

ROCHESTER HISTORY

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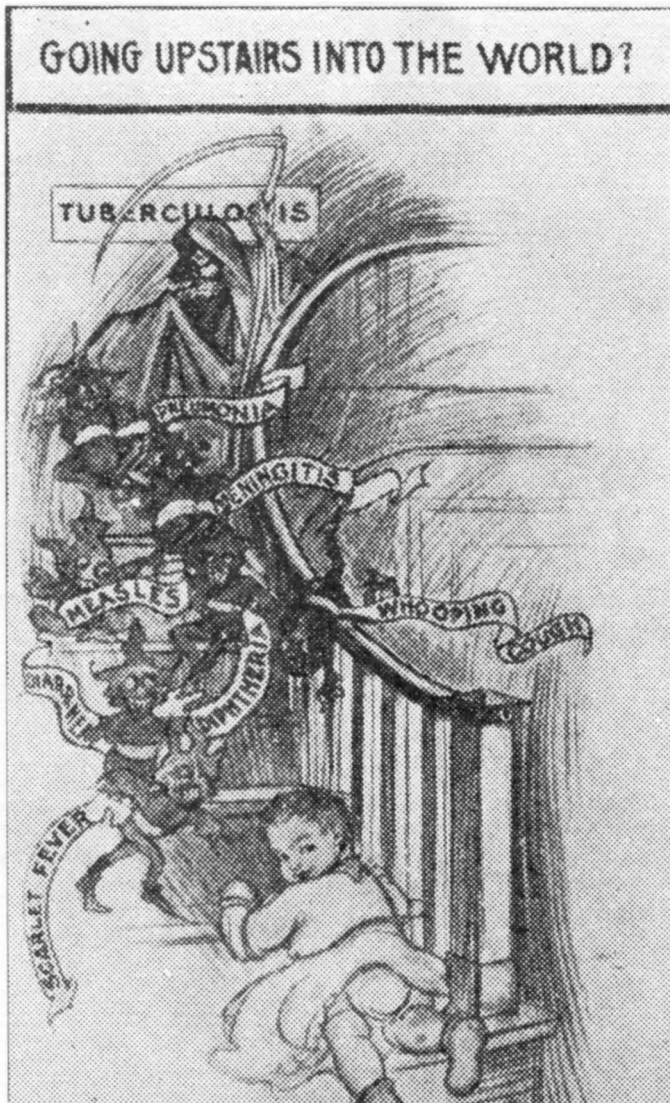
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Life and Death in Nineteenth Century Rochester

By Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck





The Rochester Child Welfare Exhibit 1913 The Baby Killer. Note the dancing demons in the bottom of the milk bottle.

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The Battle Against Infant Death

A mother in 19th century Rochester was surrounded by infant death. One out of four funerals that she attended was likely to be for a child under the age of five. Very often it was her own child.

In Rochester in 1860 nearly half of the deaths (exclusive of stillbirths) were of children under the age of five. Unsanitary housing, disease-contaminated water and food, undernourishment and ignorance of sanitation all contributed significantly to the high rate of infant mortality, but the efforts of the Rochester Health Department and improved living conditions in the city reduced the proportion of infant mortality to 20 per cent of all deaths (exclusive of stillbirths) by 1910.¹

Contagious diseases, some of which were preventable by vaccination or sanitation, were spread rapidly through the city, particularly in the overcrowded section of the northeast side of Rochester. Tenements there at the end of the century sometimes contained one bathroom to serve as many as forty people. Fixtures were frequently broken; outhouses were improperly maintained. The diseases were spread throughout the population by well water contaminated by run-off from cow sheds and outhouses, by the close proximity of other infected persons, and by ignorance of the values of disinfectants, hand washing, and particularly infant bottle washing. Bottles were so often contaminated that the Rochester Health Department dubbed them "baby killers" and urged mothers to breast feed. In the late 19th century the Health Department fought off expanding baby food companies that enticed mothers from breast feeding with the promise of more healthful infant diets.² Cholera infantum killed more infants than any other single cause and it was so rampant during July, August, and September that the number of dead infants sometimes tripled that of other months. These diarrheal and other dreaded diseases of the bowel and digestive tract were collectively called "summer complaint." When vital statistics were regularly kept (in Rochester beginning in 1857), health officers noted the increase during the summer months.

Although by the second half of the 19th century contaminated milk was shown to be the most significant cause of summer complaint and infant deaths, sewerage and contaminated water spread contagious disease more generally throughout the population. City sewer construction began in 1867 and pipes were beginning to be laid to bring

fresh, uncontaminated water from Hemlock Lake to Rochester. The water finally replaced some well water by the end of 1870, but into the early part of the 20th century cases of typhoid occurred more often in areas served by well water. Even residents who used water from Hemlock Lake bought ice cut from ponds contaminated by city sewers.

