

Early Health Conditions in Indiana

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In these trying times there may be some satisfaction in referring to the "good old days." On the other hand it may leave one feeling like the little boy who pounded his finger because it felt so good when he stopped.

It must be admitted that most of the severe epidemics of the nineteenth century came and went without anyone knowing why they came or why they disappeared.

There have been many sicknesses that have killed, maimed, or laid low the people of Indiana; to talk about them all would be a most gruesome tale. The four sicknesses, cholera, malaria, milk-sickness and typhoid were selected for discussion because they are sicknesses that can be controlled by good environmental sanitation. Yes, all of these sicknesses have visited the people of Indiana during the past one hundred and fifty years.

Today there seems to be but little similarity in the symptoms of the four sicknesses, but I am sure from my readings that even the doctors were confused in the early eighteen hundreds. The most serious epidemics of these sicknesses came and left before the real causes were understood. It is reasonable to believe that there was practically nothing that man did that curtailed the diseases or lessened the resulting loss of life during the early days in Indiana.

It was not until 1883 that Koch identified the bacteria that caused the intestinal infection known as cholera. The main symptoms of this disease, you may or may not know, were and still are where the disease exists "severe, constantly flowing diarrhea, vomiting, collapse, cramps in the muscles, and suppression of the flow of urine from the kidneys".

The scientific control of malaria also started about 1880 when Laveran, a French army surgeon, found the parasite in human blood. It is well known that the chief symptoms of malaria are intermittent chills and fever.

Milk sickness is not a disease but a poisoning of animals that have eaten the weed white snake root. The poison, an alkaloid, can be passed on to humans who develop the same symptoms as affected cattle—they are shaking and convulsions. People have become poisoned by drinking milk from animals not apparently poisoned.

Typhoid fever, the intestinal infection caused by the typhoid bacillus, is and has been much talked of. The symptoms are: first, headache, pain all over the body, a feeling of exhaustion; then chills, fever, nose bleeds, serious disturbances of the bowels resulting from ulcerations in the intestines. It was not until 1880 that Eberth discovered the organism and it was sixteen years later that Wright developed a method of protecting people by inoculation.

Similarity of symptoms such as chills or convulsions and fever in all four of the sicknesses explains some of the confusion found in early reports by doctors and newspaper reporters. The confusion of sickness identification makes it impossible to report on each of the four sicknesses in separate chronologic order. Information from newspaper and old diaries can easily be placed in proper sequence but some of the interesting statements found in histories and other published works are not so easily placed in proper order.

An attempt will be made to give some idea as to the health of the people in Indiana from the time that it gained statehood in 1816 until more recent times. Dr. Harding (4) wrote in his report, "The graver forms of periodical fever were scarcely known, and the country was considered quite healthy until about the year 1819, when both intermittent and remittent fevers became quite prevalent, and decidedly malignant. This state of things continued during the summer and autumn for three or four years. Within this period a considerable portion of the adult male inhabitants lost their lives, while women and children suffered less". In reading about Indianapolis it was noted that one reporter (5) stated that more children than grown-ups died of the fevers. Dr. Schweitzer (6) states in her historical writings that "in 1820 there was a visitation of intermittent and remittent fevers much more malignant than the ordinary fever and ague. Many new towns were almost depopulated". It is recorded that there were seventy-two deaths (one-eighth of the entire population) in Indianapolis in one year. The sale of lots in the then recently platted capital city had to be postponed until the following year. In Dr. Mitchell's notes on Indianapolis he states that "of 1000 souls in town on the donation, and the farms surrounding the town, at least 900 sickened during the prevailing epidemic." Kemper (5) states that he obtained from reliable sources that "in the fall of 1821 there was only one well man in the city of Columbus. This man, a stalwart six-footer, who evidently had been brought up in a swamp was cook and nurse to the entire community" and Kemper says then, "His memory deserves to be perpetuated," but neglects to give the name of the Good Samaritan. It is quite certain that this siege was malaria because of the vivid description of the fever and chills. During the hot stage, a statement is recorded that the physician tried to promote perspiration by internal and external remedies. After this the stomach and bowels were prepared for the reception of Peruvian bark that was given in spirits in large quantities.

In Vincennes in 1821 (10), one third of the residents were "in their beds with sickness". The whole of the Wabash country was infected. In "Recollections of the Early Settlement of Carroll County" (7) it says, "On the 12th day of October, 1824, Henry Hezekiah and Abner Robinson, with their families, accompanied by Joseph Clymer and his son, and a Mr. James French, started for the Wabash Valley. On passing through Richmond and Centerville they were annoyed by the croaking predictions of 'ill luck' uttered on all sides. 'You will never

get through', says one. 'You will die if you go to the Wabash; everyone that goes there dies in less than a year,' joined another."

