

# Back to the future: Homeopathy was once the rule here

## Town's doctoral history continued

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CORRESPONDENT

In spite of doctors and house calls, home remedies counted for a long time. "Soda and ginger was good for the stomach ache, and hot ginger tea and onion syrup was a cure for colds," recalled Frank Jarvis. "Camphorated oil rubbed on the chest and mulled tea were remedies for coughs. For the older folk, rye, honey and whiskey melted with rock candy did the trick. There were no penicillin or high class drugs — you had to make do!

Home remedies had their variations. At Ruth Johnson's home, a dish of onions, brown sugar and molasses served as a cold remedy. A nail in the foot required some salt pork to draw out the poison. For the croup, whiskey or kerosene on sugar was prescribed.

Concerning doctors, Mabel Prescott confessed, "We had no parcel with them unless we had to. Good old castor oil was a staple; a mustard poultice eased a cold."

Vivian Smith [1906-1990] wore amulets of camphor on a chain to help her sniffles. "Speaking of colds," she said, "there was a man in the town who gave us some skunk oil once to rub on my chest when I had a very bad chest cold. I'm sure that my mother must have been charmed with that odor." She remembered hiding under the bed when old Dr. Sherman of Graniteville came to take her temperature. Doctors were close to the families in those days.

Pneumonia was the most serious illness for all ages. Childhood frequently meant mumps, measles, scarlet fever, chicken-pox and whooping cough. Occasionally diphtheria and typhoid occurred. Doc put a quarantine sign on the door, and as Frank Jarvis said, "It meant no school and a vacation from everything — a real holiday. You couldn't even milk the cows. A certificate from the doctor was needed to go back to school."

Ben Parker, a former milk man, recalled that whenever a family had sign of a contagious disease, he'd stop the returnable bottles until the customer was better. Cylindrical bottles with caps and a wax base, inside and out, were used in their stead.

"Mother had herbs," said Florian Woitowicz. "Ladies came to her for basswood blossoms and the yellowish white blossoms of the linden tree. I think it was more psychological, but they'd come with an aching back and they'd claim they were made better."

Jennie (Seifer) Richards [1913-1990] offered many early 20th-century home remedies used by her family. She heartily recommended some of them. On her list were the following: toothache — oil of cloves and cotton; stomach ache — peppermints in hot water; hiccups — butter and sugar; chapped hands — rosewater and glycerine; cough — hard candy and lemon drops; bee sting — mud; poison ivy — Epsom salts. Richards also recalled her folks picked pennyroyal and dried it in the attic for use as a tea. It was supposed to bring out the rash if one had the measles. In order to prevent colds, she purchased a camphor square at the store, poked a ribbon through it and wore it around her neck. In closing, she suggested that pillows stuffed with sweet fern were excellent for people who were allergic to feathers.

"Grandfather Nesmith always kept a pot of herbs brewing on the back of the stove," claimed Ruth Hall. "If we got hurt, or had poison ivy, the herbs really worked. When anybody got cut, with needle, thimble and thread, he'd sew us up. Sister Elizabeth's finger was only disfigured for a while, as was the knee of my brother, Linwood, split open. As long as he lived, grandfather sewed us up."

Just for fun, here is a couple of poultice instructions that appeared in Dr. George H. Napheys book titled Prevention and Cure of Disease. It was printed in 1871.

**Flaxseed-meal poultice:** Warm a wash-basin by scalding it with boiling water; place in it sufficient ground flaxseed, and mix it well with boiling water into a thick, smooth, cohesive mass. Spread it a quarter of an inch thick upon folded muslin or soft linen; lay over it a piece of thin gauze, which may be sewed around the edges to enclose the poultice in a bag. Apply, and keep warm and moist by a cover of oiled silk, paper or muslin.

