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THE POLIO EPIDEMIC OF 1927

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Although it is now nearly forty years ago, the events which took place at the Vernon Preparatory School in the Fall of the year 1927 still remain vividly impressed upon my mind.

Up until mid-September everything had been as usual - a fine Summer and Fall, no hint of any epidemic in the neighborhood and a full, in fact a record attendance of pupils booked for the new School year.

On the opening day, about the 9th or 10th of September, the boys began arriving and getting settled in, some fifty-five of them. There was however one late arrival, young Howard Hunt, son of a prominent Kelowna business man whose mother brought him up late in the day, explaining that he had not been feeling well, his tonsils had been giving trouble, but that there was no cause for anxiety. The next day classes began as usual but young Hunt's condition did not improve, so Mrs. Mackie decided to return him to his home where he could get more attention. Accordingly she and I took him to Kelowna that afternoon. His father came out to meet us and carried his son inside, cheerful and laughing. That was Wednesday. Next day the Kelowna authorities phoned up to say that the disease was Poliomyelitis. On Friday young Hunt died.

In a matter of hours our whole world was turned upside down. Medical authorities insisted that the dormitory system be at once discarded and that there must be no further classes held or any communal meals or gatherings of any sort. Every out-building was pressed into service for temporary sleeping accomodation - garage, carpenter shop, stable-loft, bicycle house, etc., and a mounted policeman patrolled the highway outside the School gates day and night to prevent any communication between us in the School and the outside world. I believe the Vernon City Council tried to put up road blocks on the road to Kelowna but found they had not got the power to do so and had to content themselves with warning all travellers against going there: for it was there that the first authentic case of poliomyelitis had occurred.

Back at the School we tried as best we could to accomodate ourselves to the prevailing chaos. No laundry could be sent out and all stores had to be dumped at the letter box on the high road, a quarter of a mile away. Even the fruit in the orchard was considered unclean and had to be left there, and we were not allowed to use

the eggs from our own poultry. To add to it all, more and more suspicious cases of illness amongst the boys began to take place, anyone of which might turn out to be fatal. At the peak we had no less than eighteen boys in bed on the verandah, in the attic, anywhere where a bed could be squeezed in. Any housewife will appreciate what a state of affairs meant to the women folk of our establishment; poor things, they were literally worked to death with no way of escape.

We tried to keep the regular School football games going as far as our depleted members would allow, and it was at the close of one of these that young John Routh, son of Major and Mrs. Routh of Vernon, complained of not feeling well. He was at once put to bed and seemed to be getting on well, apart from a slight temperature. The next day we got his mother out to help look after him, and in the evening he complained that he had lost all feeling in one arm. Early the next morning I rushed into Vernon to fetch his father, for the lad was obviously in a very serious condition: the diaphragm had become paralyzed and his efforts to breathe were terrible. Before his father and I could get back to the School, John Routh was dead. (His parents were allowed to return to their home but were under "house arrest" for two weeks).

Prior to this second death, I had had an interview with the then M.O.H. for Vernon and suggested that we be allowed the use of the Vernon Fever Hospital should any further cases occur, but he said most emphatically "NO" - the risks of taking any case through the streets of the City were too great, even though it might be only a suspect. It was therefore, no surprise that as soon as John Routh's death took place, the health authorities of Vernon and the Coldstream insisted that his body be hermetically sealed in a lead casket, buried not in the family plot in Vernon Cemetery, but in the Coldstream Cemetery, and that no "outsiders" be allowed to attend the ceremony.