Some of the early residents had a belief that swamps and damp air had something to do with the sickness but at least one other believed differently because he wrote, "In 1830 the summer was dry and sickly. Unfortunately for Delphi the unusual amount of sickness gave it a bad name from which it did not recover for many years".

"The Indiana Magazine of History" (2) states, "On the whole the distress of the families during epidemics of fever was pitiable. Often there were not enough well people to care for the sick. Provisions gave out and it was difficult for the sick people to obtain food. A poor settler of Hamilton County describes conditions thus: 'In September sickness set in in earnest; nearly everyone would be down at the same time, not one to help the other when the ague was on'."

The "Indiana Journal" of June 14, 1832 carried a short item stating that cholera was reported in the City of New York and that several cases had terminated fatally. The next item that I found in this same paper was in the November 10, 1832 issue. It carried the date line, Madison, Nov. 5 and it was a letter to the readers and it read as follows: "Gentlemen—I have just time to say to you that the cholera has to all appearances, abated. We have had no case since Thursday last, 12 o'clock. That it has left our borders I am not prepared to believe, as many of our citizens are complaining and are under medical discipline. I believe, however, that here as elsewhere after the first attacks, which in a majority of cases prove fatal, the disease yields to medicine.—"

The "Wabash Mercury" of July 18, 1833 carried an article from the "Wabash Courier" headlined "Cholera at Salem". It is quoted as follows: "By a traveler from the South, we learn that the cholera is prevailing in Salem to a frightful extent. In five days, one hundred are said to have fallen victims to it. Among this number, we regret to record the name of the venerable and upright Benjamin Parke, District Judge of Indiana. Salem contains a population of about 800 souls, making the death in a ratio of one in eight. This mortality, if true, is unparalleled in the progress of the disease in our country. We hope that the reports that reached us may turn out to have been exaggerated." The "Indiana Journal" of July 20, 1833 said, "The disease has visited Salem in its most unrelenting form—business is prostrate, and a large portion of the inhabitants have fled from the scene of the distress and death." In reading the old newspapers I found that they were inclined to minimize the story about the epidemic in their own community but quote even the wildest of tales about neighboring communities. To illustrate this the "Wabash Mercury" of July 18, 1833 is quoted, "From Greensburg, we learn that the cholera has broken out with great violence and in a few days thirty deaths had occurred", "By recent intelligence we learn that the cholera was raging at New Castle, Henry County. Between forty and fifty cases, and several deaths have occurred during the past week." These may

have been very true but not a word about the health of the people in Lafayette. The "Wabash Mercury" of July 25, 1833 had items informing their readers of cholera cases in Bedford, Paoli, Rockville, Mount Vernon and Covington and three weeks later they reported cases in New Castle, Richmond, and Indianapolis.

Perhaps more authentic information on epidemics can be found in the technical writings of the medical doctors of these early days. Dr. George Sutton (9) has written extensively about the epidemics of cholera in southern Indiana. He not only treated patients that had cholera, he and most of his family had the disease. He has this to say about the 1833 epidemic in Dearborn County. "A steamboat ascending the Ohio River, in the month of May, 1833, landed near the mouth of Tanner's Creek to bury one of the deck hands who had died of cholera. Two men, one an old citizen of Dearborn County, by the name of Page Cheek, were fishing near the place this boat landed. The officers of the boat, seeing these men, employed them to bury this body, which they did. All the next day, Cheek, who lived near the mouth of Wilson Creek, about a mile from Tanner's Creek, plowed in the corn field, apparently perfectly well, but during the night he was suddenly attacked with cholera, and died after a short illness. His brother-in-law, Eli Green, went with his wife to the funeral. They resided near Hartford, about six miles from Cheek's residence; within a week both Green and his wife died with cholera, and in a few days after their deaths, three of their children also died, making five deaths out of this family of seven persons. The disease spread through the neighborhood, and soon appeared at Aurora, where a large number of deaths occurred, among the number some of the most prominent citizens. It is impossible now to ascertain the number of deaths which occurred, as no account of this epidemic in Dearborn County was ever published."

