

Doctors avert smallpox epidemic in 1907

"Smallpox — an acute, highly contagious disease causing a high fever and successive stages of severe skin eruptions." The Columbia Encyclopedia.

Monroe Countians were startled to read in the Dec. 13, 1907, edition of the *Bloomington Telephone* that there was an outbreak of smallpox in the county. The scare began when the county health officer, Dr. Otto Rogers, went to the vicinity of McMillan's stone mill and diagnosed the ailment of a man by the name of Gerald Lenox.

According to the newspaper, Rogers quarantined the Allen boarding house and the five other residences there. One statement in the article seems a bit hard to believe — "The health officer learned that his elder brother, Carl Lenox, and Mrs. Alice Allen, daughter-in-law of the boarding house proprietor, are both recovering from a *mild* attack of the same disease. From present indications they have had smallpox, too."

It was not exactly a case of sheer panic, but there was genuine concern on the part of local doctors. They were particularly worried when they learned it was possible



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

that students at Bloomington High School had been exposed."

Explained the *Telephone*, "In the last two days many pupils at the high school have been unknowingly exposed to the dread disease smallpox. The exposure came through Frank Allen, who lives at the Allen boarding house near Ketchams in the stone district, and attends the high school here, coming up and going back each day on the accommodation (train)." Not only had young Allen sat in class all day, he also attended an after-school football meeting.

Concluded the *Telephone*, "Today he is not in school but is quarantined at the boarding house along with several others."

Sure enough, the disease turned up in Bloomington. On Dec. 16, the newspaper in-

formed its readers in a front-page story that, "Smallpox is in the city. John Lanum, the cabman being confined to his home at 805 West 3rd Street with the dread disease."

Two local doctors confirmed the diagnosis and placed that address under quarantine, too. It is odd that Lanum appeared in town on Saturday with the characteristic broken-out face and no one challenged him on his appearance. In fact, noted the newspaper, "Lanum was on the street Saturday with his face broken out and came in contact with scores of people."

As a matter of fact, Lanum took himself home because he really didn't feel very well. His symptoms were probably chills, severe headaches, acute pain in the back and nausea. No doubt he was also running a fever. The *Telephone* added that "He was much surprised when Dr. Ross called his complaint the smallpox."

The local health authorities were naturally anxious to know where Lanum picked up the germs. The patients suggested perhaps he got them "by hauling some transients from one station to another in his cab."

Because of the quarantine, 13 people

were confined to the West Third Street house. The *Telephone* listed some of them: Lanum's wife and three children, the oldest 5 years old; the Nunn family, (who lived in the other half of the house) including Jack Nunn's wife and five children, General (age 14), Pearl (12), Grant (10), Arthur (8), and Raymond (5); and Nunn's mother, Nancy. Jack Nunn was "out on the streets and will probably not be allowed to go home if any of his family contract the disease."

Two visitors to the Nunn household were vaccinated: Mrs. Lizzie Clark and her daughter, Ollie, who lived on East Second Street. Dr. Thurston Smith, city health officer, urged any who came in contact with Lanum to be vaccinated also.

By Dec. 20, all of the physicians involved were hopeful that an epidemic had been averted. Both Gerald Lenox and Lanum were to getting better. Alice Allen and Carl Lenox had recovered, and best of all, there were no new cases in the county.

The *Telephone* explained that one other precaution had been taken: "Lanum's cab, from which he may have contracted the disease, has been thoroughly disinfected."

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