**Half a pound to a pound of linseed-meal** was required to make a poultice large enough to cover one side of the chest.

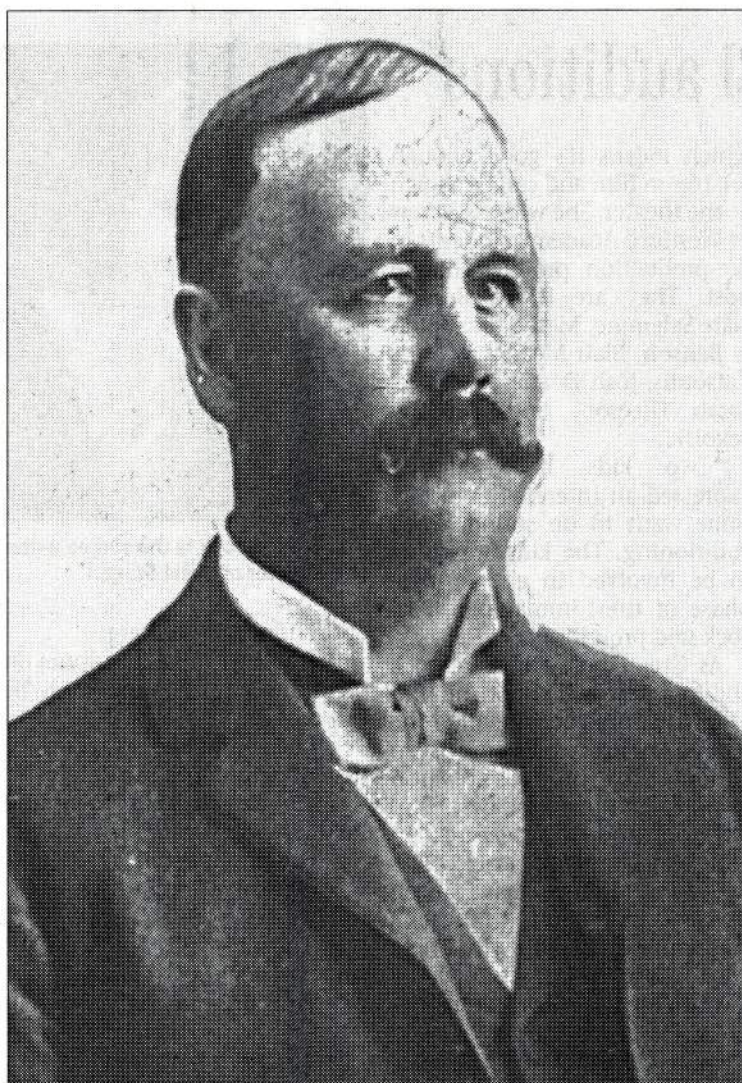
**Onion poultice:** "Boil thoroughly some corn meal until a very soft mush is produced; cut several raw onions very fine; stir the onions and juice into the hot mush; heat through and spread upon cloths."

"Or, partially roast some onions, mash them and spread upon folds of thin muslin."

"When children are threatened with convulsions or fits; the application of onion poultices to the legs and arms is a useful one, and may avert the attack. Onion poultices are also of service in cases of croup and catarrh of the chest in children."

### The bell tolled

Town records show that First Parish of Westford was paid the



**Albert P. Richardson was an undertaker here at the turn of the 20th century. Born in Jaffrey, N.H. in 1843 he was educated at Westford Academy and served as a selectman from 1879 to 1891.**

sum of \$7.50 in 1856 for tolling the bell for deaths and funerals. Kate Hamlin in a magazine article from 1907 entitled "Memories of New England," refers to the bell in the tower: "Whenever a death occurred, its slow, monotonous sound, as it tolled forth one hundred strokes, still echoes in the ear. All work ceased, and a hush fell upon all. After a pause came the four or six strokes which informed the listening ones whether it was male or female who had passed away. Another pause, and the age was tolled, one stroke for each year. It seemed during the tolling of that bell that all nature rested, that it held its very breath, and it seemed, too, that it was then that the soul really passed from earth."

Albert Davis in his diary of 1857-58 mentions hearing the bell toll one evening and wondering who had died. In 1905, May E. Day wrote: "Went over to Wright's to pick berries. Heard a bell toll while going over." On the following day she records: "Edith Wright came before I was dressed and said her grandmother died yesterday. That was what the bell was tolling for."

### Funerals

Mr. Gould and Mr. Richardson were early undertakers for the town. There were no funeral

homes. Just a few dollars covered expenses. In 1858 the Town Report states that for the first time Rev. Leonard Luce was paid \$1 for attending a funeral. Coffins were made for \$2 a piece. Kate Hamlin penned in the mid-1800s, "Mr. Wright was a cabinet maker by trade. What he made I do not know, beyond the fact that he made all the coffins required by the town and, as they were hastily finished for the funeral, the fragrance of varnish was stronger than that of roses. His shop was in the yard of his house [the O'Keefe-Krankewicz home at 15 Boston Road], and I remember the fascination it had for children; they would climb up and look through the window, when, seeing a newly made coffin, or one in the making, they would jump down and run as if pursued by ghosts or something worse. The old hearse house, which stood in the rear of the Unitarian Church had the same fascination for children."