Outhouses (also called vaults) required regular chemical disinfection and emptying. The vault contents were emptied by paid licensed city scavengers who dumped the contents at night (thus the term night soil) into the Genesee River from a downtown bridge. Besides contaminating the water that filtered into the wells and contaminating the water children swam in, night soil scavengers left a trail of human feces on city streets to be washed into public wells and to be tracked home on foot.³

The unrefined design of the city sewers, improper laying, and lack of water made sewers as dangerous to human health as vaults, especially in dry weather. In 1868 the Health Officer noted there was "unusual, intense heat all summer, very little rain, and a sun so hazy and red it could be looked at directly with the naked eye." Health Officer Henry H. Langworthy wrote that foul sewer "gases, often generated in stagnant sewers, is a source of more mischief than any other nuisance which citizens have commonly to deal with."⁴ He looked forward to the Hemlock Lake water that would supply the city with enough water to regularly flush sewers to prevent disease and poisonous sewer gases from building up in poorly ventilated homes and public buildings.

Five years later, Health Officer Thomas C. Collins wrote that physicians who attended victims during an epidemic of cerebro-spinal meningitis that caused 48 deaths in 1872 "were satisfied that obstructed and foul conditions of our sewers had much to do with its production. For many months no rain of sufficient severity had occurred to thoroughly cleanse the sewers; and it is to be hoped the time is not far distant when our city will be abundantly supplied with pure water, for without it we cannot be clean, and cleanliness is the first great sanitary law."⁵

In 1870 cholera infantum killed 150 infants during July, August, and September alone. Like health officers throughout the latter half of the 19th century, Bleecker C. Hovey of Rochester blamed many of the deaths on ignorance:

Cholera infantum which prevails to a greater or less extent every year during the hot weather of summer, was more than ordinarily fatal this year, the mortality being 150 for the months of July, August, and September.

There is no doubt that hundreds of children have died annually from this malady whose lives might have been saved had anything like intelligent care been exercised in regard to clothing, diet, air, and exercise. The character, quality, and quantity of food on which many children are nourished, precludes almost the possibility of their escaping this most formidable disease of the nursery. . . all classes, the rich as well as the poor (are ignorant of sanitation that could save the infants' lives).⁶

Fourteen years later another outbreak of cholera infantum that killed 140 infants prompted Health Officer W. F. Sheehan to suggest that children leave the city during the summer; an impractical suggestion if not impossible for the bulk of poor children. He wrote, "the causes of excessive mortality among infants during the months of July, August, and September are well known. High temperatures, overcrowding, improper food, defective sanitary surroundings, all contribute." Preventive measures suggested by doctors were to evacuate the infants from the city during the summer. Sheehan continued, "No measure was so highly recommended as a ride in the country, or a sojourn at the lake shore. Within seven miles of where innocents are dying in stifling homes, blows the pure air from the lake, that in brief time would restore them to health." He called for philanthropists to arrange evacuation.⁷ Children of wealthy parents regularly spent summers at the lake, but poorer children had to await the construction of the Infants' Summer Hospital in Charlotte. They went there to recuperate and to be quarantined, not to avoid becoming ill.

The most dramatic drop in infant mortality in Rochester occurred after 1897 as a result of a campaign by Health Officer George Goler to sanitize the contaminated milk he believed was the cause of the dramatic increase of diarrheal diseases in the summer and the primary cause of hundreds of infant deaths.

DEATHS AMONG CHILDREN UNDER ONE YEAR AND FROM ONE TO FIVE YEARS FOR TWO TEN-YEAR PERIODS, ONE BEFORE AND THE OTHER AFTER SYSTEMATIC MILK WORK WAS BEGUN AT ROCHESTER, NEW YORK.[†]

		1887-1896													
		Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Total	
Under 1 1 to 5		319	303	316	316	258	280	1010	808	554	342	234	244	4975	
		233	214	201	210	192	163	212	267	185	181	200	218	2476	
		552	517	517	526	450	443	1222	1075	739	523	434	462	7451	
		1897-1906													
		Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Total	
Under 1 1 to 5		210	265	265	283	218	205	413	478	424	270	194	196	3421	
		178	134	142	160	128	117	127	125	109	112	99	113	1544	
		388	399	407	443	346	322	540	603	533	382	293	309	4965	

Contaminated milk was recognized earlier in the century as a cause of infant mortality through bacterial intestinal infection; but health officers later showed that not only were milkmen by their movement throughout the city carriers of contagious diseases, but that the milk they carried was often dirty, watered with typhoid or diphtheria-infected water, or taken from tuberculous cows.⁸ Health Officer Goler complained in 1897 that the city milk inspection law required only that the milk contain a certain food value measured by the amount of solids, butter and water.⁹ In Rochester by this date infant deaths under the age of five were reduced to 22 percent of all births, contrasted to 33 percent nationwide. Goler complained this "means that of all the children brought into the world one third (of those nationwide) die before reaching the age of five years. This rate is undoubtedly due in a great measure to the dirty milk received by children."¹⁰

In 1898 Goler wrote that the danger to children from milk was through conveyance of disease or lethal amounts of formaldehyde that milkmen used to preserve their milk."¹¹ Formaldehyde use was banned by the city and Goler believed without the vigilance of his inspectors (hired after 1896) the incidence of formaldehyde use would be much greater.

