

"Dorothy Elderdice, Local Historian"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

A number of amateur historians have made significant contributions to the written history of Carroll County. One writer who is perhaps better remembered for other accomplishments is Dorothy Elderdice of Westminster. Her interest in community theater, costume and pageantry dovetailed nicely with her interest in local history. In the early 1970s, she wrote about a series of newspaper articles about local history topics for the Historical Society. "A Look At Health Services Back Then," which described health conditions and care in the summer of 1872, was published in the August 31st issue of this newspaper:

"A phone call to our present Carroll County Health Department established the fact that it was created in 1929. That set me wondering what organization, if any, was concerned with our health in previous years. A partial answer may have been discovered in a public notice appearing in The Democratic Advocate of August 14, 1872.

'VACCINATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS'

'At a meeting of the Board of County School Commissioners held on July 1st, 1872, the following resolution was adopted:

'Resolved that the Board will hold teachers responsible to the extent of a forfeiture of their certificate in the event that any pupil who has not been vaccinated shall introduce the disease of Small-pox into the public schools of this county. By order of the Board, J. M. Newson, Secy.'

This left me still wondering just how long smallpox vaccine has been with us. Here my Oxford dictionary helped--since 1799. But no mention of when made compulsory.

That no doubt came about gradually. At any rate it could not have been universal in the summer of 1872. The New York journals were saying that smallpox was on the increase in Philadelphia and Baltimore; while the Philadelphia journals were saying it was abating there but spreading to Baltimore. Not to be outdone, the Baltimore journals maintained the other two cities had more cases.

For the record, there were 36 smallpox deaths in Baltimore the first week in May and 50 in Philadelphia the week previous.

When Joseph Davis of the Westminster bar died in July his friends had to bear the expense of finding any men willing to bury a smallpox victim. This in spite of the fact that 'his counsel and aid were sought by many and his friendship extended to all.'

Cholera morbus is mentioned even more frequently as the cause of death. In August it claimed the life of Augustus Shriver, president of the Western Maryland Railroad and the First National Bank.

Returning to my original question: who took care of our health in 1872? I find one answer given August 24 by one who signed himself MEDICUS.

'There is a great tendency to cholera morbus and bilious dysentery this summer. It is important to keep our habitations clean in order to guard against disease. Special attention must be given to damp alleys, pig pens, privies, chicken coops, cellars, and sinks. Sprinkle quick lime. Anyone who goes through the

alleys these hot nights will find the air loaded with noxious exhalations. Disease lurks in mouldy damp places. A little attention to cleanliness, outdoors and indoors will prevent much sickness. Let no one neglect it at his peril. The scythe of the ruthless reaper has been busy all around us.'

We also learn that 'there is a chattering of teeth along the bank of the Monacacy, Pipe Creek and other streams. In some instances whole families are attacked. A gentlemen entered our office (The Democratic Advocate) with an old fashioned ague that fairly shook his buttons off.'

However we had a number of dedicated physicians who were on 24-hour call in those days. By their ads we learn how they covered the county even in those horse and buggy days. Dr. George S. Fouke, for instance mentioned the days in which he would be at the following places: Rocky Ridge, Double Pipe Creek, Middleburg, Taneytown, Uniontown, Union Bridge, and New Windsor.

Other prominent physicians were Dr. Daniel S. Coonan, Dr. Leonard Zepp, Dr. W. K. Fringer, and Dr. J. H. Billingslea.

Dr. Charles Billingslea and Dr. J. M. Weller, dentists with offices in the second door west of Farmers and Mechanics Bank took pleasure in informing friends that they were at all times prepared to perform any operations in dentistry. Full sets of teeth: \$10, \$15, \$20. Pure nitrous oxide gas on hand at all times. Dr. Billingslea will visit Union Bridge the first Wednesday in every month; remaining until Friday afternoon; New Windsor the second Wednesday in every month; Uniontown the third Wednesday remaining until Friday; Taneytown, the third Friday in every month.

So at last we can answer the question with which we began. It was our peripatetic doctors who took care of our health during the summer of 1872."

Dorothy closed her article with a friendly, "Till I see You!".

Photo caption: Miss Dorothy Elderdice wrote a local history column for this paper in the early 1970s. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.