Diary recalls outbreak of measles at IU

Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

"Measles, if uncomplicated by secondary infections, is not dangerous, and one attack confers immunity"

Columbia Encyclopedia.

Measles is generally considered a childhood disease, but it was not a respecter of age in the Indiana University community in 1857. Theophilus Wiley, an IU faculty member who kept a diary, noted that the weather was "still mild and rainy" on Feb. 5.

Earlier in the week Wylie wrote that his wife, Mag, was "sickish," and two days later he wasn't feeling all that well, either. In fact, the professor "did very little" in the afternoon.

Thanks to his diary, we know that on the following Saturday night there was a heavy snow. Though the temperature on Tuesday was only 8 degrees, Wiley stoically worked for a time in the university library without benefit of a fire in the fireplace.

Suddenly, on Feb. 12, Wiley wrote that a student by the name of Brown (probably James M. Brown of Clinton) was "very threatened with croup." Two days later, the temperature shot up to 60 degrees in Bloomington, a startling turn of events for February.

Brown's "croup" had turned to measles by Feb. 14. Public gatherings were not discontinued, because people in those days didn't know that measles was spread by a virus contained in droplets of spray from the nose or mouth of the sufferer.

Grumbled Wiley in his diary on Feb. 22, "A number of students sick with the measles. For the last two weeks it seems to me that there had been more sickness than in the last two years. This unseasonable warm and moist weather is certainly the cause." The high temperature on that day was 32 degrees, or so the professor wrote in his diary.

Wiley, who had a family, went to visit one of the sick students, Charles Miller, a special student from Ladoga. Again, medical knowlege being pretty thin at that time, the threat of illness did not prevent Wiley from hearing "recitations as usual."

And it was class as usual the next day with one exception. Wiley wrote in his diary, "When hearing the recitation of the Senior Class, Mr. (Hiram) Allen came in and announced the sudden death of his classmate, Charles Miller. Mr. Miller had had the measles and was as we thought recovering."

Indeed, Wiley recalled that he had seen Miller on the previous Saturday and seemed to need only time to recuperate. The professor was certainly shaken up by the death. "His death gave us a severe shock."

At that time, Wiley was not thinking only of himself. As he noted in his diary, "What distressing tidings will the parents receive.'"

Funerals tend to be for the living, rather than the dead, and the faculty and students of the little university consoled themselves with a ceremony. Wiley noted, "At 6 o'clock religious services were held, in his room — the students and faculty formed a procession, and it was a melancholy sight to see the long funeral proceeding slowly through the rain, with their lanterns to the depot, from which the body was to be conveyed to Ladoga, about 12 miles from Mr. Miller's home."

No one in the somewhat limited circle of faculty and students was without compassion, but the rhythm of classes and recitations continued. March unkindly dropped a blanket of snow on Bloomington, and the temperature dropped to 19 degrees.

There is no indication in Wiley's diary that the cases of measles turned into an epidemic. But it was always a possibility in those days.

Professor Theophilus Wiley lived in what is known as the Wiley House at the corner of Second and Lincoln streets. Currently on display are photographs, documents and artifacts belonging to the Wiley family. They will be on exhibit into May. The house is open Monday-Friday from 1 to 4 p.m. and by appointment. Admission is free.

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