More commonly infants died because the milk sold in the city was poorly kept and caused bacterial disorders that led to diarrhea and death for infants whose entire diet was sometimes milk. This inability or unwillingness (since the capability to cool milk existed) to keep milk fresh during July and August was a major cause of the doubling and tripling of infant deaths in the summer months.

Dr. Harvey F. Montgomery, health officer in 1871, said that because milk was the main and sometimes sole food of children under five, infant mortality increased in the summer when milk was difficult to keep. He wrote, "these are the result of diarrhea, and imperfect digestion, or nutrition. Children in the country, where milk after being taken from the cow, is immediately carried to and kept in a cool place till used, do not suffer from 'summer complaints.'"¹²

Montgomery quoted from the report of a Cincinnati milk inspector:

The importance of removing animal heat from milk before sending it to market, cannot well be over estimated in our city. Thousands of children die during the summer months of diseases of the digestive organs, by unwholesome milk alone. There is another condition of milk far more unwholesome than sour milk. It is called tainted milk, and is produced by transporting warm milk during the extreme-



A Rochester milk station occupies a hardware store.

ly hot weather to market, in closely covered cans. On opening the cans, a sickly offensive odor, we ought as well call the odor putrid meat, animal odor arises. The milk is not sour; it has a slimy alkaline taste. Putrification has commenced in it. It is putrid and poisonous. It is a startling fact, not generally known, but nevertheless true, that milk brought to this city for sale during hot weather, confined in closed cans, and exposed to noonday suns, reeking hot, with animal heat not removed, is sometimes sold in this putrid state, and is about as wholesome for food, as putrid meat, or rotten eggs. Yet is used under the mistaken notion that because it is not sour, it is not unwholesome. Little, if any, of the milk brought to this city is properly cooled; most of it is not cooled at all, and that which is peddled around usually is not fit to be poured down the throats of helpless infants. No wonder so many children die. The wonder is, so many live. The milk ought to be cooled immediately, thoroughly cooled.¹³

Montgomery agreed with the inspector and knew Rochester shared the problem. But without inspectors, he could not check on the freshness of the milk sold in Rochester and without the appropriate city ordinance he could not enforce quality standards.

In 1897, when Goler was Rochester's health officer, two nurses' stations from which milk was sold, were set up in the city. Sterilized baby bottles prefilled with pasteurized milk were sold after being

processed under the supervision of the health department. "How To Take Care Of Babies" was a pamphlet instructing mothers in several languages on baby's needs for air, food and water, sleep, clothing, and bathing. In the same year that the health department began to sell its own milk, one third of the city's milkmen were fined for delivering milk with less than the required food value (often because it was deliberately watered down).¹⁴

The following year two additional milk stations were operated by the health department, and milk inspectors made checks on milkmen who sold within the city. Many milkmen tried to circumvent these inspections by selling their milk to milkmen outside of Rochester. These milkmen, who were not covered by the inspections, resold the milk to mothers in Rochester who bought from any milkman who sold at the lowest price.¹⁵

Goler rejoiced in his clean milk campaign in 1900; he wrote that for the past four years the deaths among children under five was 21.9 percent for all deaths. For the previous 16 years it had been an average of 34.5 percent. He wrote, "I believe this diminution in the deaths in children under five years of age, has been due in some measure, to the efforts of this department to secure a better milk supply, to the establishment of milk stations during the summer, and to the distribution of the pamphlet 'How To Take Care Of Babies In Hot Weather.'"¹⁶ He reported, "In no class of diseases has there been such a manifest descent in mortality as in the bowel diseases of children from birth to five."

Milk samples taken from milkmen in 1900 were reportedly 60 percent tubercular. Despite the efforts of the Tuberculosis Commission in the state to contain the epidemics among cattle, Goler pointed out that "thousands of tubercular cattle (are) giving milk used as a food supply . . . the danger to the public and to little children is thus very great."¹⁷

Some milk bottles actually contained dirt. Cockroaches and animal feces were found by milk inspectors in dairy barns. Caroline Bartlett Crane wrote in a preliminary *Report of The Sanitary Survey of Rochester* that "if you plant just common dirt germs in milk which is allowed to stand in a temperature of above fifty degrees, there is proper soil—the milk itself, the temperature which causes those germs to multiply in this is not one hundred fold only but ten million fold—and you have your harvest of death."¹⁸

Goler's clean milk campaign is visibly successful when the decade prior to the milk campaign is contrasted to the decade following it. Clean milk is further isolated as a contributing factor by the pronounced contrast in infant deaths during July and August of each decade.

