

Pest House Was Tragedy

by Marguerite T Callahan

The last person to die in a “Pest House” at Fayette was an old man, who for two months, had been struggling for life in that place of isolation. Although he was thought to be recovering from a contagious and dreaded disease, death came suddenly. So far as is known, he lies in some neglected spot, unknown, unmarked, forgotten, beyond the tribute of a sigh. Before his time, there were perhaps others who died under the same circumstances.

At one time the pest house was a familiar sight to the townspeople. This relic of the past, now unheard of, was a necessity for all towns and settlements, from earliest times until the advance of medical science did away with the need for such a place. The pest house, located outside the limits of the town, was for the isolation of those unfortunates who had contracted contagious diseases such as smallpox, yellow fever and cholera.

In 1900 the quiet little town of Fayette was thrown into a state of excitement when word of the outbreak of smallpox quickly spread over the town. The CH Gunter family had come down with the dreaded disease and was quickly hustled away to the pest house.

This was the year when old men were discussing the Boer war in South Africa. The daring exploit of an able Alabama naval officer, Richard Pearson Hobson, at Manila Bay was still fresh in the minds of the people. Carrie Nation, the militant prohibitionist, had started on her crusade, invading saloons with her hatchet. Young ladies were reading the popular historical novels, “*To Have And To Hold*” by Mary Johnston, “*Janice Meredith*” by Paul Leichester Ford and “*Alice of Old Vincennes*” by Maurice Thompson. Religious people were mourning the death of Dwight L Moody, the great evangelist.

The smallpox scare brought the city fathers together and it was decided that the school would close for two weeks. There were those who so feared the disease that they left town for a time.

The Gunter family was treated by Dr. TM Peters while C. Propst, evidently immune to the disease from having had it, nursed the patients. The mother, who was old and frail, soon died. Old Mr. Gunter, called Uncle Charmer, remained in the pest house.

There continued to be outbreaks of smallpox in many parts of the world even though Dr. Edward Jenner, an English physician, had made a vaccine in 1797, which he hoped would eradicate the disease from the face of the earth. Vaccination was the only method of control. There was little to be done once the patient had contracted the disease.

Dr. William McCay’s old medical book describes smallpox as a disease in which putrid symptoms are in evidence almost from the beginning. The face and neck swell, the eyes close.

There is inflammatory fever and delirium. Eruptions over the face and body break out about the third day. If the patient survives, pock marks on the face remain as a telltale sign of the disease.

Treatment prescribed was salts every other day and 30 drops of laudanum at night, water and lemonade. Salve was used on the eyes.

George Washington bore the marks of smallpox on his face. He had suffered a light case of the disease while on a journey to Barbados Island.

Fayette people had good cause to fear smallpox. It had been among them and had taken the lives of those they knew and loved. During the Civil War there were outbreaks among the soldiers in army camps. Michael Guin was one victim. He died March 22, 1864 while serving with the First Alabama Cavalry U.S.A.

In 1878, smallpox took the life of J Thomas McConnell, a Fayette County native. He died in San Saba, Texas, at a quarantine station where he had gone after taking the disease at Fort Comanche. Newspaper accounts of the day reported him to be the son of Thomas P McConnell, of Fayette Court House. He was in the cattle business with the Murray brothers in Tom Green County, Texas.

When no new cases of smallpox broke out the people of Fayette settled down to their usual way of life. JR Robertson was Mayor. WR Ennis was Sheriff and Daniel W Morton was Postmaster.

Old Mr. Mr. Gunter seemed to be recovering from smallpox. When Dr. Peters made his last call the old man appeared to be in good spirits.

“I have not felt better in years.”, he said.

An hour later he lay a corpse, the victim of a heart attack, so it was believed. It is not likely that there was a wake or the usual evening of sitting up with the dead because of the circumstances of his death and because of the fact that the house in which he and his family lived had burned to the ground. This had occurred while he was at the pest house.

In the middle of the night, the old two-story house went up in flames, probably due to a careless tramp. It was located near the Southern Railroad tracks at the east crossing. Fayette County Commissioners had recently bought the property with plans to use the old house for the construction of a new pest house.

Throughout the history of Fayette there have been several pest houses, the last one located near the overhead bridge which crosses the railroad on the Covin Road. It stood on the left-hand side of the railroad in the vicinity of the present-day coliseum.

Elliott P Jones first owned the land on which it was located. His son, James B Jones, the next owner, sold the land to William M Cannon, on February 14, 1900. William M Cannon and his wife Mary, conveyed this land, 33 acres in all, to the Fayette County Commissioners.

In 1922 the last pest house looked quiet and forlorn to the eyes of children who came upon it on their Sunday afternoon walks. Violets grew undisturbed where solemn steps once marked the tragedy of human life.

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