



# Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

dennishs@cape.com

www.dennishistsoc.org

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## **When the Cure Is Worse Than the Disease**

For several years now prime time television has seemed to be top heavy with ads for prescription medications, each one followed by a long list of warnings against using them. Recently I was given a prescription that came in a small bottle with two pages of dire results that could happen if I were anything but a 21-year-old Polly Purebred. How did that happen?

Looking back over the centuries it appears that whoever survived the medicines or practices prescribed for early illnesses could thank Lady Luck or Divine Providence.

Our Pilgrim ancestors who were accustomed to the illnesses of England and Holland found clean air and pure springs in their new country. The 52 people who perished in the first year seem to have succumbed from lack of food and the severely cold winter. The diseases they suffered in following years were brought to them from England.

As the population grew in America and the small villages became cities sickness of all kinds proliferated: typhus, cholera and smallpox were the ones most feared. Smallpox had the most impact in Yarmouth/Dennis. It was brought to our town in the early 1720s primarily by mariners who had probably picked it up at their last port or when they landed in Boston. Anyone infected was put in a room with blankets placed over the windows and doors to keep the germs from escaping. (It also kept the fresh air from entering.) The house was quarantined. No outsider could enter and no one inside could leave. Various and sundry purges, blood letting by use of leeches and poultices made from cow manure were tried as a means of medication.

When the patient died, as they often did, the body was not allowed to be carried past another home on the way to the smallpox cemetery. The body was not allowed to be interred in a regular burial ground. Dennis has a one-grave burial site near Setucket Road, East Dennis believed by some to be a smallpox burial. The victim's clothing and bedding was burned and the entire house was fumigated by smoldering pots of dried cow manure. The person who cared for the victim had to so notify the selectmen and he/she was isolated from the community until all danger of infection had passed. A number of Cape towns, including Yarmouth, had isolated pest houses where local victims were taken in.

The smallpox outbreaks of 1730 and 1778 killed off nearly all of the native Indians on the Cape and especially in Yarmouth. Dr. Edward Jenner in England realized that people exposed to cowpox were immune to smallpox. In the early 1800s people were being inoculated here and the dreaded fear of the disease was quelled.

Tuberculosis, also called consumption, was another widespread disease that killed many Cape Codders. It was very contagious. The bacteria could be carried in milk and food, in the saliva of victims and in the air and dirt contaminated by people spitting on the ground. The famous, or infamous, signs "Do Not Spit On The Floor" (sidewalk, street, etc.) came when spitting was found to spread the disease. The remedies for this disease were rather bizarre: to smoke dried cow manure in a pipe (for some reason cow manure seemed to be an all-purpose medication!), eat butter made from the cream of cows that grazed in churchyards, eat mice boiled in salt and oil, etc. That sort of makes the warnings of kidney and liver failure on today's prescriptions sound not so bad. In the late 1800s doctors discovered that fresh air, sunshine, plenty of rest and good food could cure tuberculosis. Sanitariums were established in isolated places to take advantage of seaside or mountain air. In time vaccinations were invented to help protect people from this disease.

Influenza was the other disease that killed a large number of Cape people. The first massive outbreak was during World War I. In 1918 and 1919 more than 500,000 people died from it in the United States. Schools and churches were closed and people started wearing masks if they had to be out in public. That

influenza started in this country at Fort Riley, Kansas and was spread by soldiers being transferred to other places. 30 million people died from the flu world wide and about 22 million died in World War I for a total of 52 million people—the world’s largest disaster.

Patent medicines were in great demand that were useless doses of alcohol and herbs, and sometimes with harmful additives. The only medicines that offered any relief were quinine and aspirin. White signs with bold red “Influenza” on them identified the homes of victims. By 1920 the virus had run its course but its outcome was many homes with heavy hearts.

Local people made medications to cure many ailments. Horatio Kelley, born in Dennis Port, went away to study medicine. He came home and joined Dr. Chauncey M. Hurlburt who practiced medicine in South and West Dennis. They established a drug store in West Dennis where Dr. Horatio experimented with different medicines and developed “Kelley’s Headache Cure” that became famous Cape-wide. He bought Dr. Hurlburt’s interest in the store in 1888 and later had a second shop in Dennis Port. He became

moderately wealthy by dispensing medicines.