The causes of infant death were numerous in the last half of the 19th century, and with the conditions of the home, the city, and everyday food being among the primary causes of infant death, it is not unlikely that a mother should feel overwhelmed by the task of preserving her family. She not only felt the loss of her own infants, but the number of infant deaths around her must have had a personal effect. In 1907, a desperate and grateful mother said to a milk station nurse, "May God bless you. I have lost three children with the summer complaint, and I think the milk and the book kept my fourth baby."¹⁹

Suspected Infanticide

Stillbirths were a great source of infant death that remained throughout the last half of the 19th century in Rochester. Throughout the period, health officers separated or wished that they could separate the number of stillbirths from other age groups before determining the death rate for Rochester, because the stillbirths so inflated the death rate. In 1867, stillbirths accounted for 67 of the 1,021 deaths of all ages. The death rate at one out of 70 (the report did not say if stillbirths were included) was "remarkable," the health officer wrote.²⁰ The year before, with a rate of one death in each 58.75 of the population, was considered very favorable indeed,²¹ because stillbirths were included even though he believed they should not be. He wrote, "In one month the still-births reached as high as 13, so it will be readily understood they sometimes form no inconsiderable item."²² Stillbirths continued to be high: 67 in 1867, 90 in 1870, 106 in 1871, 129 in 1872.

In 1870 Health Officer Bleecker C. Hovey remarked that "still births at 90 are 10.9 percent of the total number of deaths from disease in the city. The percentage of still births to the total mortality is truly enormous. Its causes are truly worthy of physiological and medical inquiry."²³

Two years later, Health Officer David Little noted the increase in stillbirths to 129. He remembered that Dr. Hovey compared the rate of stillbirths in Rochester to those of Philadelphia, where in 1870 the rate

was 46 per 1,000 births. In Rochester it was 71 per 1,000 births. Now in 1872, it was even higher. Dr. Little suggested a cause for the high rate; he wrote,

Premature and still births have been mournfully numerous. It is difficult to estimate how many of these were 'avoidable accidents.' As it is well known, however, that there are men (?) in the community who live and fatten on the slaughter of the innocents, it is fair to presume that *murder, cowardly murder, is rife* in our midst. A pity our active coroners could not unearth some of this villainy.²⁴

He called for the same remedy as Dr. Hovey before him and Dr. Goler after him.²⁵ Registration of births with the health department and the recording of the cause of death, they believed, would point out the cases of infanticide. Even when registration was required—after 1884—compliance with the law was feeble well into the 20th century. It is certainly unlikely that a doctor would record the cause of death as infanticide if he was the one guilty of the crime. Without records it is not possible to determine whether the large number of stillbirths occurred among mothers delivering their own children or those attended by a midwife or a doctor.

Many children died because their mothers gave them a morphine patent medicine that was intended to quiet the baby and to help it sleep, but very often an overdose killed the child. Kopp's Baby Friend was one such patent medicine pointed out by Health Officer George Goler as a "poison" that killed babies. Unknowing mothers were at the mercy of drug companies and sloppy professionals. Many others, some of whom could not speak English, relied on foreign midwives to deliver and treat their babies rather than to call a male doctor who spoke English. One of the problems that the Rochester Health Department uncovered in investigating infant deaths in the city was the lack of knowledge of the English language of the midwife. While it helped her to communicate with her patient, she was not always able to treat her properly. One midwife was questioned by health authorities because a baby she delivered developed blindness because the midwife bought a silver nitrate solution from the drug store but could not read the directions for proper dosage. She simply put a few drops into the baby's eyes. Many doctors were cited for unclean practices, for spreading child bed fever and for signing birth certificates for midwives who were not licensed and for whose deliveries the doctors were not present. Like the rest of the nation, Rochester was caught up in the move toward medical professionalism. Midwives sometimes viewed their

licensing as a tactic to curb their practice and to force them out of the medical profession, but many male doctors were also supervised and cited by the Rochester Health Department, too. Well into the 1920's the Health Officers still complained that doctors were not completing birth and death certificates. It took nearly a half a century for the health officers of Rochester to professionalize the medical community, the dairy industry, and the sanitation heads of Rochester. Through their efforts and the education of mothers, the incidence of infant death was significantly reduced.²⁶

Baby fed on clean milk from tuberculin
tested cattle



HEALTH BUREAU MILK STATIONS

It is not necessary for babies to be sick.
They get sick through ignorance and carelessness.
Come and learn how to keep the baby well in hot
weather.

