, and hope of patients facing an uncertain future. For decades, neurologists, pathologists, and surgeons would venture to Cushing's collection for study and research. With the advent of modern imaging and the change in research priorities, the collection became forgotten. Too precious to dispose, yet no longer relevant, the collection found its way to the sub-basement of the Yale Medical School dormitory, adjacent to a fallout shelter. Medical students would routinely visit the sub-basement for a macabre study break. Realizing the treasure of these dusty jars and piles of glass plates, Christopher Wahl, a medical student, wrote his thesis about the collection. This attracted the enthusiasm of the medical school and the Cushing Center was born.

A small portion of Cushing's photos are back on display. The brain collection is available to all. Today, this young girl continues to stare quietly, hopefully, persistently, at school children and scholars alike, a testament to another era of medicine. We cannot help but wonder about her fate.

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## Reference

A neurosurgeon's photographic legacy, Yale Medicine. 2008 Spring:27-33. Available from <https://medicine.yale.edu/news/yale-medicine-magazine/a-neurosurgeons-photographic-legacy/>

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