Then there was James F. Kenney of Yarmouth who developed a medicine that would cure many ills—“Speedy Relief”. His slogan was:

“Speedy Relief is my belief  
And so it is of many  
Put up in bottles  
With little cork stopples  
And sold by James F. Kenney.”

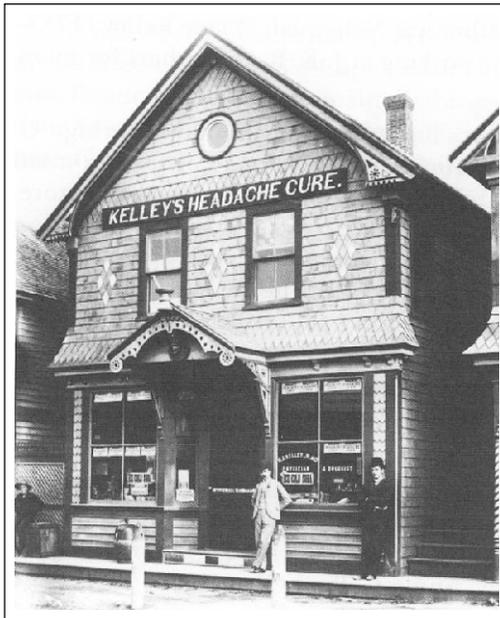
This was sold far and wide and was a household staple in most Cape homes.

Another good old stand-by was “Aunt Sophie’s Bitters”. “Aunt” Sophie (Kelley) Chase lived on the northwest corner of Depot Street and Upper County Road in Dennis Port. She was a medium who could find lost items by holding the hand of the person who had lost it, or locate lost people by holding a piece of their clothing. She also concocted tonics and salves. They were made from herbs from her garden and berries and other things she found in her surrounding area. Her bitters was a noted “spring tonic” guaranteed to clean out your system from the winter ‘drearies’. My mother, her brothers and sisters were each given a dose one spring. They thought, for sure, they were about to die! They didn’t—but never again was my grandmother able to get another teaspoonful into any of them. Sophie also made a “love potion” which young, and sometimes older, people bought to entice that someone special. I don’t know if it worked, but she was famous for it. Youngsters thought she was a witch and when nearing her house would cross the street to be further away from her magic. In reality she was a woman with a great gift who only wanted to help her neighbors.

The main ingredient in most old time cures was alcohol. One favorite was “Mrs. Lidia Pinkham’s Elixer for Ladies” which was about 80% alcohol and 20% herbs and bitters. Others also included various kinds of opiates. They were all touted to cure whatever was wrong—from a hangnail to cancer. It didn’t cure anything, but the patient didn’t care about much if they took it early and often.

Modern medicine has cured many illnesses and prolonged lives but those two pages of contradictions somehow harken back to the old days.

– Phyllis Horton



## Reflections of a Dennis Boyhood

One of my frequent correspondents when I worked at the Cape Cod Times was Lester “Les” Bachman of South Dennis. Les called me on the phone or wrote a letter, often commenting on something I had written, particularly if it was about the history of Dennis. Occasionally, he stopped by the news room to drop off a letter to the editor of the Times and he would stop by my desk to chat. Les loved Cape Cod history, especially stories of people of early West Dennis.

Shortly before he died at age 81 in 1993, he sent me a folder of stories he had written about growing up in the West Dennis – South Dennis area. He had titled the collection of personal stories “Vignettes of Cape Cod – Era of 1918.”

“Do what you want with them,” he said.

To me, these vignettes are priceless. I filed them away safely with the intention of finding some way to share them with those who are interested in Cape history. The Dennis Historical Society newsletter seems an appropriate venue. The following is one of Les Bachman’s stories.