MILK STATIONS

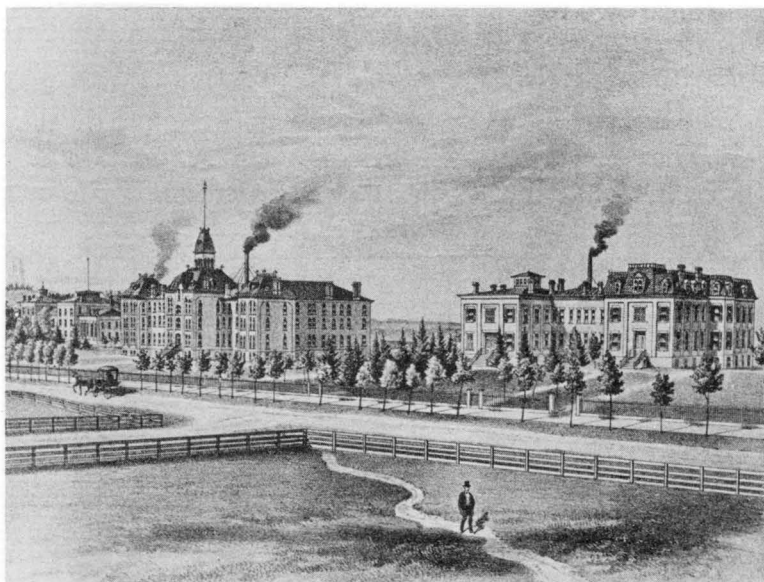
Open daily, 8 to 1; Sundays, 8 to 12

BUREAU FOR FOREIGNERS, 129 FRANK STREET
BADEN STREET SETTLEMENT, 152 BADEN STREET
HOUSEKEEPING CENTER, 227 DAVIS STREET
STORE, 191 WEST AVENUE
STORE, 322 SOUTH AVENUE

The nurse from the Health Bureau will tell you
how to keep the baby in good health.

This advice is free.

The Health Bureau furnishes clean milk in nursing
bottles, properly modified, for babies who are
sick or cannot nurse, and also for sick children.
Milk one and two cents a bottle.



This Monroe County Almshouse, centered between the penitentiary (left) and the insane asylum (right) was built in 1872 after a fire. (Credit Burr Lewis, Democrat & Chronicle)

Poverty In The Nineteenth Century

For nearly a century and a quarter the men, women, and children who lay dead beneath the earth at Highland Park were undisturbed and forgotten. Their burial site was unrecorded on plat maps and cemetery maps; there were no headstones and no records of burials on the grounds of what was once the site of the Monroe County Almshouse, Insane Asylum and Penitentiary.

Until July of 1984 there were infrequent but little known uncoverings of bones near the edges of the cemetery: in the late 1800's when a pipeline was laid and in the 1930's when the prisoners plowing the farmland there cut into the graves. The scrambled bones were thrown back into the ground and reburied.

On July 25, 1984, at least six skeletons were disinterred by a bulldozer landscaping Highland Park. Six additional skeletons were washed to the surface by rainstorms before archaeological excavation was begun to remove them and to determine the perimeters of the cemetery. The burials were thought to be from the family cemetery of Erastus Stanley until scores of skeletons were discovered. Plat maps showed that the Monroe County Almshouse, Insane Asylum and Penitentiary once occupied this site near the southeast corner of South and Highland Avenues. The land was bought by the county from Erastus Stanley around 1826 to expand the Almshouse farm to make it more self-sufficient.

Excavations were completed when the Brighton Town Clerk's *Record* for 1847 through 1850 was located by the City Historian's Office in the Local History Division of the Rochester Public Library. This *Record* is the only identification found that named those who died in the Monroe County Almshouse. The name, sex, occupation, cause of death and, in 1847, the place of birth, is given for 251 people listed. These were the only years that the state required these vital statistics to be kept up to this date. Brighton, in which this site was located in the last century, did not begin to keep its own official records until 1881. The dates the *Record* was kept fall coincidentally into the burial period set by the Rochester Museum and Science Center (RMSC) who was conducting the excavation for the county.

After 22 working days, 305 graves were excavated from 301 sites. Five

of the sites were multiple burials. Since 19 of the skeletons were too deep to be disturbed by the landscaping, only 296 skeletons were removed for relocation to Mt. Hope Cemetery. Test holes indicated that the cemetery extended beyond the area being excavated. Stains in the soil indicated that a fence once surrounded the cemetery. One other reference in an 1841 newspaper indicated that a committee serving the Superintendent of the Poor recommended building a hospital north of the Almshouse and surrounding an acre of land behind it with a high fence. Though the use of this acre of land was not specified, it is believed to be the site of the cemetery.

