

IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE AREA?

As settlers moved to the area in the 1830s and 40s they left behind cultural and educational opportunities, family ties and anyone with any medical training. Maybe that wasn't all bad. The lack of understanding of the human body and the many ills which might befall it allowed horrifying treatments to take place. The fixing of leeches to a wound to get rid of putrified flesh or the letting of blood to combat an illness are sufficient examples for our readers.

The cholera epidemic of the early 1830s ensured that settlers did not linger long in heavily populated areas as Detroit on their journey west. Families had little with which to fight the dreaded plagues. Other terrifying diagnoses included scarlet fever, measles, diphtheria, typhoid, tuberculosis, whooping cough, ague (malaria) all took a heavy toll on the population; especially, it seemed, where many lived in close proximity. Little knowledge of how disease spreads, and lack of sanitary water and facilities often decimated the hapless settlers. Being born and surviving was a major accomplishment.

We hear of the pioneers who lived well past their 80th birthday and might be misled to believe those were the 'good old days.' A short tour of an old cemetery soon dispels that opinion. The numbers of graves of those who never lived to their 5th birthday is disheartening.

These brave people seldom went to seek a doctor but when there were more sick people in the family than well, there was little choice. Dr. Samuel W Pattison, in 1836, located in Fentonville (Fenton) relates, "I was guided to many of these places (in the northern part of the county) through timbered openings by marked trees and often following Indian trails.....During the months of August and September the intermittent and remittent fevers - diseases peculiar to low or flat countries - prevailed to an alarming extent. The well were the exception; whole families were down, many became discouraged and some fled, but it was remarkable that most of these returned to Michigan."

With a doctor several hours horse or buggy ride away, the mother of the family was expected to be able to treat the patient. Researching the remedies used is almost as revolting to the imagination as studying the illnesses. A mixture of lard and turpentine rubbed on the chest treated a chest cold. A mustard plaster or one of hot fried onions in a bag on one's chest was the remedy for more severe congestion. And a caring mother couldn't let her family approach Spring without a dose of castor oil to 'clean out the system.' (By Marieanna Bair. To be continued. The writer hopes that persons with knowledge of medical practitioners in the area, since the turn of the century, will contact her. 229-6402)

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