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FRONTIER HOME REMEDIES AND SANITATION¹

IN PIONEER DAYS most families had a few simple remedies for ordinary ills. The remedies used for people and for livestock and the ways in which they were administered varied somewhat in different families and localities.

Some of the more common remedies that were kept on hand whenever possible for emergencies were: skunk oil, which was rubbed on the chest in cases of severe colds that settled on the bronchial tubes; bloodroot, a weak decoction of which was taken internally to help ease off a persistent "cold on the lungs," often in connection with the oil treatment; ginger or cayenne pepper, which was taken for fresh colds, in hot water that had been sweetened and sometimes mixed with a little milk or vinegar; black pepper, which was put into hot water and used to "settle the stomach" when that organ threatened to "turn wrong side out"; rhubarb root, senna leaves, and castor oil, which were used as laxatives or physics; camphor, opodeldoc, or a liniment made of vinegar and salt, for sprains and bruises; and alum, which was powdered after heating and applied to sore lips, cold sores, and the like. Pennyroyal was gathered wild on the prairie and was used by some in fever cases, if I remember correctly. Sulphur and molasses and dandelion-root tea played an important part in the lives of most pioneers as

¹ This article, like Mr. Davis' recollections of "Some Frontier Words and Phrases," published *ante*, p. 241-246, is drawn from a manuscript volume of reminiscences, in which the author presents his impressions of various aspects of frontier life in southern Minnesota after 1866. *Ed.*

spring alteratives. They were supplemented by greens—the cooked leaves of mustard, dandelions, cowslips, and other wild plants, and of beets from the gardens. After the long winter, the “oldsters” insisted, the blood was thick, torpid, and slow-moving, and it was their theory that this treatment would “thin the blood,” as they said.

Boneset or thoroughwort and tansy grew in almost every garden. A decoction of boneset leaves was expected to make the patient sweat, and in certain cases it was also used as a mild emetic. Tansy was used as an emmenagogue. Wormwood, which was also grown in many gardens and dooryards, was used as a vermifuge. When a mother saw her child's upper lip take on a slightly bluish-white tint, she said emphatically, “It's worms,” and acted accordingly. Sometimes wormwood was used as a tonic in bitters, a much prized remedy with some, probably because, whatever else was put into the bottle, it was sure to contain a generous proportion of alcohol or whisky. Tonics, such as tincture of iron, goldenseal, and wormwood, were given only when the patient was thought to be in a “run-down” condition, which was usually called “general debility.” It was easy, however, to have the “run-down” feeling when one wanted a bottle of bitters. Pumpkin seeds were considered a good diuretic, although a remedy of this kind was very rarely prescribed.

As an astringent in ordinary cases of diarrhea, blackberry juice or brandy was used when at hand, but other simple substitutes were common. In preparing tonics, the pioneers often used sweet flag, which grew at the edges of the sloughs, and camomile, which was brought from the East and became common in the pastures. The latter was used particularly as a tonic for infants, and it was also administered for coughs and colds. Urine, sweetened, functioned as ipecac and was used in severe cases of croup. For little shavers with colds a syrup made of onions and sugar or molasses was found useful. But for pure unadulterated

cussedness in youngsters, the parents had a very effective, if crude, remedy called "strapoil." When children had measles, they were kept in bed for a week at least and doped with cayenne pepper or ginger tea to "bring out the measles." Every newborn child had to take its allotted portion of saffron tea to clear from its skin the reddish tint or rash. A fat rind of fried salt pork was often given to very young children to suck or chew when they were in a "run-down" condition and no other treatment seemed to be effective.

Teething in infants caused considerable worry in every family. Excessive drooling, long spells of fretting, poor digestion, and loss of appetite and weight were the most noticeable symptoms. Drooling was perhaps the first warning. The child was at once furnished with a bib and something to bite on, such as a ring of ivory or rubber. Harness lines often were equipped with genuine ivory rings. In the absence of suitable rings, any kitchen utensil the child could handle without danger to itself was pressed into service. Careful feeding, a lot of mothering, and the occasional use of a soothing syrup or other medicines that were calculated to keep the baby's system in good condition, usually brought the little shavers through all right. The fact that most mothers nursed their infants for two or more years also may have helped. Teething was fatal only when some complication set in, and that very rarely happened.

