Medicine in Early Brighton

Low land prices in the Northwest Territory during the 1830s were an incentive to hundreds in the eastern United States who packed their families on a boat in the Erie Canal to begin the first leg of their journey to a better life. These newly arrived settlers in Livingston County had left behind not only all educational, cultural and religious resources, but also family support and access to doctors.

What did a doctor's medical training consist of? Most 'doctors' got their medical education working with another doctor; not unlike a would-be attorney apprenticing with another to practice law. Some read medical books and then decided for themselves they were doctors.

In the Michigan Territory during the early 19th century, there was no 911 service in the event of an emergency. Any doctors were several hours away via Indian trails through forests and around swamps or by way of braided trees.

Today, it is difficult to conceive the desperation, which settlers experienced, if an accident or illness befell a family member. Cutting trees or squaring logs for a cabin occasionally resulted in broken bones and deep flesh wounds. If gangrene occurred, it was usually a matter of amputating the limb or dying of blood poisoning. Cooking at a fireplace occasionally resulted in a garment catching fire. A tipped-over lamp or candle was the source of severe burns. A to sometimes applied to a snake bite to stop the spread of venom occasionally caused the inadvertent loss of limb.

Not until 1835, when Dr. Thomas Curtis moved to Kensington Village (just east of the county line), was any medical assistance available to the southeast quarter of the county. There, Curtis built a tavern. Had an office and, probably, a druggist. The Brighton area's first doctor was Wilbur Fisher from Ann Arbor, who moved here in 1836. It is said his medicines were certainly given in sufficiently large doses to cure "... if quantity were the consideration."

Dr. Iras P. Bingham (brother of Governor Kimbley S. Bingham of Green Oak Township) was in the area in 1835. He located his practice in Brighton in 1841, where he practiced for 40 years, living in the Brighton (Eastern) House for a time. Dr. Bingham is buried in the Old Village Cemetery. In 1854, William J. McLench arrived to teach in local schools. Within a year, he began "reading" medicine with Dr. Bingham and in the fall of 1855 entered the medical department at University of Michigan, where he received his degree in 1858. Following service as U.S. Army Assistant Surgeon General during the Civil War, he continued studying to keep up with medical developments. He continued his practice in Brighton for 52 years after the war. His gravestone is in Fairview Cemetery.

Compiled by Marianna Bair "Michigan Memorabilia" by William Piess, "1880 History of Livingston County" by Franklin Ellis, "From Settlement to City - Brighton, Michigan" by Carol McMacken and clippings. To be continued. Additions/corrections requested. 830/229-6402.

Online Historical Resources

There are many great resources online that make it easy for the serious historian and casual history buff to do research. One of my favorite is the Seeking Michigan site. This web site contains a large collection of stories, maps, photos, documents, oral histories and more. It is also easy to browse and search. I would highly recommend visiting this site to learn about Michigan's great history - Dave Ball

Seeking Michigan online at: seekingmichigan.org

There is a good chance that when you read this title "Ice harvesting", you may begin to wonder: what does ice harvesting really mean? How or why would you harvest ice? Ice is found conveniently inside our refrigerators. If we need a big bag of ice for a party or picnic, we can get it at our local grocery store. How or why would anyone attempt to harvest ice?

As all school kids know, ice is simply frozen water. If we go back in time to the 1930s and 1940s, the term refrigerator was just coming into the American vocabulary. This modern piece of kitchen equipment started to replace the familiar wooden icebox that was found in most homes. These iceboxes typically used lake ice into the 1930s.

Before refrigeration, all ice came from lakes and rivers that were located in the northern climates. The Brighton area with its fifty surrounding lakes became an important source for providing ice to the large commercial ice suppliers located in Detroit and Toledo. Railroads located next to lakes and rivers allowed huge blocks of ice weighing up to 300 pounds to be transported to the major cities.

The CoBACH Center exhibit will feature a media collection of old photos and vintage movie footage from the harvesting process in the early 1900s. The practice of ice harvesting relied on rugged men who would cut the ice into large slabs using handsaws and in later years horse-pulled ice sleds with saw mounted on the underside. The exhibit includes a variety of hand saws and horse-drawn saws that were used to score the ice with parallel grooves prior to the ice cutting sleds that cut deep grooves which allow the workers to hand-fraction the ice.

This exhibit is a must see! You will not see this equipment or learn about the difficult job of ice harvesting when you visit Greenfield Village. Ice harvesting was one of the ten largest industries in the United States at one time. Most of this vintage equipment and media is on loan from the extensive collection of the Kenyon Ice Museum of North America located in Port Huron, Michigan.

Jim Vichich

Your Support

Your continued support for our mission in 2011 is both needed and appreciated. We need volunteers and financial donations to continue our many projects, including:

- Historic Resource Survey
- Archive digitization
- CoBACH Center programs
- Lyon School maintenance
- Historical exhibits

Every hour you volunteer and every dollar you donate goes toward these projects. With the generosity of our members, none of this would be possible. Thank you and we look forward to your support in the coming year.