As a further precaution the same authorities decreed that the boys should now be divided: roughly half (non-suspects) were to be housed in tents on the Range, the rest, including all suspects, to stay on at the School. The then manager of the Coldstream Ranch, Mr. F. E. R. Woolaston, very kindly allowed us the use of a flat piece of range, ominously enough, quite close to the Coldstream Cemetery. Many kind friends came to our aid in this unexpected dénouement. The C.P.R. generously offered us the loan of enough tents to house the boys and staff: the Kinsmen (I think it was) supplied all the lumber required for flooring and an unknown number of workers laid the floors and put up the tents. My brother,

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Rev. A. C. Mackie with my wife Grace were in charge of the School half, and I, assisted by the late Mrs. (Col.) Bott, Miss Topham Brown, Mrs. Whitehead (still with us I am glad to say) with the late Capt. C. Nottingham and Sgt. (now Inspector, retired) Butler R.C.M.P., of the ranch half. To these men and women we owe a greater debt for their unselfish services than we can ever hope to pay.

Activities for us on the Range were very limited: baseball was tried but as every boy had to have a separate bat for fear of infection, it was a short-lived affair. We went for walks when weather permitted, and at stated occasions parents and friends were allowed to shout greetings across the fifty-foot lane which bordered the camp. One big excitement was the discovery of a rattlesnake on the edge of the camp, which was promptly blown to pieces by a policeman's gun.

At the School things were happening fast. A boy named Isaacs, grandson of a wealthy lady then residing at Oyama, who had been living in isolation in a tent in the School orchard under the care of his grandfather Dr. Williams (then M.H.O. for Vernon) began to show symptoms of the dreaded disease. Removed to the School his condition rapidly grew worse and despite the frantic efforts of his uncle and everyone concerned, and a midnight rush to Kelowna for drugs, he too died. Just before he did so, those around his bed heard him say: "Why is Hayes coming over to the School?" Now Hayes, the son of a well known Kelowna fruit packer, was in my section of the camp, half a mile away and there was no communication at all between the two sections. You can imagine then the feelings of those at the School when an hour or so later a message came from my camp to say that Hayes was ill and was being sent over to them at once. Providentially he recovered completely, which is more than anyone dared hope at the time.

I should say that all parents who wished to come to the School and live with their boys were invited to do so. About a dozen accepted the invitation and came to Vernon with bags and blankets, prepared for a long quarantine. They described to us how they had been shunned by the citizens of Vernon as if they were carriers of the plague - people seeing them coming up the street would step off the sidewalk and turn their backs to them; yet thus far none of them had even been out to the School or exposed to infection of any sort. One wonders how far mass hysteria can go!

Amongst those parents was Mrs. Sayers of Vancouver. A few days after her arrival her boy felt ill. He was in bed in the

Carpenter's Shop, I remember, and hourly his condition grew worse. At last she could stand it no longer and begged my brother to administer Extreme Unction, which he did. This is a service provided for but rarely practised by the Anglican Church, and consists of the offering of prayers with the anointing of head, hands and feet with consecrated oil, and is used only in cases of extreme illness. The patient's temperature by now was something fantastic and the end seemed close at hand. Yet no sooner was the service ended than the boy fell into a deep sleep, and when he awoke later his temperature was normal, and soon he had completely recovered.

Those are the facts: draw your own conclusions!

About this time we had, for a change, a little light diversion. A Kelowna parent having made up his mind to kidnap his son, stole up one night, evaded the police guard and began to search the out houses for the boy. The latter had then recently been removed to other quarters so his father's search was in vain; after waking up several boys by flashing his torch in their faces (as they told us the next morning) he decided things were getting too lively and retreated in a hurry.

It was now getting on towards the end of our quarantine; no fresh cases had appeared and we began to think that the worst was over. But Fate decreed otherwise: Death was to strike yet again, and from a wholly unexpected quarter.