Family and friends of the deceased participated more closely in proceedings than people do today. On Saturday, Nov. 6, 1869 Emma Day writes: "Warren and Ada and I went over to see Mrs. Hosmer, we helped put her in her coffin."

A black crepe with purple ribbon announced a death to neigh-

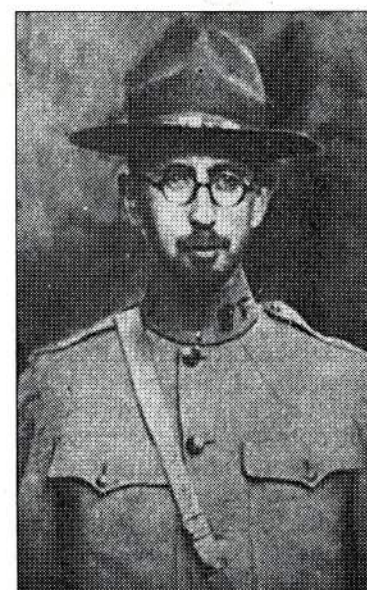


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**Dr. Orion Vassar Wells, a Westford physician, graduated Harvard Medical School in 1906. He was a member of the Massachusetts State Guard and of the Spaulding Light Military Association. He died of pneumonia at age 38, after tending to patients during a 1918 epidemic.**

bors. Tom Curley remembered the morning he passed Dr. Draper's Main Street house on his way to school. "The crepe on the door told us the good doctor had died." At the old Burbeck homestead on Route 110, nieces have vivid memories of drawn curtains in the parlor with mourners seated on a prickly horsehair sofa. The body was laid out on an ironing board placed over two or more chairs.

Frank Jarvis told the following tale: "In December of 1913 when Mr. Collins, a Civil War Veteran, had died, our teacher from the Parkerville School took us down to pay respects. It was the first dead man I'd ever seen. I wasn't any the worse for it, but my mother thought it was the most horrible thing in all my life to think the teacher had taken us down to see a dead man."

"Funeral services were held in the church or home. A hushed solemnity and secrecy prevailed. Eulogies lasted one or two hours, though some were short, sweet and snappy. The body was then taken to the cemetery in a hearse drawn by two black horses with plumes

on their bridles. The driver dressed in black. The mourners drove their own buggies. Everyone processed to the cemetery in proper order of relationship; otherwise family feuds or arguments resulted. Much jealousy arose. In some cases one wouldn't speak to an individual because he had been placed one or two carriages ahead of the other. Closing with a committal service, the gathering went home to mourn in their own way — and complain about position in the procession. Black arm bands and clothing were worn for months."

On a lighter vein, Jarvis related this story of a man's death in South Chelmsford. "There was no undertaker. Following the home service the casket was placed on a square wagon and taken to Hart's Cemetery. When it began to rain, the driver backed the wagon under the shed and said, 'Well, we can bury him tomorrow.'"

The town of Westford owned the horse-drawn hearse and kept it in a little building at the rear of the Meeting House until 1870 when it was moved to the new Town Hall. Later, when the town had no use for the hearse house, it was moved across the street.

In 1910 the hearse had worn out. The town got \$50 credit for it. For \$800 they purchased a new one from New Bedford, it was sent by freight. On another occasion, when the hearse was worn out, the issue arose at Town Meeting. Several men recommended that the town purchase a new one. One spokesman claimed that the old one was rickety, rode "uncomfortable" and wasn't safe. Alvan Fisher, stroking his side whiskers, replied, "Elijah, my esteemed friend, how do you know? Did you ever ride in it?" There was no new hearse for Westford that year.

In 1897, when the Catholic population increased in Westford, they wanted their own undertaker. J. A. Healy became the funeral director in Graniteville. The Greig's succeeded Mr. Richardson in the center section. Today, J. A. Healy Sons is the only undertaker in town.

— This is the 10th article in the ongoing Westford Recollections Millennium Series.