

Dr. Osgood pulled teeth with a cant hook and a twist

A doctoral history of Westford town

BY JUNE W. KENNEDY
CORRESPONDENT

In her "Reminiscences," Kate Hamlin paints us a picture of a country doctor who lived in Westford Center on the present site of the Westford Fire and Police Department. This the way it was in the mid-1800s: "Dear Benjamin Osgood! What a dear old doctor he was. In his earlier practice, he had made his rounds on horseback, carrying his medicines in his saddlebags. When he became too old for that method of travel, he used a two-wheeled gig; it consisted of an arm chair set on an axle with springs. He continued to carry his remedies in the saddle bags. I remember standing at his knee while he measured out his powders on the end of his pocket knife and carefully wrapped them in papers. In my presence, also, he rolled his pills, and I wondered what they were made of. Pinkroot and Senna seemed to be his uni-

versal remedies, for no matter what the ailment, those words were always in the directions to my mother."

Gleanings from Emma Day's Diaries during the years 1868 to 1872, offer a first-hand account of

Westford
Recollections
MILLENNIUM SERIES
1729-
2000

Catarrh very bad but he could cure me he thought for \$25.00.

"Sat. Nov. 21, 1868: I have put mustard on my stomach again.

"Sat. Dec. 12, 1868: Father has got cold and Mother gave him a sweet.

"Thurs., Dec. 17, 1868: W. throat is little better, worked all day cutting hoop poles and tonight I gave him a sweet and put onions on his feet and am setting up with him.

"Sat. Dec. 19, 1868: W. is little better I sat up till half past twelve he has taken salts and Senna twice and 2 Rochelle powders and 1 teaspoonful of salts and put mustard cloths on his back and feet.

"Wed. Jan. 10, 1869: face swollen — presumed tooth — began to poultice Quincy neck — put on flax-seed.

"July 1869: Mother Day was taken lame in her foot & it went to her heart.

"Sun., June 4, 1869: I had the sick headache real bad & was very tired.

Aug., 1, 1869: Father coughed very bad. I went upstairs twice carried the Licorice Losengers & they stopped him.

"Jan. 31, 1869: Dr. McCollester came here and cut Quincy's teeth.

"Aug. 18, 1871: I have not felt very well since yesterday and have taken flour and water and it helped me. Had a hot stone to my back."

[In the early months of 1871 the mother of Emma Day was ailing and suffered much pain. Some of the nursing care and neighborliness is recorded]

"Jan. 1871: Gave Mother some Senna. I made Mother some gruel the Dr. told me about. Got Mother up and I have her an injection of 1 pint H2O and spoonful of salt and little oil. In dreadful pain — gave quieting powder and wet flannel in hot water and put spirit of turpentine.

"Feb. 1871: Pain worse, chloroform and morphine injection. Spice poultice made of rye meal and all kinds of spice on stomach & hop bags on side. Mrs. Sherman

watched last night.

"Sun., Feb. 12, 1871: Snow and blowes and cold. Dr. came down and was most froze — ice all over his face. Mr. Luce called. Dr. staid to supper. Uncle Eldridge came over to see us and help W. if he needed. Mother Day took care of patient. Mr. F. brought a tumbler of jell for Mother. March 1, 1871: Mr. Sherman came up and watered the cattle and helped.

"April 6, 1871: Uncle E. and Mr. Sherman was here to help put dear Mother in her coffin.

"April 29, 1872: Quincy was sick this afternoon. I think it is worms he has slept some this afternoon & is very hot. I put Onions on his feet.

In spite of what we're led to believe, the youngsters of yesterday were not scaled down adults bringing their parents no grief and tension. And so, without the comfort of telephone, ambulance, Medical Associates or a hospital, time and the almighty were great healers. Again, an excerpt from Emma Day's diary:

"Dec. 1869: Quincy don't feel very well he bumped his chin & took off the skin & Ada let me trunk cover fall down on her hand. Sarah fell down coming up the steps with handful of wood.

"May 5, 1872: Warren and Mother and I went to the Temperance Lecture at the Unitarian Church. While we were gone Quincy Swallowed a chain of three links and an eye — large one. I don't know what to do.

"May 7, 1872: Ada bit off a Belt-pin and swallowed it we expect. It seems as though both meant to kill themselves. May God in his kindness bring them out all right."

