

Buena Vista Sanatorium Wabasha County



AT THE TURN of the twentieth century, Minnesota was in the depths of a public-health crisis. Between 1900 and 1911, the mortality rate from tuberculosis increased dramatically, a sign that the disease was spreading. TB was killing 50 percent of its victims, making Minnesota's death rate one of the nation's highest.

In response, the state and its counties turned to a fairly new method designed to help save the lives of those sickened by the "white plague"—so called for the pale complexion of its victims—while stemming its spread. More than a dozen tuberculosis facilities, or sanatoriums, were established, including Buena Vista in Wabasha County, which opened in 1917. The cornerstone of its treatment was the therapeutic triad of "rest, good food, fresh air." Patients experienced the fresh air, in part, on Buena Vista's large screened sleeping porches, which maximized their exposure to the elements—a nearly universal feature of sanatoriums.

As time and medical technology advanced, Buena Vista's role changed from simply isolating infected persons from the general public to aggressively treating the disease. By the 1930s, the staff also worked in area communities and schools to test for TB, in order to prevent it from further developing and spreading. Buena Vista's 1933 annual report noted, "if . . . [a sanatorium] is carrying out all of these tasks, [it] is working toward a time when there shall no longer be any work for it to do." That statement was a prophecy.



The sanatorium's signature sleeping porches, about 1920 (MHS COLLECTIONS)

In Minnesota, 119 out of every 100,000 residents died from tuberculosis in 1911. By 1920, shortly after sanatoriums like Buena Vista opened, the death rate had fallen to 89 per 100,000; in 1940, it dropped to 27 per 100,000. The introduction of effective antibiotic treatments, beginning in the 1940s, caused incidence of the disease to nearly disappear. In 1954, a year before Buena Vista closed, 97 percent of its patients were on drug therapy, relegating its large, screened porches to a bygone era.

—Steven R. Kinsella

Sources: Leonard G. Wilson, "Medicine, Population and Tuberculosis," *International Journal of Epidemiology* 34 (June 2005): 521–24; Buena Vista Sanatorium, annual reports, 1918, 1930, 1933, 1954, and Minnesota Department of Health, letter, Feb. 7, 1953, both in State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society.

Among other pursuits, Steven R. Kinsella of St. Paul is a freelance writer. His book, 900 Miles from Nowhere: Voices from the Homestead Frontier (2006) was a finalist for the Great Plains Book Award.

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