

# Epidemics a part of Indiana’s long history

By Ed Breen

Stand at the corner of New York and West streets in downtown Indianapolis. To the north and west of this spot, no more than a couple of blocks away, is a serene little patch of unmolested ground in the middle of the IUPUI campus, not far from the medical school building.

A stone, a small boulder, marks the spot. Affixed to it is a metal plaque informing that this is the site of the “plague cemetery,” the first cemetery in the cluster of cabins that is now Indianapolis, and it was created in 1821 for the burial of those men and women who had died in the epidemic of that year, probably an outbreak of malaria. Among those interred there are relatives of the Maxwell family, founders of Indiana University and, among them, the first dean of the IU Medical School.

Plagues, epidemics, pandemics have, I suppose, been a part of the human condition forever. But most certainly they have been on the Indiana landscape as long as we have. Smallpox, cholera, malaria, diphtheria, influenza, tuberculosis, polio and now the coron-

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avirus COVID-19. Each, in turn, claiming its victims and giving Hoosiers cause to both fear and fight. We built sanatoriums to house tuberculosis victims in their last days.

As far back as 1711, when very little of Indiana had been seen or settled by whites, an epidemic of smallpox swept through the tiny southwestern fur trading settlement of Vincennes, a place that would become important as westward expansion crossed the Wabash River. Before it abated, half

of the hearty traders, trappers and settlers of Vincennes were dead.

While not a contagious disease, but rather a deadly poison of then-unknown origin, “the milk sickness” claimed thousands of frontier lives, particularly in the Ohio River valley, especially southern Indiana.

The source: a weed, the white snakeroot plant, which infected cattle and, in turn, contaminated their milk, and eventually killed the men, women and children — especially the children — who drank the tainted milk.

Among the victims was Nancy Hanks Lincoln, the mother of Abraham Lincoln.

Mosquito-borne malaria came and went with the seasons, cholera with contaminated water and other communicable diseases have ravaged Indiana for generations.

But it is two pivotal moments that define us Hoosiers and disease. One a contagious disease and the other a man of both intelligence and courage.

The disease, of course, was the flu epidemic of 1918 and 1919. It claimed the lives of 760,000 Americans over two seasons of rampage. Here is how it unfolded, as reported in something called the “Encyclopedia of Influenza.”:

“The first intimation that influenza might be on its way to Indianapolis came on Thursday, September 19, 1918. Keen to assess the impact of influenza on war production” — remember we were then in the throes of World War I —

“U.S. Surgeon-General Rupert Blue telegraphed each state’s health officer that morning, asking for reports on influenza’s prevalence. “To carry out the Surgeon-General’s directive, Dr. John Newell Hurty, Secretary of the Indiana Board of Health, called each local health officer in his state by telephone with instructions to produce an influenza report by the end of the day. He also dispatched four inspectors to survey Indianapolis manufacturers engaged in war production



Indiana has seen many epidemics throughout its history.

work.”

And that introduces us to Dr. John Hurty, a man described at that time as “the most useful citizen of Indiana.”

A transplanted Buckeye, Dr. Hurty was an early friend of Col. Eli Lilly, long before Lilly was either rich or famous. Hurty was later described by another Hoosier, Vice-president Thomas Marshall as “the premier health commissioner in America.”

He was in charge of Indiana public health for 26 years until he retired in 1922. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, Dr. Hurty cam-

paigned, cajoled, demanded, pleaded — whatever was necessary — to get the proper attention for public health for Hoosiers.

“It is plain that the people must have knowledge of the sources of ill health and the causes of disease,” he said, “before they can practically apply the means for prevention.”

In the final analysis, he did his best, but the influenza was too much. Between September and November of 1918, 3,266 Hoosiers, mostly young men and women, died, leaving 3,020 orphaned children.

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