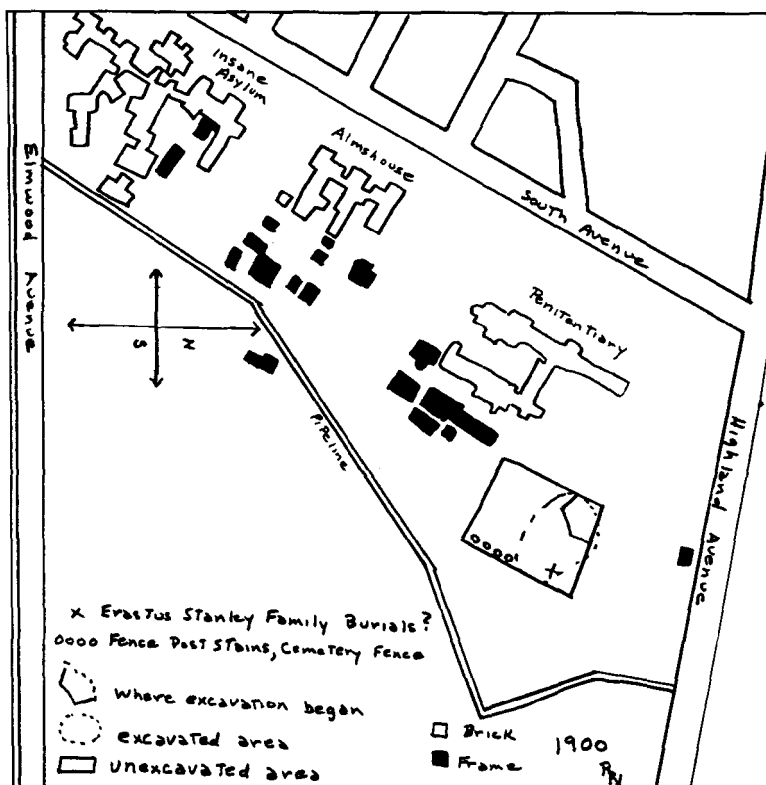
Photographs were taken of the skeleton in the grave and records were kept of the burial position and its relation to other graves. Notes were kept about jewelry, shrouds, buttons, pins, and any obvious conditions of the skeletons such as amputations or stains left by jewelry. A few hundred machine square-cut nails, some buttons, shroud pins, a two-prong leather belt and metal buckle, two rosaries, a Catholic Miraculous Medal and a few flowers survived because of the good drainage through the soil.

All of the skeletons were buried in a coffin although two of them were shared; one by a woman and a baby, another by an infant and a three-year old. Most of the coffins were hexagonal-shaped wooden coffins with two hinges although three had triple hinges to display the face while covering the body. There was a glass window over the face of another more elaborate coffin. Newspaper reports indicate that some relatives contributed to the paupers' support and it is supposed that these more elaborate coffins were the donation of relatives outside of the Almshouse. Many of the coffins were visible only through the stains left in the soil by the wood or the chips of red paint that once covered them. A few pieces of coffin wood that remained intact were found between the skeletons of a woman and the infant buried on top of her.

In two areas of the cemetery, skeletons appeared to have a familial relationship. One area may be the site of the Eratus Stanley family cemetery. Most of their family members were not located in other area cemeteries. As the Brighton Town Clerk's *Record* shows, many other family members died close enough together to be buried side by side and in some cases in the same coffin.

The cemetery seemed to have begun with some order with the heads

pointed to the west. While the eastern end of the cemetery is orderly, the western end is not; and as the cemetery became crowded, coffins were buried on top of others and the coffins did not always lay in an east-west direction. Several infant graves in the southern end of the cemetery were buried without any orderly rows. This disorder reveals the attitudes toward the poor; those who did not own a plot of land in which to be buried. Several coffins were buried on top of others when the cemetery became crowded and two coffins were shared. The coffins were buried without order after it became crowded; possibly because there were no markers to indicate where burials were located. Two cows were found buried within the cemetery. One cow was actually intrusive on a human grave. Expenditures for coffins and burials are not evident in the aggregate figures of the cost of running the Almshouse and it may never be known why the cemetery lot was not expanded; but the pressure to economize is evident through-



out the newspaper articles and expenditure reports and the lack of order, the overcrowding and lack of markers or marker stains, gives further evidence of "economical" burials.

Several skeletons were visibly unhealthy. There were signs of cancer, ricketts, arthritis, broken or poorly healed limbs, infected gums and rotted teeth. X-rays of the long bones may reveal periods during which the growth of an individual stopped because of disease or malnutrition. Tests may also reveal the actual causes of death of the people whose symptoms are listed in the Brighton Town Clerk's *Record* as the cause of death. Additional dietary information may be had that could supplement what is already known about the diet of the Almshouse residents. Since most of the residents were not long-term, the poor condition that arose from diet was likely to have been developed before entering the Almshouse. The well-rounded diet served at the Almshouse consisted of meat, potatoes or other vegetable, bread, coffee or tea and milk. Fruit was served in season. This menu indicates that the basics of a healthy diet were known to the administrators of the Almshouse.

Newspapers reported some of the reasons that people became residents of the Almshouse, but further study may reveal what illnesses and debilities came under the newspaper's general heading of "sick." Many of the conditions may be tracable to alcoholism as was charged by a newspaper editor from the *Rochester Daily Democrat* in 1841.

Information is rarely available from modern cemeteries. Sensitive scientific tests will reveal information that has much more than a regional significance and some of which is only available through such studies of skeletons. Many of the skeletons show repeated bouts with diseases unheard of in America today. There can be greater dimension to our understanding of the diet, lifestyle, debilities, physical endurances, and deaths of the poor than is now available through records and writings alone.

