

HEALTH & HEALTH CARE  
Putnam County Tennessee, 1850 - 1970  
by Mary Jean DeLozier, pgs. 202 - 207

The health of Putnam Countians was generally poor in 1890. Epidemics sometimes wiped out whole families; infant mortality was high; numerous women died in childbirth; and all their lives many residents suffered from malnutrition, and other chronic diseases, as well as the fatigue and mental depression which accompanied them.

Tennessee recorded no reliable vital statistics until 1913, but apparently tuberculosis, commonly known as "consumption," was the number-one killer in the county. Many others died of typhoid fever, scarlet fever, dysentery, influenza, diphtheria, whooping cough, meningitis, pneumonia, measles, cancer, heart failure, and strokes.

Although smallpox vaccination had been used successfully in the United States since 1721, many Putnam Countians, either because of ignorance, superstition, carelessness, or inability to get to free clinics, failed to receive immunization. In the twentieth century, an incredibly late date, the county had two sieges of the dread disease which either killed its victims or left them hideously scarred for life.

In October of 1900 two prisoners in the country jail contracted what appeared to be smallpox. At the request of Dr. Jeff F. Dyer, the county health officer, a physician from the State Board of Health came from Nashville and confirmed that diagnosis. Even though the jail was placed under quarantine, eventually thirty-seven persons contracted the disease.

In response to the great alarm, public officials and the press became, defense. The Putnam County Board of Health prematurely issued a circular assuring citizens that the danger was over; a later bulletin stated that all cases were under quarantine and that the contagion was in control. The Board alleged that a prisoner taken in East Tennessee had spread the illness, and the *Press* charged that black railroad and mining hands who were infected with small pox had been shipped out of Cumberland and into Putnam County. It charged, "had it not been for this, Putnam would have been clean of smallpox. Cumberland county is doing nothing to stamp out the disease...and our people are getting tried of such infamous conduct." Again in 1904 an epidemic struck and twenty person contracted smallpox.

The county employed a primitive means of controlling this and other epidemics. In cooperation with the Oddfellows it operated a house of quarantine known as the "pesthouse: two miles north of Cookeville. Here victims of dread diseases, particularly vagrants, the poor, and the black, who could not be isolated in private homes, were retained. Those who were thus incarcerated were doubly cursed. They were desperately ill, and conditions under which they recovered or died were horrible. Guards passed food and water to them through slots in the walls. Members of their families and friends were not permitted to visit them.

To most of the populace pregnancy was a “hush-hush,” shameful condition. Many expectant mothers had no prenatal care, rarely appeared in public, and thought it immodest to call in a male doctor. There were midwives, usually called “aunts,” in every little community who delivered most of the babies. Postnatal care for women and babies was the exception. Most mothers breast-fed their infants from nine months to a year. Then, because cow’s milk was not pasteurized and there was little knowledge of the dangers of bacteria, many babies died of the “milk sickness” during the first summer after they were weaned.

Old people were expected to die of “old age,” and often their families did not call in doctors until patients were in the terminal stages of their illness.

Many Putnam Countians sought medical advice from quacks, for men with no training could register with the county clerk and begin practice. J. G. Wiggington, a phrenologist, used electrical charges to cure paralysis and John A. Ridger advertised as an “Indian doctor” and convinced many that he had cured them. A number of local women were believed to have healing powers.

Other who were sick turned to folk remedies based on ignorance and superstition. For example, some believed that tying the foot of a mole around a baby’s neck eased teething pain, that a buried dishrag removed warts, and that forcing chickens to run over children warded off chickpox. A few of the home cures probably had some medicinal value. Housewives brewed sassafras tea to improve the blood, made poultices of slippery elm bark and dried calamus root for colic, applied yellowroot for sore mouths, and advised drinking blackberry juice for diarrhea.

Many people relied on patent medicines. Unregulated in any way before the passage of the United States Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906 and the Tennessee Pure Food and Drug Act in 1907, over-the-counter remedies, such as Pe-Ru-Na, Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound, and Wine of Cardui were heavily laced with alcohol. While they made some patients feel better temporarily, they created as many ailments as they “cured.” In the 1890’s Z. T. Hinds, a Cookeville druggist, formulated Hind’s Little Liver Pills and advertised and distributed them in Middle Tennessee.

Unfortunately, many trained doctors were inadequately prepared to diagnose and cure. Medical schools, many of them poor, had multiplied without regulation in the 1880’s, and diplomas from many of them had little value. The Tennessee Medical Society and later the Tennessee State Medical Association handled licensing as best they could. Well-meaning doctors, not only in Putnam County but throughout the nation, did not know the causes of numerous illnesses, and many of their remedies were primitive. The use of purgatives accompanied by starvation diets was the standard treatment for most ailments. Doctors prescribed large doses of castor oil, calomel, and Epsom salts to open the bowels and “stir up torpid liver.” Many also ordered the drinking of turpentine and whiskey.

Struggling against these hardships, a number of physicians spent their lives trying to cure the sick. Cookeville doctors in the 1890’s included John B. s. Martin, Henry C. Martin,

Lemuel R. McClain, Jeff F. Dyer, and G. W. Whitney, Drs. Claude P. Martin, Zebedee L. Shipley, Lex Dyer, L. D. Ensor, W. Scott Farmer, William H. Ragland, and William A. Howard began practice somewhat later. Farmer eventually moved to Nashville and served as superintendent of Central State Hospital some thirty years.