Cholera received the most attention in the papers of this period but in the "Wabash Mercury" of September 12, 1833 there was an article (not unlike our columns of letters to the editor) that apparently had been written in reply to one previously sent in by a traveler that quoted an elderly lady. It said, "The milk sickness is not as prevalent between Logansport and Vincennes as reported by a traveler quoting an 'elderly lady'." The elderly lady may have had some foundation for her statements because the "Wabash Mercury" of November 14, 1833 carries three columns describing milk sickness and sick stomach and how to treat them. A tinge of what nowadays is called propaganda can be detected in the following quotation from the aforementioned letter, "The Wabash country for the past three years, has been as healthy as any other section of the Union, and the emigration too is unexampled in the history of any new country; and as the population increases, the diseases consequent to a new country disappear." Perhaps the anonymous correspondent was interested in some commercial venture that depended upon new people coming into the country. I am sure that there is overwhelming evidence that the years 1830-33 were far from being healthful.

Schweitzer (6) writes, "Up until 1836 malaria returned each year with but slightly lessening severity, and the distress was well nigh universal, and from the first of July till the first of October all work and business ceased and the few well ones devoted their time to the care of the sick."

It is not easy to conclude that malaria was less dangerous than cholera when we read in Kempers, "Medical History of the State of Indiana," "The doctors found the ague, in many instances, more than a match for their skill. It was of the real shaking variety, the chill lasting not infrequently three or four hours, to be followed by raging fever. So malignant was this type of fever that as many as three or four deaths of adults have occurred in one family in less than forty-eight hours. Peruvian bark and calomel would temporarily check the fever, but cold weather seemed to be the only thing that would stop this dreadful scourge." Perhaps the free usage of the lancet to bleed practically all patients coupled with the more than free usage of calomel, tartar emetic, castor oil, and salts did not decrease the mortality rate among the fever ridden. The doctors tried to do their best for their patients even though they themselves were ill. At one time in the town of Franklin, only two out of the five physicians were able to answer calls. Their services were so much needed that they rode from place to place on a gallop. Often they traveled not less than fifty miles per day (10).

Dr. Sutton (9) says, "In 1838 the Laughery Valley, which is a few miles below Aurora, was visited by a malignant form of malarial fever—I think I can safely say that every family residing along this valley, for eight miles from the Ohio River, was more or less unwell, and in many families all were bedfast."

Hamelle (3) wrote, "Princeton Township in White County was for thirty-five or forty years known as one of the bad fever districts of the County. The worst season of all was reported in 1844-45. In July and August there were not enough well persons in the township to care for those who were seized with it." Dr. Schweitzer writes that in a personal interview with Dr. P. H. Jameson she was told that in the summer of 1845 hardly one person in six in Indianapolis escaped having what is now believed to have been malaria.

In 1846 Kemper (5) says congestive fever (probably malaria) as it was called appeared in Hancock County. One doctor contending that bleeding was the only remedy and he lost every case. A consultation of all physicians in Cumberland was called and it was agreed that "full and frequent doses of quinine" was the best treatment. A great hindrance to the use of quinine was its cost and the scarcity of money. An ounce of quinine cost about the amount that could be obtained from the sale of one fat beef, eight dollars.

The second serious epidemic of cholera in Indiana was first indicated by cases in Aurora in 1849 (8). About May 1st the residents began having diarrhea, with sudden attacks of vomiting and purging, profuse perspiration and a "remarkable depression of the vital powers"; some who neglected treatment developed the characteristic rice water

discharges, dark and shrunken appearance of the skin, and severe cramps of the extremities. On May 13th there were four deaths in Aurora, on the 14th large fires were made at the corners of the streets and cannon were fired every twenty-five minutes for four or five hours. There were fourteen deaths on this day. Between the 27th of May and the 2nd of August, 132 of the city's inhabitants had died. There were 1600 of the people who left the city and of these only 13 died. Dr. Sutton wrote to his fellow physicians in some of the counties of the state and learned that cholera was prevalent in the following counties in 1849-50-51:

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| 1. Franklin | 14. Grant |
| 2. Ripley | 15. Allen |
| 3. Ohio | 16. Carroll |
| 4. Switzerland | 17. Tippecanoe |
| 5. Jefferson | 18. Johnson |
| 6. Jennings | 19. Putnam |
| 7. Bartholomew | 20. Clay |
| 8. Decatur | 21. Knox |
| 9. Shelby | 22. Dubois |
| 10. Rush | 23. Washington |
| 11. Union | 24. Floyd |
| 12. Wayne | 25. Spencer |
| 13. Henry | 26. Vanderburg |

In July and August 1850 there were 28 deaths from cholera in Mt. Sterling, a little village a few miles north of Vevay. Dr. Thompson reported that there were no cases in Wabash County and Dr. Brackett reported from Fulton County saying that there were no deaths from cholera there during 1849-51.

