

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan
Livermore City Historian

Diseases We Conquered—Or Have We?

The presence here of two hospitals for tubercular patients, Arroyo Del Valle Sanitorium and the Veterans Administration Hospital, testifies to the terrible presence of TB before the advent of streptomycin and other antibiotics in the 1950s. Many people died of the disease at home without being hospitalized. Unfortunately, since the 1980s, some tubercular bacilli have become drug resistant.

Today, all Livermore Valley children are required to receive the DTaP combination vaccine, first developed in the 1940s to prevent diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis, any of the three often fatal to small children. Diphtheria is a highly contagious disease that spreads quickly; as soon as a case was known, officials would close the local school. In 1876 a diphtheria epidemic caused 25 deaths in Livermore. Pertussis, better known as whooping cough, is also an infectious bacterial disease. The membranes of the respiratory tract become inflamed and secrete extra mucous, causing the victim to have persistent attacks of coughing that sometimes

end in a relieved inspiration that is the “whoop.” Dr. William S. Taylor lost his little girl, Olive, to this disease in 1882, when she was only a year old. The three-week-old son of Richard C. Sweet died of whooping cough in 1903. A news article several days ago told of increased infections of whooping cough—nearly 18,000 cases reported this year in the United States, raising doubts about the effectiveness of the vaccine.

Typhoid fever is another disease that is curable with antibiotics. The bacterium *Salmonella typhi* is transmitted by drinking water or eating food that has been contaminated by fecal matter. Out-houses before the days of modern sewage systems were often the problem, with flies that flew into unscreened houses and landed on food. Dennis F. Bernal’s father died from the disease in Pleasanton in 1860. Here in Livermore in the late 1880s and early 1890s, baker Lorenz Huber, farmers James Egan and John O’Brien, gravedigger John McCauer, and ranchero Nathaniel Green Patterson all succumbed to the disease. Leland Stanford Jr. died of the disease. His parents created Stanford Uni-

versity in his memory. Eugene Day, Livermore livery stable owner, died of typhoid in 1908. With today’s safe food-handling practices, sanitary sewage treatment, and modern water systems, the disease rarely occurs now in California. Livermore put in its first sewer system in 1908. By 1896 scientists had developed a human vaccine using guinea pigs. In 1948 the first antibiotic was used. Some of the *Salmonella* bacteria, however, are beginning to show resistance to antibiotics.

Infantile paralysis, or polio, is caused by a virus that enters the body through the intestinal system. It then invades the spinal cord, leading to paralysis and muscle degeneration. Henrietta Greer believes the disease that struck her grandmother, Sophie Nissen, in 1894 in Livermore was polio. Local medical opinion did not agree because the disease was only known to infect children, not adult women of age 40 with six children; nevertheless, Sophie remained in a wheelchair with paralyzed legs until her death 36 years later. By 1921, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt con-



Hans and Sophie Nissen at their home in Livermore.

tracted polio while in his forties, more adults were being recognized as having the disease. The first public notice of infantile paralysis in Livermore was a front page story in the *Herald* on 8 October 1910, which told of four fatalities, two in Tesla and two in Dublin. In the same period the Livermore Valley reported six serious cases, none of them fatal.

In 1927, Barbara Merritt Adams, daughter of the head of Livermore's Coast Manufacturing and Supply Company, was having a good time with her family vacationing at Capitola, frequently the destination of Livermore residents in the summer. She fell ill with polio, but at first no one suspected what was wrong. They returned home to Livermore, but Barbara continued to be ill. A city doctor was brought in and confirmed a diagnosis of infantile paralysis. The

family was house-quarantined for about three weeks. Barbara remembered that Schenone Grocery brought supplies and hung them on the apple tree in the backyard. She eventually developed paralysis in both legs. She stayed for 18 months at an Oakland hospital, part of that time in a body cast. She recalled a nurse who often read to her, and a canary named Henry. To amuse Barbara, her aunt made beautiful clothes for her dolls that closed with snaps and even buttons. One of her legs recovered, but she required a brace on the other. "I couldn't run or skate or bicycle, but I could do everything else." Her parents encouraged her to live a full life—camping, horseback riding, swimming, traveling.

In 1953 Jonas Salk developed a polio vaccine. In 1954 the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis launched an am-

bitious mass inoculation. Susan Dopking Canfield remembered when the vaccine was offered here in Livermore; her parents refused to allow her to be inoculated. She was very upset because she did not receive a Polio Pioneer lapel pin. Albert Sabin followed Salk's development in 1961 with an oral vaccine that was easier to administer. On Sunday March 10, 1963 at what was billed as "K.O. Polio Family Day," Livermore residents were offered the oral vaccine at Junction Avenue and Joe Michell Schools. The last polio case occurred in the United States in 1979. Unfortunately, some polio survivors are suffering a recurrence of the disease's symptoms, labeled PPS, post-polio syndrome. This happened to Barbara Adams in 1995. As a result, she had to use a wheelchair.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)