From 1890 to 1920 J. Thomas Moore and J. A. Butler practiced medicine in Algood and Robert L. Ray, W. C. Officer, C. A. Collins, Alvah Johnson, and T. Morrison Crain were Monterey physicians. Drs. Samuel Denton, W. E. Sypert, Shelia Davis, Ned Burton, William F. Sewell, J. M. Wheeler, Thomas Jefferson Smith, and Luther M. Freeman served the western part of the county.<sup>17</sup>

R. L. Duval, G. N. Guthrie, W. D. Ferrell, J. Peyton Terry, and S. H. Baird were some of the Putnam County's leading dentists.

In his charming and informative book, *Dr. Tom J. Thomas Moore* described his medical practice in Algood in the early 1900's. he received few patients at his office, at first a hotel room; instead, often riding miles into the country, he made hundreds of home calls a year. In summer he traveled on horseback or in a buggy, and on snowy winter days he fitted runners made of wagon tires under his buggy and turned it into a sleigh. He charged one dollar for a house call within two miles of his office and five dollars to deliver a baby. "Dr. Tom" pulled teeth, practiced surgery with Dr. William A. Howard, and treated all the common diseases without the benefits of penicillin or antibiotics. Once, on a kitchen table dragged outside under a tree, he removed a bullet from the liver of a shooting victim. Such a large crowd gathered to observed the surgery that the constable was called to restrain the crowd!

Dr. Moore and other Putnam County physicians made efforts to stay abreast of their profession. For years he, Dr. Howard, and Cookeville dentist Terry went for a week's training at Mayo's Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Many Putnam County physicians were active in the Upper Cumberland Medical Society, a group of doctors from some fifteen counties who me annually to discuss problems and share information. In 1900 Moore helped organize a Putnam County Medial Society, but the association was not chartered until 1922 and did not meet regularly until the 1930's.

Moore, like other local doctors, felt that improved education was essential to rid the county of reliance on medical "witchcraft" and to control epidemics. He helped promote the Algood High School and served on the County Board of Education some twenty years. In 1951 the Tennessee Medical Association named him "Doctor of the Year."

The Episcopal Church operated a valuable health service in Monterey. In 1914 the Tennessee Diocese bought the Cumberland Hotel building and opened Saint Raphael's, a school for missionaries, social workers, and postulants, in the rambling building. The directors soon had an infirmary and visiting nurse service functioning under the direction of Rose Orwell, Dr. Alexander C. Killeffer, his wife Mary, and their family arrived in the mountain community in 1918. Under the leadership of Killeffer, who was to head the mission until 1931, the facility reached its zenith. Monterey physicians Officer and

Johnson performed surgery operation. In addition to medical aid, the mission held Sunday School classes and worship services, opened a library, and provided the mountain people with clothes from missionary barrels. Killeffer organized a Boy Scout troop, probably the first affiliated with the national organization, in Putnam County.

In the early years of the twentieth century a number of factors brought some improvement in health practices in Putnam County. Informed persons throughout the United States began to realize the implications of the germ theory and to demand better sanitation. New discoveries in medical science gained increased respect for the medical profession. In 1901 the Tennessee General Assembly tightened standards for state medical schools, and in 1916 that body required examinations of all physicians who wished to practice in Tennessee. The Putnam County Quarterly Court elected a health officer who led immunization drives and sanitation projects, hired a county nurse, and paid partial expenses for care of mentally ill at Central State Hospital in Nashville. The Tennessee Public Health Department examined water supplies.

After World War I the Red Cross provided workers who investigated the health needs of county families and arranged for care with local physicians. The chapter likewise scheduled classes in home nursing.

County doctors introduced new techniques. They abandoned their emphasis on purgatives, emphasized immunization, and began employing x-rays for diagnosis. Dr. Moore introduced the use of aspirin to relieve pain.

In spite of improved sanitation and preventative measures, epidemics continued to hit the area. While smallpox and typhoid fever were on the wane, diphtheria and scarlet fever still claimed many victims, and in 1918 a terrible influenza epidemic hit the United States and Putnam County. Beginning in September of 1918, the disease spread rapidly throughout the county. It struck whole families and many, especially the elderly, babies, and those who refused bed rest, died. Stores ran out of coffins and families had to make their own. Schools and theaters closed, and clubs discontinued meetings.

Nevertheless, Putnam had made progress in health care from 1890 to 1920. While many of its citizens still relied on folk cures, many others called in physicians, now better trained to treat their illnesses. In 1923 Putnam County had 116 practicing physicians and ranked 22 in the number of doctors among the 95 counties of Tennessee.

For many of the starry-eyed young Cookeville High School students who received their diplomas in May of 1893, who debated, recited, painted, and played, who faced the future with naïve optimism, the ensuing decades had been rewarding ones. Hatfield had improved Putnam County schools significantly. Holladay had helped write the bill establishing TPI. Whitney, active in several literary and civic organizations, had stimulated women to think. The graduates had brought lyceums, concerts, and libraries to Putnam County. They had subscribed to newspapers, worked in civic clubs, and supported improvements in public health. And they had had a lot of fun.

<sup>17</sup>This list, compiled primarily from accounts of medical meetings in area newspapers, is not a complete roster of the physicians of Putnam County from 1890 to 1920. Although during these years medical doctors were required to register their licenses in the county court clerk's office, these registrations cannot presently be located by that office. Dr. and Mrs. Thurman Shipley and others were helpful in checking the list compiled by the writer.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>