

Settlers relied on their own skills

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Health care has always been a concern to the families settling in a new area. Early pioneers had to rely on their skills and knowledge, treating common ailments with herbs and other substances then thought to be beneficial. Almost every housewife had her own stash of medicinal supplies with which to doctor her family. Some women gained quite a lot of experience and people would seek them out for advice and help.

Early Vacaville resident Luzena Stanley Wilson was known for her skill in dispensing medicines. "I dealt out blue-mass, calomel, and quinine to patients from far and near; inspected tongues and felt pulses, until I grew so familiar with the business that I almost fancied myself a genuine doctor. I don't think I ever killed anybody, and I am quite sure I cured a good many of my patients," she wrote in her memoir.

Not until the 1890s was there an attempt to regulate public health issues. At that time, town trustees appointed a five-member health board. They established a so-called "pest house" to help quarantine people with contagious diseases.

One of the first physicians to permanently settle in Vacaville was J. W. Stitt, who arrived in 1883 from Kentucky. Together with Dr. Terrill, he established the first hospital in 1897. This was located in an orchard and boasted "a trained graduate nurse, a competent matron and all necessary equipment."

Unfortunately it did not last long and for many years, patients continued to travel to either San Francisco or Sacramento for any serious illness.

Helen Power remembered such a moment in her life where the decision to seek help could mean life or death. "And then there was Dr. Gunn's Doctor book that every person had in their own home because doctors weren't too available, so therefore you diagnosed your own case. When I was about 12 years old, I got a pain very suddenly, when my family entertained company. While they were outside saying goodbye, I grabbed Dr. Gunn's book and diagnosed my case correctly.

"I went to San Francisco, but it was not an emergency. My appendix was inflamed and the doctors waited till the inflammation went down by putting ice packs on me. Then I had surgery."

Even with the diagnosis from a doctor, Joseph Gonsalves was not so fortunate. His

obituary in The Reporter on December 14, 1914, told the story.

“Joseph Gonsalves, a well-known resident of Vacaville passed away in a Woodland hospital Wednesday afternoon, where he had been taken Sunday for an operation for appendicitis.

“He was on the street Saturday morning, but was not feeling well. He grew rapidly worse in the afternoon, and a doctor was summoned, who pronounced it as acute case of appendicitis and advised that he be taken immediately to a hospital. The patient demurred to this at first, but later consented and was taken to Woodland Sunday morning.

“While on the way the appendix broke and on arriving at the hospital he was operated on as soon as possible, in hopes that his life might be saved, although the doctors announced that it was an extremely critical case.

“The body was brought to Vacaville Thursday morning, ...”

Consumption, or as we know it today, tuberculosis, was one disease rampant in the population. This was mostly due to crowded living conditions, foods such as unpasteurized milk and malnutrition. Fresh air and sunshine were thought to help fight the disease and many people migrated to warmer climates “on account of their health.”

Luther Harbison, and before him his uncles, eventually moved to California in search of a healthier life. In later years, Luther’s wife, Hester, kept a letter by one of the uncles who described how widespread the illness had been in his family.

“In the fall of 1866 Uncle David & Uncle Jim bought the farm in West Salem, Wis. I imagine they went up there on account of health. Six brothers and sisters had died with consumption. Uncle David was already far gone with the disease. He only lived a few months.

“They all lived together in a log house. There was a living room and kitchen combined. One small bedroom downstairs - a pantry. Upstairs was all one room, about room for two beds. We were mighty hard up that first year. We had cornmeal mush for breakfast, corn bread for supper, and fried corn mush for dinner.”

Young Luther Harbison would battle the disease all his life, spending years in later life in a sanatorium but eventually died from the disease.

Epidemics were another major concern. The influenza of 1918-1919 strained the

existing health care system to its limits. In Vacaville the Red Cross stepped in, operating two emergency hospitals. By November 15, 1918, the number of new cases had decreased to 25 in town and around 50 in the surrounding areas.

Town trustees passed an ordinance to prevent the spreading of the disease. The Reporter wrote on October 25, 1918: "During the prevalence of the influenza epidemic especial care should be exercised in regard to spitting in public places. There is an ordinance against this practice at any time, but like all laws of this character, is more honored in the breach than in practice. There is no surer way of spreading influenza than by spitting in public places. The serious nature of the prevailing epidemic makes it imperative that every precaution be exercised to prevent its spread."

And a few days later: "An acceptable mask is made from two to four layers of fine mesh gauze or six to eight layers of coarser gauze, or of three layers of butter cloth, 55 by 8 inches in size, and held firmly in place over the face by means of tape attached to the corners."

Whether the mask helped or not, eventually the town recovered from the influenza, though at least ten patients died from the disease.

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