The Lives of the Almshouse Residents

The discovery of this 19th century cemetery focused attention on the lives of the people who lived in the Almshouse before the Civil War. In 1826 a small brick building that could house 75 to 100 people



Skeletons being excavated by RMSC team. Arthritis caused the foot of one female skeleton to fuse to the lower leg. The vertebrae of another skeleton were fused together. (Photo by Michael Schwarz, Times-Union)

was built in Brighton near the corner of what is now South and Highland Avenues. The population was only about 35 residents but by 1859, the building was outgrown. Immigrants were singled out by a committee serving the Superintendent of the Poor as the cause of the population explosion. Almost half of the 5,132 paupers given aid or shelter in 1849 were Irish and another 512 were German.¹ The potato famine in Ireland probably contributed greatly to the influx of the Irish into the county. Hundreds came to America with nothing and came to Almshouses soon after their arrival. To make more room and to separate the children from the influence of the insane the children were housed in a dormitory above the school and the insane were moved to a separate building. The men and women were housed in separate wings of the building which emphasized the devastation that poverty reeked on the family. The care given to the paupers was described by a newspaper editor as misfortune "alleviated as far as it is possible for them to be by public munificence."²

No one was idle. Women worked as domestics except for the cooking that was done by hired help. The children attended school except for the older girls who were withdrawn from school to help their mothers work. This was evidently not the common practice in public schools because a visiting newspaper editor noted the seven to one ratio of boys to girls in the school attendance and asked the teacher for the reason. The editor was impressed with the performance of the students.³

Able-bodied men were set to work on the farm planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops, tending fruit trees and bushes, milking cows, caring for livestock, woodworking and doing general maintenance of the grounds. Birch-shaving mattresses were being made by two old men the day a newspaper editor observed the Almshouse.⁴ They were sold to the public at a profit. The varied backgrounds of the men allowed for almost every job to be performed by a resident. In 1845 only two men were hired from outside of the institution. Occupations listed in the Brighton Town Clerk's *Record* are laborer, blacksmith, tailor, servant, farmer, cabinet maker, machinist, auctioneer, physician, miller, gardener, baker. Women were houseworkers, tailoresses and servants.

Neither unemployment nor illness was the major cause of the poverty of the Almshouse residents. Nearly two-thirds of them were

there for alcohol-related reasons. In 1850, 3,582 people were given support or shelter by the county because of alcohol. Children made up 765 of those and 305 were wives left without support.⁷ Alcoholism not only made a man incapable of supporting himself and made him susceptible to disease, but it made his entire family dependent on the county. This angered an editor who complained that men spent their last sixpence on liquor, then moved into the Almshouse with their families.⁸ These were the men who contributed to the popular image of the poor as the "vicious and idle." Intemperance or intoxication was the official cause of death in twelve of the 251 Almshouse deaths recorded in Brighton between 1847 and 1850.⁹ Many others, it was charged, were the result of a weakened condition caused by alcohol.¹⁰ Joseph Russell was only twenty years old when he died in the Almshouse from intemperance in 1849.¹¹

The committee serving the Superintendent of the Poor recommended in 1833 that the residents work harder on the farm to reduce the costs of supporting them. Fresh air and hard work were believed to be healthy and many believed that idleness was the devil's workshop. More than that, taxpayers resented the support they had to give those who were not genuinely ill or temporarily unemployed.¹² Alcoholism was a self-inflicted disability that led to death and life-threatening diseases. It destroyed families and drove them to the Almshouse.

The cost of supporting the poor was increasing at a ratio greater than the increase in the population and this caused the committee under the Superintendent of the Poor to recommend that necessities be bought wholesale rather than retail and that some extravagances such as sugar and tea be removed from the list of supplies.¹³ The purchase of these items, they said, were "at war with common economy, and is certainly not required by motives of philanthropy. A house of public charity should not become a house of luxury, thus offering to the vicious and idle a reward and a comfortable home."¹⁴ A few years earlier, the *Rochester Telegraph* praised the Poorhouse System in Monroe County and applauded the New York Legislature for adopting a similar system for all counties. The editor was pleased that "while it will administer relief and comfort to the really necessitous, will hold no inducements to the idle and vicious."¹⁵

Except for the ill and the school children, everyone at the Almshouse worked. The committee recommended in 1833 that more land be

bought and that the produce from the farm make the Almshouse more self-sufficient. The making of birch-shaving mattresses was to be continued because it was profitable. Some woodwork was also done. Coffins for in-house use were possibly among the products. Money was made for the Almshouse by the sale of these products and some of the produce from the farm.¹⁶ Towns and villages that could not care for their own paupers were billed for those that were referred to the Almshouse, and relatives of the poor also gave some support. The move toward self-sufficiency reduced the cost of supporting each pauper from 88 cents to 52 cents between 1838 and 1841.¹⁷ When the winters were harsh the Almshouse population swelled to five times its normal size. Sixty-year-old Samuel Oldenhaus died at the Almshouse in early January of 1849 because his feet froze that cold winter.¹⁸ When Spring came, the able-bodied were turned out to find work.