– Peggy Eastman

“Every day it was a ritual for me to take a tightly covered tin pail – in those days called a “growler” – and at an hour before sunset, head down from Wrinkle Point, cross the (Bass River) bridge (to South Yarmouth) and walk to Homer’s farm. For a dime, I purchased a gallon of warm, raw milk. Often on this daily errand I met the Yarmouth lamplighter. This was a must for stopping.

I had always marveled at his tasks when I occasionally saw him working in the morning. He walked about the more prominent streets of South Yarmouth, clad in bib-type overalls. On one arm he held a short, wooden ladder. His other hand clutched a large kerosene can fitted with a long and slender spout. His pockets bulged with rags or the old-fashioned “seizing stuff” string used for wiping and cleaning.

At each lamp post, employing the little ladder to climb a step or two, he would deftly lift out the chimney and swing the bonnet aside. In a quick moment he had the oil and assembly on the ground, the glass filled, the chimney cleaned. He then trimmed the wick with small shears, if it needed any adjustment. I always waited for him to drop or break the chimney, but he worked carefully.

In my evening forays for milk, I had hoped to catch the lamplighter off guard. I never succeeded. He was always garbed differently. He now wore clean trousers, a white shirt and a neat hat. His ladder was gone. In this hour nearing sunset, he carried a long oak stick, which today would be an antique dealer’s delight. One end had a double hook affair. This arrangement, handled carefully, enabled him to tilt back the lamp chimney mount, revealing a small aperture. He then reversed the stick and lit a small cloth held in a tiny clamp. The flame was then carried aloft to the tall lamp post. The wick properly aflame, he again reversed the stick and closed the lamp door.

South Yarmouth had many of these lights. They were spread from near the bridge into the center of the village and along most of the nearby busy streets. Several stood in close array near the (Methodist) church. What all this street lighting carried in cost escapes me. However, I do know that West Dennis in those days never dared to engage in this public service. One or two lights were privately owned and maintained near the center of town – one was situated in front of the old Friendship Lodge. Another unit was located on the edge of the white-shelled, long path leading to the ancient public library that sat well back from Main Street and was partially hidden by the Maurice Nickerson string of stores.

This earlier West Dennis Library, I dimly recall, was very nearly an exact duplicate of the old South Dennis Library, (and like it) was well decorated with the old-fashioned gingerbread woodwork common to that day.

Dennis and Yarmouth did have some things in common, however, such as the hitching posts for single horses and teams that dotted both villages. And, drinking troughs, hollowed out of huge chunks of granite were everywhere. Beside each one there was always a “deep-lift” hand-operated pump. An unwritten law commanded every teamster to take his turn at filling the troughs. A battered tin drinking dipper hung by each pump. Sanitary laws didn’t exist. No doubt more than one hearty fever or common cold originated at these stopping points.”

– Lester Bachman

**Dennis Historical Society  
P.O. Box 607  
South Dennis, MA 02660-0607**

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## Mark Your Calendars – Upcoming DHS Programs



**Saturday, April 18, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.**  
**Barbara Kennedy of Wellfleet**  
**Talk & Exhibit:** *“What The Ladies Wore - 1860-1960”*  
From Hoops to Minis – One Hundred Years of Change in Fashion  
West Dennis Graded School  
67 School Street, West Dennis



**Saturday, May 16, 1:00 - 4:00 p.m.**

**Historian Phyllis Horton’s Maritime Days Exhibit:**

*“Dennis Lifesavers”*

1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum  
77 Nobscusset Road, Dennis Village

**Saturday, June 20, 1:00 - 4:00 p.m.**

*Josiah Dennis Manse Museum Opening Reception*

1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum  
77 Nobscusset Road, Dennis

**Saturday, June 13, 10:30 a.m.**

**Brendan Joyce:** *“Walking Tour of Historic Quivet Neck”*

Meet at the Jacob Sears Library

23 Center St., East Dennis

Rain Date - Sunday June 14, 10:30 a.m.

**Sunday, June 28, 1:00 - 4:00 p.m.**

*A Victorian Tea Party*

1801 Jericho Historical Center

90 Old Main Street, West Dennis