In the range camp were two brothers, sons of Mr. and Mrs. Norman Whittall, a well known Vancouver business man. As the time of our release drew near, Mrs. Whittall decided to come up to take her boys home and wrote to tell them so. The younger lad, a charming little chap and a special favourite of mine for the previous four or five years, decided to give his mother a pleasant surprise: he would get her some rattlesnake skins for a belt. The day before she arrived, he and a friend, without telling anyone of their intention, slipped out of the camp - it was impossible to prevent such a thing with so many tents so widely separated - and went up to the top of the hill overlooking Ravine (Deep) Lake where there were many caves in the rock. They must have previously discovered the particular one they were making for (we knew nothing of its existence) and knew it to be the haunt of rattlers. There must have been a large number of the reptiles there when they reached it for it was just at the time of the year that the snakes collected together in such places prior to hibernation. (Later on my brother killed about 100 snakes in or around this one cave). The boy made two fatal mistakes: he under-estimated the distance

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a snake can strike and over-estimated the length of his stick. Almost at his first blow he was bitten by a large snake. Then he made the worst mistake of all - instead of gashing the wound with his knife (if he had one) he dropped his stick and rushed down to the camp over a mile away, thus accelerating the spread of the venom throughout his body. He arrived in a complete state of exhaustion and shock and we instantly got in touch with the Doctors in Vernon, only to be informed that there was no "anti-venom" on hand, either in Vernon or Kelowna, or in fact in the entire Province. The nearest supply was in the U.S.A. - Washington or Oregon. No plane was available there - a messenger was rushed off on a motor-cycle, but it broke down near the border, and the plasma did not arrive till late the next day. By then it was too late - the poison had spread all over the body and in the afternoon the poor little victim died.

Mrs.. Whittall decided - and who can blame her? - to get her remaining son away from the camp at whatever cost - and a night or two later we discovered that he and a boy from Kelowna, named Maclaren (afterwards killed whilst serving in the RCAF in World War II) were missing - gone without a trace, probably to Kelowna. The police were informed and at once took up the chase. It was hinted at the time - whether justly or not is not for me to say - that the pursuers slowed down until the pursued had crossed the Kelowna City boundary, and then turned back. Be that as it may, the fugitives got away safely and lost no time in reaching Vancouver the following day. Local reaction was explosive - the Attorney General of B.C. was wired for advice, and asked to prosecute, but in effect replied "Clean up the mess yourselves, it's nothing to do with me." Local rumblings and reverberations gradually died away, and blood-thirsty threats gave way to irresolution and finally inaction.

At last came the great day - the boys scattered to their homes and we were left to get to work and disinfect the entire premises - a job which took weeks to do. Later in November the School reopened, with, somewhat to our surprise, almost as many boys as before. There has never been any occurrence of polio since, nor, with the advent of the Salk vaccine, is it likely that there ever will be.

Before closing this account I will mention two incidents which may be of interest.

After things had returned to normal, I made a point of appearing at a meeting of the Vernon City Council to complain publicly of the denial to us of the use of the Vernon Fever Hospital during

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the epidemic. The M.H.O. (Dr. Williams) maintained stoutly that he had never done any such thing. It was, therefore, a case of his word against mine - but no unbiased person would suppose that we would have failed to use the facilities of the Hospital had they been made available to us. The good doctor talked loudly of getting \$20,000.00 damages for libel out of us, but, I suppose, thought better of it on reflection, for we never heard anymore. Perhaps he was inclined to over value his own reputation or to feel uncertain of the view a Jury might take, and if he wasn't sure we had enough cash to pay him any damages at all, how right he was!

The other matter concerns the rattlesnakes. After young Whittall's death, my brother vowed vengeance upon the whole tribe of them and so started the campaign against them which made his name familiar throughout B.C. and beyond. He was tireless in hunting them down, not only throughout the Okanagan Valley, and around Kamloops, but in Alberta too. By the time increasing years (86) prevented anymore such activities, he had accounted for well over 4,000, and it will, I hope, be many years before the ill-fated "Whittall Den" fills up again.

Today, the only remembrance of those hectic days of 1927 is the stained glass window to the four dead boys in the Chapel of the Vernon Preparatory School. To us who lived through that experience, no further memorial was necessary!