Grownups also had trouble with teeth, and often decaying teeth, "jumping toothache," abscesses, and the like became very real and serious afflictions. And there were few dentists in the land in pioneer days. Doctors in the remote towns extracted teeth with what would now, perhaps, be considered crude forceps. It was not often, however, that the sufferer could or would go to a doctor. To ease the pain caused by an exposed nerve, a tiny wad of cotton was often saturated with some strong liniment, camphor, or even tobacco juice (the sufferers were desperate), and packed into the cavity. Liniments or camphor also were rubbed

on the cheek, if it was swollen. Sometimes these treatments seemed to bring relief, often not.

Affected teeth were often allowed gradually to decay until only the roots remained for a doctor to dig out, if given the opportunity. Suffering during the intermittent spells of pain was borne with more or less fortitude, according to the disposition of the patient. After the railway towns attained a size sufficient to support doctors, the extraction of teeth became an important item in an ordinary doctor's practice, especially if he happened to be skillful. Then a patient whose tooth was so affected that it caused severe pain and swelling of the cheek went to the nearest doctor and had it "yanked out," as he said. There was no thought of filling the tooth. Sometimes, too, teeth were pulled by some member of the family with a shoemaker's or carpenter's pincers.

Vaccination was practiced and most people had faith in it. But, with the difficulty of getting large families to doctors and the scarcity of vaccine, many pioneers went without this protection. Often one or two members of a family were vaccinated by the nearest physician and, after the vaccine had "worked" well, the others in the family were vaccinated with matter from scabs on the arms of the first to receive the treatment. Such operations were usually performed by the father or some grown-up member of the family. It was not thought perfectly safe to use the vaccine from one family on members of another, because of the possibility of passing on some impurity in the blood.

Cuts and other open wounds were allowed and even encouraged to bleed freely for a short time, and were then wrapped "in the blood," as was said, with strips of clean cloth, muslin or some other white cloth being preferred. Usually the wrapping was left on the wound at least until the healing process was well started, unless some evidence of infection appeared. Pain, or throbbing, or more than ordinary warmth of the parts affected led to an earlier unwrapping and redressing of the wound. Of course, if the

wound had need of cleansing, it was given a thorough washing with boiled water, if handy, and then allowed to bleed a little before wrapping. The bleeding was supposed to remove all poisonous and foreign matter from the wound and thus prevent the open blood vessels from carrying impurities into the blood stream. If infection developed, strong healing and drawing salves were applied, and sometimes saleratus was used. This would bring about healing, after suppuration set in, when other remedies failed.

Burns that did not blister were treated with whatever soothing ointment or salve was at hand. It was rubbed over the surface of the burn or scald and the affected parts were then wrapped with a clean cloth. Sometimes camphor or sweet oil was applied, and if the burn was not too severe the healing process was left to nature. When blisters developed, healing ointment was applied as quickly as possible and the wound was carefully bandaged. Such treatments usually sufficed, but if healing seemed to be too slow, or suppuration set in, redressing, often with stronger salves or saleratus, followed.

Carbuncles and boils were treated with poultices, which were often made of dried bread, crumbled, softened, and well mixed with sweet milk. Sometimes, into this was mixed a little white of egg, crushed boiled onion, corn meal, or wheat bran. The powdered leaves of some herb that was thought to have a drawing quality or would be likely to help soften the skin, or the soft, sticky substance obtained by soaking or boiling the inner bark of the red elm tree, known as "slippery elm," also often was added to the poultice mixture. Of course all these things were never used at once. The mass was applied hot and was expected to keep the affected part soft and moist and to have a drawing effect, thus helping nature to eliminate the poison or whatever was causing the disturbance. Poultices sometimes were applied to wounds that were believed to be infected. Mustard plasters and salves were used commonly and usually with good

results. When a felon developed, the end of the affected finger was tightly bound with several thicknesses of muslin or some other thin cloth that had been cut into narrow strips. The finger was then pounded with a carpenter's or shoemaker's hammer, while the groaning of the patient made the entire family uncomfortable. After this a poultice was applied. Such heroic treatment was credited with hastening the "coming to a head" of the abscess.

