

# More doctorin' and dosages

By June W. Kennedy

Towards the end of the last 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. Day or night he'd come; sometimes 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 ever forget Dr. Sleeper.

"When I was a small boy, one of the big attractions on the 4th 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," he recalled.

"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 eight 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. "His early years were spent on a meager farm several miles from the village of Bakersfield, Vermont.", son Huntington says 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

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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!"

### Tales of Doc Blaney

Doc Blaney served the town in the teens and twenties. 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 verify patients who took the pin-head 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' tall — maybe 1 or 2", but not anymore. He was splay-footed 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.

There was another time when someone came to town, had need of a doctor and was sent to Doc Blaney's house, on Boston Road. They went in,

and when whatever was wrong was taken care of, they looked around in the place which was very untidy.

The woman looked at him and said, 'This is the filthiest place I've ever been and I am going to report you to the Board of Health'.

"Go ahead, I say, I say", replied Doc Blaney, 'Go ahead! I am the Board of Health! And he was.

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" needle, and just started stitching him up. No medication!

### Home remedies

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", recalls 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 penicillins 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, cured a cold. A nail in the foot required some saltpork 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 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 remembers hiding under the bed when old Dr. Sherman of Graniteville came to take her temperature. Doctors were very close to the families in those days.

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

During his days of peddling milk, Ben Parker mentioned that whenever a family had a 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", says Florian Woltowicz. "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".

"Grandfather Nesmith always kept a pot of herbs brewing on the back of the stove", claims 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 little while, as was the knee brother Linwood split open. As long as he lived, Grandfather sewed us up".

So much for doctorin'!

Westord Recollection Series  
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