

DIPHTHERIA OUTBREAK IN BLOOMSBURG

A Bloomsburg newspaper, *Columbian*, announced to its readers on November 2, 1877, that there were numerous cases of diphtheria in the community. It urged the public to take preventive measures to check this terrible misfortune that had gained a foothold in our midst. "The disease is not only formidable because it is wide spread, but because science knows little how to deal with it." When people learned of this outbreak, there occurred a feeling of alarm and apprehension. This was the era before the age of immunization when medical science would ultimately provide protection from such diseases as diphtheria, scarlet fever, typhoid fever, measles, chicken pox, and mumps.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site provides the following description of diphtheria:

Diphtheria is a bacterial disease that can cause a leathery membrane to form in the throat causing suffocation. It can also cause problems with the other body organs such as the heart and lungs. There are two major strains of diphtheria bacteria, one that produces a poison, and one that does not produce a poison. It is the poison that is responsible for the more severe symptoms of the disease, such as the heart problems. The poison produced at the site of the infection is absorbed into the bloodstream and then distributed to other parts of the body.

Diphtheria is a respiratory disease, very contagious, and usually occurring in colder months. It is easily transmitted from person to person by coughing and sneezing since the "germs live in the mouth, throat, and nose of an infected person."

The *Columbian* in an effort to inform its readers about the danger and seriousness of this outbreak, advised people to adhere to high standards of cleanliness in and around their homes. Having "pure air" in their houses was crucial. Rooms that had been occupied by people having the illness should be "cleansed and disinfected." Parents were admonished to stop "the disgusting custom of compelling children to kiss every visitor is a well contrived method of propagating other grave diseases than diphtheria." Family members who had the disease should be isolated from those who were not sick. During this time health officials would quarantine a house that had a contagious disease.

Despite these efforts to inform the public to guard against the spread of diphtheria and the lack of modern day medicines, there was a very high death rate. An examination of the

Old Rosemont Cemetery records identifies those who died from diphtheria and their ages. In a fifteen month period from March 23, 1877, to June 21, 1878, there were twenty-nine deaths, an average of almost two diphtheria deaths each month. It is important to note that there may have been other deaths with burials in cemeteries other than Old Rosemont. Nine deaths in October 1877 were the highest death rate for a single month. This was a disease that killed children. Of the twenty-nine deaths listed, ages were given for twenty-six children with the average age being 4.8. Bloomsburg's estimated population in this time period would have been approximately 3,500. The number of fatal cases caused by diphtheria as recorded in the Old Rosemont burial records is staggering. Think how these statistics would be viewed today in Bloomsburg if children were dying at the rate when diphtheria existed in the community in 1877-78.