Usually the mother was the family doctor and only rarely was outside help called in, except in cases of accouchement. Then a regular physician was sent for, if one was within reach, and two or three experienced neighbor women always came in.

Among the names of diseases commonly heard on the frontier, but seldom, if ever, heard now, were congestion of the lungs, lung fever, inflammation of the lungs, and consumption. The latter might be "galloping consumption," "quick consumption," or "lingering consumption." The terms "quick" and "galloping" were applied to cases that developed very fast and ended ordinarily in from three to six months. Lingered cases ordinarily lasted fourteen years, it was said. Inflammation of the bowels included what is now called appendicitis, perforation of the bowels, and all other serious disturbances in the abdominal cavity that developed dangerous inflammation. Summer complaint was a form of diarrhea that occurred in hot summer weather. Any disturbance of the liver was described as liver complaint, and most cases of prolonged indigestion were called dyspepsia. Sinus infection was known only as a cold in the head and was treated as such. If the cold became chronic, it was called catarrh, and the treatment that was considered most effective was a general toning up of the patient's system. Neuralgia of the face was often called *tic douloureux*.

In each neighborhood there was usually a horse doctor, that is a man who professed to know something about the

diseases of horses and cattle. Some of the remedies he used were logical enough. A cow or "critter" was said to have "lost its cud," however, when the local horse doctor did not know what was wrong with it. In such cases, a wet dishrag was balled up and pushed down the sick animal's throat.

Living conditions were practically the same in all the small frontier houses, whether they were built of logs, sod, or lumber. Lack of room to turn around, as the women said, was the great difficulty. In the crude dwellings of one, two, or, rarely, four rooms, there was little opportunity for ventilation in cold or stormy weather. Usually the air that came in when the outside door was opened was about all the fresh air that entered. Even then, when the youngsters went in or out, almost without fail someone would exclaim in no gentle tones: "Shut the door ye little tike an' don't slam it!" Sometimes he would add, "We can't heat all outdoors." Under frontier conditions, sanitation as we now understand the term was impossible.

Very little bathing was done in the small frontier houses during the cold winter months. In warm weather, the rivers, lakes, and sometimes the clear water sloughs served for what bathing was done by the men folks. The practice of bathing was by no means universal even in summer, as was evidenced by the atmosphere in the small schoolrooms.

Cleanliness about the house, then as now, depended largely on the disposition and health of the housekeeper. Most of the homes were kept fairly clean, some of them remarkably so, conditions considered. Homemade soap, hard and soft, was used, the hard soap being cut into big oblong cakes. All wood surfaces, including chairs and tables, were scrubbed thoroughly and often, and kept practically white. The painted surface of a kitchen chair seat soon became white and thick boards rapidly became thin from scrubbing. Good housekeepers were not so rare as some would have one believe. Cleanliness was considered a virtue, of course, but

not because of the fear of germs. It would seem that ages of experience taught people many things that the germ chasers were to learn with infinite labor and concentrated thought scores of years later.

Among the greatest enemies with which housekeepers had to deal in summer were flies, and from these pests there was no mechanical protection. In fly time there was a continual fight. One method was to "shew" the flies out and close the doors and windows when possible. On very cool mornings they could be swept from the walls and burned, and at times they were kept moving by waving a leafy branch over the table during mealtime, especially when there was company for dinner.

Perhaps the most difficult of situations in connection with living in small houses on the sparsely settled prairie came when a settler, already "put to it" for sleeping room for his own family, was obliged to furnish shelter for travelers during storms or for relatives who came to visit from a distance. This was always done without sign of disinclination or reluctance to accommodate. After all it was a simple matter. A place on the floor was cleared, it was swept clean, and blankets or robes or both, as supplies warranted, were spread over a space wide enough to accommodate the extras, who bunked down with most of their clothes on—side by side—men, women, and children, as occasion and modesty seemed to dictate. If youngsters were restless, or the women embarrassed, such incidental things were borne with as unavoidable inconveniences of frontier life and one never heard the government blamed for any of these hardships. Indeed, as I remember it, the average family gloried in its ability to meet and overcome any difficulties and untoward conditions that the raw new country had to offer.

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