Delphi was worried about the cholera epidemic and to protect the peoples of the city the following ordinance was passed:

"Be it ordained by the Mayor and Common Council of the Town of Delphi that all persons passing or traveling from places infected with cholera, be prohibited from staying in our midst more than time sufficient to procure a meal of victuals; that all places of public entertainment be required to prohibit the stay of all such persons for a longer time; and that our town citizens, except physicians, be hereafter prohibited from going to or visiting places, near or distant, where the cholera is prevailing, unless there is absolute necessity for so doing; and any person or persons offending against or violating any of the provisions of this ordinance be fined in any sum not less than three or more than ten dollars for each offense." When Stewart (7) recorded this ordinance he added, "Note the cholera was prevailing at Lafayette at the time of the passage of the above law, and the citizens of that city were very indignant at the Mayor and Council of Delphi, on account of the prohibitory ordinance."

That there were deaths from cholera in Lafayette there is no doubt, James P. Jenks, the editor of the "Daily Courier", died after

a severe attack of chills and fever followed by a violent attack of dysentery. It is reported that there were 300 deaths in Lafayette during the epidemic.

Dr. Ezra Read of Terre Haute wrote to Dr. Sutton, "We have been singularly and entirely exempt from cholera—but a single case has ever occurred here. A traveller died at this town in 1850, having passed through some districts in Illinois where cholera was prevailing. He had symptoms when he reached the hotel, and died in about six hours. We can scarcely assign a cause for our exemption from this disease. It has prevailed on the Wabash River towns, both above and below Terre Haute, and at Paris, Illinois, 20 miles west of us."

Vogel (10) said that milk sickness destroyed the value of lands in neighborhoods that were known to be afflicted with it.

In the biographies "The Doctors Mayo" Clapesattle says that both Dr. and Mrs. Mayo had weathered attacks of chills and fever. The Doctor is quoted as saying, "One hour you are so hot you can't get cool; the next you are so cold you can't get warm. Hell, he insisted, is a place where people have malaria." One day in the summer of 1854 in the midst of a chill he stamped into the barn, hitched up horse and buggy, and shouted to his startled wife as he drove off westward, "Goodbye, Louise, I'm going to keep on driving until I get well or die."

Dr. Harding (4) quoting Dr. Woody, wrote in 1853, "During the last winter, typhoid fever was unusually prevalent. Indeed this form of disease seems to be on the increase; while on the other hand, there seems to be a diminution of remittent and intermittent fevers, as well as all diseases of a malarious origin." Esarey (1) wrote, "Typhoid fever would scourge a whole community until its mysterious course was arrested by the autumn rains or winter. In the year 1859 by way of example, the deaths (from all causes) in August, September, and October, the typhoid months, were 1500, 1633, and 1364; while for the three preceding months there were, all told 3358 deaths and for the preceding three there were 2991; an excess of 1139 over the preceding spring months and 1506 over the succeeding winter months. The death toll of typhoid fever seems to have been about 500 persons per month though the total number directly attributed to this malady was 1763."

Dr. Schweitzer said that, "The fevers (malaria) became more severe. They steadily increased in virulence up to 1856; after that time, they gradually decreased." The last widespread epidemic was in 1865.

The very early newspapers did not carry regular notices of deaths. "The Daily Journal" of 1866, had started the practice of publishing death notices and those listed on Saturday morning, August 11, were: Margara Mattler, age 6 years; Mrs. Mary Browning, age 22 years; William McCoy, age 33 years; Cyrus Blauvelt, age 12 months and 12 days; and John Duncan, age 18 months. It is interesting to compare this listing with a recent one in the "Lafayette Journal and Courier", (Saturday, December 9, 1950). James D. Sinclair, age 90; John Funk, age 74; Mrs. Sadie E. Piggat, age 79; and Mrs. Ida L. Paul, age 80.

Vogel (10) said, "No part of America, outside of the tropics, was more subject to malaria visitation than the rich lands in Indiana. So alarming was the mortality that the General Assembly of the State set apart a day for public prayer and supplication to the Almighty God that He might bless the country with fruitful seasons and bring health and peace to the unhappy citizens."

By 1885 malaria had practically disappeared from many sections of the state. Typhoid fever was reported to have reached the highest incidence in 1900. There was not a single month in any year up until 1937 when there was not a reported death from typhoid in Indiana.

Eighteen cases of malaria is the smallest number reported in Indiana in any one year and this was in 1941 prior to the return of many individuals from other parts of the world where they had contracted the disease. There were 643 cases of malaria reported in 1945.

In 1949 there were 47 cases of typhoid in Indiana.

There have been no reported cases of cholera in Indiana in many years. There was one case of milk sickness reported in 1935.

Perhaps our present day problems should not look so difficult to us when we realize that we have been almost entirely relieved of the burdens and fears of those who lived in Indiana in the early days.

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