When questioned about dentistry in Westford at the turn-of-the-20th century, the present citizenry commented that if there were any that maybe they would have more of their teeth today. You can be sure there were a lot of toothaches — and a lot of tricky ways devised for pulling teeth. It's been said that back in the days of the 25-cent office call, Westford's old-fashioned medical man, Dr. Osgood, pulled teeth with a cant hook — and just a little twisting! A quick and painless hour's appointment was not the solution either. "Had the teeth ache today lots," said Emma Day. Her diary entry



PHOTO COURTESY OF JUNE KENNEDY
Dr. Sleeper, a native of Manchester, N.H., tended folks here at the turn of the 19th century.

reads: "July 1, 1872: Fair & hot I got up at 15 past two and got ready for Warren was going to Fitchburg and I went as far as Ayer called up Sarah got there before five staid till after six then Sarah went with me to Dr. Hartwell's Office to have my tooth pulled it hurt real bad but want I glad when it was out. I was dizzy and fell down three steps hurt my knee a little. We got home before sundown."

"Towards the end of the 19th century, white-whiskered Dr. Sleeper made house calls in his horse and buggy," related Lucinda Prescott. "We were all born in the house — never went to the hospital for those things. We had no phone. If we didn't feel good someone would go on horseback for him [the doctor]. Day or night he'd come; sometime twice a day. He put up his own medicines and carried them in his satchel. I remember one day he checked me both before and after his trip to Manchester, N.H.

"I'll never forget the afternoon at our Chamberlain Corner Farm when Dr. Sleeper removed the tonsils of 15 or 20 kids in the neighborhood. It was a job to keep them all from hiding." It's no wonder when one realizes that a looking glass, a rocking chair, a nurse, gas and a crude knife and fork combination was all that was needed for a tonsillectomy.

Allister MacDougall won't every forget Dr. Sleeper. "When I was a small boy, one of the big

attractions on the Fourth of July was to run around the three sides of the common. On the first corner you were to drink a bottle of tonic; on the next corner you were to eat a big slice of watermelon...then on to the finish line for crackers and cookies. After going into the three-legged race and the hundred-yard dash, I developed a stomach ache. It seemed as if it was a pain in my heart. Mother decided I should have a doctor. Dr. Sleeper came and claimed I'd strained my heart by going into so many races. I think it was 8 altogether. So he told me I couldn't run for a year. You can imagine a boy of 8 or 9 years being told he couldn't run for a year. It was agony! Sometime after that Dr. Wells came into town. He checked me and said, "There isn't a solitary thing the matter with your heart. I wish mine were half as good! So I wasted that year walking around Westford."

After Dr. Sleeper died around 1907, Dr. Wells moved into the Main Street home [The Woodford Home at 29 Main Street]. "His early years were spent on a meager farm several miles from the village of Bakersfield, Vermont," son Huntington Wells said of his father. "He didn't have a dime. Must have been scholarships that put him through Harvard Medical, Columbia and Wesleyan. I remember he had one of the first cars in town — a touring car. He was active in the State Guard — the flu epidemic of 1918 took his life. As a youngster, I always thought it would be fun to take the skeleton Dad kept for his practice and bury the bones around the Common where they might be found. Seemed like it would make for a little mystery around town...but I never did it!"

Doc Blaney served the town in the teens and 20s. He was a good doctor, albeit a town character. It's been said that if you spotted an automobile flying by and there was nobody in it, he was! He was a short man with a goatee. Argue, argue, he loved to argue over anything. If you were not feeling good, he'd always open with "What's the matter?" Then he'd promptly take pills from his vest pocket, blow the dust off, saying "Here, take these and you'll feel better." That's the truth said patients who took the pinhead-sized pills every three hours and somehow managed to be cured. Many a tale has been told about good old Doc Blaney.

From Elizabeth Carver McKay — a patient: "Doc Blaney was a man who was about 5 feet tall — maybe 1 or 2 [inches] but not anymore. He was splayfooted and used to rock from one foot to the other. He sported a Van Dyke beard. There was no doubt but what he was a very brilliant man — was known for being very good at taking care of pneumonia. He could bring them through. He was very controversial, very argumentative; he loved to argue town politics and if you were upstairs 'sort of dying' it didn't matter if he could get someone to talk with downstairs. I remember one time being in my aunt's cottage on Depot Street — had scarlet fever. He had changed a tire in the driveway and Mother asked, 'Now Dr. Blaney, don't you want to go upstairs and wash your hands?' 'No, no,' he answered. He came into the room and there was a long-haired cat that we always had. 'Get out! Get out! I say, I say, get out! It's germs!' But with those same hands that changed the tire, he peddled out the pills that we were supposed to have."

Walter Fletcher graphically recalled, "We were spraying potatoes with arsenic lead and the twins got into it. We were scared. Blaney came a flyin' down to the farm in his Model-T fed them mustard and H2O. They came out of it fine!"

As a final account, Fred DeCatur told of a party in a car that hit a telephone pole on Boston Road. Doc Blaney came down with a powder horn and 12-inch needle, and just started stitching him up. No medication!

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