

Recalling doctorin' & dosages

By June W. Kennedy

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 is the first of a two-part retrospect on doctoring in the mid-1800's:

"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 saddle bags.

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

Lines from Emma Day's diaries during the years 1868 to 1872 offer a firsthand account of the remedies for specific ailments in those times. Some may appear odd, but if they cured the patient, that's all that was necessary:

"Sunday, Nov. 15, 1868 — I went to see Dr. Campbell yesterday. He said I had Catarrh very bad but he could cure me he thought for \$25.

"Saturday, Nov. 21, 1868 — I have put mustard on my stomach again.

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

"Thursday, 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.

"Saturday, Dec. 19, 1868 — W. is little better. I sat up till half past twelve. He has

J. V. FLETCHER LIBRARY

As the Board of Health has reported a case of contagious disease in your household, the Trustees of the Library must deny you and your family the privileges of the Library until all danger of contagion is passed.

Children excluded from school should not visit the Library.

Any library books now in your possession should be kept until disinfected by the Board of Health.

Librarian.

Westford, Mass.

19

EVEN IN THIS century, the fear of epidemics from contagious disease prompted the town library to send some ill book borrowers this notice, temporarily denying them library privileges and notifying them that the health board would disinfect the books still in their possession.

(Courtesy of 'Westford Recollections')

taken salts and senna twice and two Rochelle powders and one teaspoonful of salts and put mustard cloths on his back and feet.

"Monday, Dec. 21, 1868 — Warren is better.

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

"Wednesday, March 24, 1869 — Fair. I was quite sick last night. W. got up and got me some J. Ginger but that did not help me. He then called Mother. She gave me three doses of Gin and put flannels wet with mustard on my bowells and that did me good.

"Wednesday, June 16, 1869 — Quincy was choked up last night I had to put oil

and snuff on chest.

"July, 1869 — Quincy is about same. I got some brandy for him.

"July, 1869 — Mother Day was taken lame in her foot and it went to her heart.

"Sunday, June 4, 1869 — I had the sick headache real bad and was very tired.

"Aug. 1, 1869 — Father coughed very bad. I went up stairs twice, carried the Licorice Losengers and 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."

□ DOCTORIN', Page 7

Recalling doctorin' & dosages

□ DOCTORIN', From Page 6

In the early months of 1871, the mother of Emma Day was ailing and suffered much pain. It was believed she had cancer, but when she died in March of that year it was found that the lining of her stomach had decayed and five gall stones were present. Some of the nursing care and neighborliness is recorded:

"January, 1871 — Gave Mother some Senna. I made Mother some gruel the Dr. told me about. Got Mother up and I gave her an injection of one 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.

"February, 1871 — pain worse; chloroform and morphine injection, spice poultice made of rye meal and all kinds of spice on stomach and hop bags on side.

"Mrs. Sherman watched last night.

"Sunday, Feb. 12, 1871 — Snow and blowes and cole. Dr. came down and was most froze, ice all over his face. Mr. Luce called. Dr. staid to supper. Uncle Eldrige 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 and is very hot. I put Onions on his feet.

"Jan. 28, 1872 — I called on May Everett; carried little broth and wheatbread.

"Feb. 17, 1872 — Luke Fletcher came after Mother to take care of his wife.

"Feb. 19, 1872 — I went to watch with Mrs. Luke Fletcher."

In spite of what we're led to believe, the youngsters of yesteryear were not scaled-down adults bringing their parents no grief and tension.

And so, without the comfort of telephone, ambulance, Medical Associates and a hospital, time and the Almighty were great healers. Again, an excerpt from Emma Day's diary:

"December, 1869 — Quincy don't feel very well; he bumped his chin and took off the skin, and Ada let my trunk cover fall down on her hand. Sarah fell down coming up the steps with a 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.

'I was quite sick last night. W. got up and got me some J. Ginger but that did not help me. He then called Mother. She gave me three doses of Gin and put flannels wet with mustard on my bowells and that did me good ... Mother Day was taken lame in her foot and it went to her heart.'



HOOD'S OLIVE OINTMENT

The Best Family Salve. Try it. Price, Twenty-five Cents Five Boxes, One Dollar.

Prepared only by

C. I. HOOD & CO., APOTHECARIES, LOWELL, MASS.

(OVER)

A TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY advertising card touts the cure-all qualities of Hood's Olive Ointment, supposed to fix everything from chapped lips to 'scrofulous sores'. On the reverse of the card is warranted: 'We do not offer it as a pile ointment, but it has cured multitudes of this distressing complaint when all other remedies failed.'

(Courtesy 'Westford Recollections')

"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.

"May 8, 1872 — Quincy chain came through him this morning."

When questioned about turn-of-the-century dentistry in Westford, the present elderly citizenry commented that, if there had been any, maybe they now would have more of their teeth. 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¢ 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 in her diary entry for July 1, 1872:

"Fair and 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."

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.