

SMALLPOX IN COVENTRY

By FRANK G. BRIGGS

Coventry, it appears, has had several outbreaks of smallpox during the early years of the Town, *which was incorporated in the year 1741*. Most of these early cases were quite severe, death often resulting and in many instances the face and other parts of the body were left with very noticeable scars and pits.

Treatment of this awful disease in the early days was somewhat crude according to our present day standards. As the disease was highly contagious the persons so afflicted were isolated and kept apart from all others. This necessitated the erection of quite a large building, known as the Pest House, located on land belonging to the Town, opposite the Town Farm buildings and several hundred yards back from the road at the edge of the woods. The building was quite large and divided into several rooms. Many confined were not sick at the time they were taken there but had come from homes wherein the disease existed and had been exposed and expected to come down with it. When an epidemic struck and a case was discovered, it was the custom, and the law, that the person and the entire family of which he or she was a member should be quarantined. This consisted of the doctor, who was usually the Health Officer, notifying the proper officer of the case, and this officer's duty was to place a red sign near the door of the home whereon were the words "SMALLPOX" in large letters. Families under quarantine were not allowed to leave their homes or allow others to enter until all danger of the disease being communicated had passed. This usually took from a few days to several weeks and if cases of violation of quarantine were discovered, watchmen were placed near the home and a close watch would be kept on the premises to see that none left or entered except the doctor or someone in authority.

Now some of the highlights of the epidemic of smallpox with which I was closely associated with the Health Officer, Dr. Fred W. Bean, and which lasted from 7 to 9 weeks, during this time Dr. Bean gave up his private practice and attended to nothing but this smallpox epidemic which numbered somewhat over 250 cases and caused the quarantining of more than 50 homes in different sections of the Town. Early in October, 1911, Dr. Smith notified Dr. Bean that to the best of his belief there were several cases of smallpox in Quidnick Village and they should be quarantined. Upon investigation several cases were found here which was a mill village and many had been exposed. The disease was in a mild form and to make sure that it was taken care of properly Dr. Gardner Swarts, Chief of the State Board of Health, was notified and I well remember when he came and examined these several cases. He said that it was without doubt smallpox and that in his opinion we were in for a long siege and that all preventative measures should be taken to keep it confined in as small an area as possible. He advised wholesale vaccination of persons who had come in contact with anyone who had been exposed at all. He told us that vaccine would be furnished by the State Board of Health and work should be begun at once. The vaccine came to Dr. Bean and he distributed some to the several doctors of the Town. It was soon found that this epidemic had spread throughout the mill villages of Anthony, Quidnick, Harris, Arkwright, and other parts of the eastern end of the Town. It was thought advisable that schools, churches, and other public meeting places should be closed and all advised to stay at home and isolate themselves as much as possible. Also each family which had been in contact with anyone who had been exposed should be quarantined. This caused many families to be quarantined where there was none of the disease and in many cases none later developed. This shutting families in caused hardships in many cases and the Director of Public Aid was notified to furnish these people with food, fuel, and the necessities of life while they were confined, which in some cases took two to three weeks or until it was thought there was no further danger.

The Pest House had to be opened with Miss Julia Coon, a practical nurse, engaged to go there and care for those confined therein, some of whom were ill with the disease but many were not but were there under quarantine and had to stay until danger of the disease passed and they were allowed to return home. Miss Coon was at the Pest House and cared for sometimes as many as 35 men, women and children who were ill or confined there. This was a tremendous undertaking and was a 24

hour job and while there were none seriously ill, many thought they were and required much attention. In addition to this, meals had to be prepared and many never lost their fine appetites. Miss Coon was assisted in this by Mr. Ratte, George W. Finch, and James T. Pollitt who helped and served as watchmen. It was my job to see that necessary supplies—groceries, fuel, etc. were delivered to the Pest House as it also was to get supplies to families quarantined. The doctor and I rode together most of the time and the doctor cared for those who were ill and we attended to the quarantines and vaccinations. All of this necessitated long hours from early in the morning until late at night. Excitement ran high and everyone was afraid that they might catch it and people gave the doctor and myself a wide berth and no one appeared to want to have much to say or associate with us. Even the Director of Public Aid would not let me in his house, but would give me the necessary orders for the purchase of supplies, food, fuel, medicines, etc. by raising the window and dropping the orders outside and closing it as soon as possible our conversation being through a closed window. Our families were practically isolated and the only place where we ate or rested at all was in our own home. We were not disturbed by company coming to call or visit us. Cold weather began to come on and with it the epidemic appeared to subside somewhat although we had cases of it during the winter of 1911-1912. We closed the Pest House in December, 1911, and most of the families were released from quarantine during the early winter of 1912. Schools and churches were allowed to open and things became near normal. The job of cleaning and disinfecting a house when the quarantine was lifted was something as follows: All occupants were to stay out for several hours. Then we went inside and rolled up all rugs, closed all windows and doors and spilled formaldehyde all around. This fumigated everything and all germs were killed. After 2 or 3 hours of this, the house was opened and aired and the occupants were allowed to return. Everyone had taken a bath and changed into clean clothes. For this purpose of disinfecting we used several carboys of formaldehyde and my automobile was saturated with it for a long time.

There were many incidents connected with this affair which really had a humorous as well as a serious side. Such as the man who, when he came home from the saloon where he had spent the P.M. and found a quarantine sign attached to the house near the door, did not like it at all and ripped down the sign and entered the house and ate his supper then started visiting his neighbors and letting all know that he would have no "Board Bill" on his house and that he would stay in or go out as he pleased and no one would stop him. The doctor and I were told about this the following morning and we found him in this same mood. He was not going to be told what to do or where to stay by anyone, smallpox or not. His family was afraid and so we placed him under arrest and while he made a show of resistance, he soon was calmed down. We took him in my automobile to Apponaug where the District Court was in session. It was raining and I drove the car in the shed in the rear of the Town Hall and went in and told Judge Hebert what we had. The Judge said, "Don't bring him in here, I will go out there". This he did and he gave the man a severe talking to and sentenced him to a short term at the State Farm and gave us committal orders to enter him. We drove to the State Farm and I went in the office and the officer in charge took him into the basement where he removed his clothes. The officer took a pitchfork and threw them into a blazing furnace and then had him take a bath and gave him new clothes, throughout, and after a few days, during which he had time to think things over, was released and allowed to go home. He stayed home and did not violate quarantine again. Many more affairs such as this happened which at the time appeared quite serious but as we look at them now are almost funny. Space will not permit further details at this time. To the best of my knowledge the above was the last serious outbreak of this disease in our Town. The Pest House has long since gone as has also our Town Farm.

Total expenses for this epidemic was about \$4500.00. A special town meeting had to be called to pay the bill. The Town Council members were Harris H. Bucklin, Frank F. Wooley, Charles M. Perry, George P. Newell and Alton L. R. Hambley.

I am much indebted for the preparation of the above article to Mr. Charles M. Perry, the able Historian of our Society whose untiring efforts searching records, etc. have finally caused this to be written, also, to our Town Clerk, Mr. Duffy, who has so kindly assisted me in every manner possible in procuring the above data.

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The Society likes to have stories of personal experiences; or those of which they have intimate knowledge.

Suggestions concerning the contents of the Bulletin will be welcome.