As many as one third of the deaths in the Almshouse were of children under the age of five. Many times it was because of outbreaks of communicable diseases.¹⁹ At those times, the Brighton Town Clerk's *Record* sometimes lists one death each day and sometimes clusters of brothers and sisters.

Agnes Ian (or Lan) was born in Ireland and before she was one year old she was living in the Monroe County Almshouse in Brighton. She died there at the age of one along with twelve other young Almshouse residents in a measles epidemic in 1847. Measles killed Rosanna Bond, aged four; Joanna Mahony, one; Catherine Holland, one; James Files, one; Mary Cook, six months; Margaret Ward, two; Charles Warner, 1; Ann Switzer, 1; James Hennessee, 3; Eliza Huzns, 2; and Mary and Bridget M'Grady, three months old.²⁰ They lived along with hundreds of other children in the Almshouse.

The following year eleven children under the age of five died. Margaret Walsh, 3, died from an inflammation of her lungs a month before her six month old sister, Rosanna, died of consumption. Their sister, Rozetta, died in December of 1847, a month before Margaret. Their forty year old mother, a servant, died of dysentery on October 1, 1848.²¹ It was not unusual for whole families or several family members to die together. Hannah Shean, aged nine, died of a brain inflammation in February of 1848 a few days before her four year old sister Bridget died of consumption. Their infant sister died of a lung inflammation in April.²²

Lucinda Story died at age 32 in the 1849 cholera epidemic. Earlier in the year she lost three infant daughters to the croup and cholera. During the cholera epidemic in 1849, four of the 28 cholera deaths were of children under the age five. There were other deaths too. Three year old John Smith died of worms in 1849; and four year old Mary Carrigan and eighteen month old Rainel Turner followed. One year old Jane Gibson died of heart disease and one year old Thomas M'Cauley died of a "disease of the head." In 1847 a three month old "stray infant" died of diarrhea. In 1849 an unnamed baby was stillborn.²³

Trying to raise children in the Almshouse must have been difficult but giving birth there must have been very depressing to a mother who has nothing to give her new baby. Many children were born in the Almshouse and moved on with their families, but many died there having been exposed to disease or born to malnourished or diseased mothers.

Many mothers died, too, as a result of child bed fever which followed childbirth when germs were introduced into the mother by unclean medical instruments or unwashed hands. Doctors and midwives both spread this disease. Sara Ritchie, a house laborer died at the age of 27 after she gave birth to a son. That baby died 17 days later from consumption on January 25, 1850.²⁴

Many children in the Almshouse also died from bowel inflammations like diarrhea or dysentery but the incidence of unsanitary milk-related deaths in children under the age of five seemed to be lower in the Almshouse than in the general population; perhaps because they were either breast-fed or were given milk fresh from the cow.²⁵

Many of the causes of death listed in the Brighton Town Clerk's *Record* were symptoms rather than causes of death. Seventy-three year old Mark Wherter and 47 year old Allen Benedict died from fits. Fifty-four year old Archibald Adams died from a sore leg. And some parents buried their children behind the Almshouse without even knowing the cause of their deaths. Infants like three month old John Green or premature Rozetta Walsh (whose two sisters and mother died a few months later) or premature infants who went to their graves without even a name. The *Rochester Daily Advertiser* reported that two city infants died from teething.²⁶

Every year consumption ranked the highest in the number of report-

ed causes of death at the Almshouse except in 1849 when cholera swept through the country and killed 28 people in the Almshouse alone. Another 149 died in Rochester. Consumption killed another 21 people in the Almshouse.²⁷ That year 84 year old John Loss committed suicide. Editors of the newspapers in the area tracked the spread of cholera from England through Canada and to states bordering on New York. Some were optimistic that Rochester would be spared because the frequent thunderstorms of 1849 made "the atmosphere as pure as man could wish to breathe."²⁸ But cholera did reach Rochester and people fell victim nearly every day from mid-July through September.

Over 700 people were buried in the graveyard behind the Almshouse complex. When they were accidentally disturbed in July of 1984, they were identifiable only through the Brighton Town Clerk's *Record*. No other records were found that could identify the graves. Only Adoniram Perkins, the middle-aged laborer who died following the amputation of both of his legs, may go to the grave with a name. The Clerk's *Record* lists only those 251 who died between 1847 and 1850.²⁹ The 296 skeletons removed from Highland Park are to be reinterred at Mt. Hope Cemetery in 1985.

Notes on "The Battle Against Infant Death"

1. **Annual Report of the Department of Public Safety of the City of Rochester, 1912**; Local History Division, Rochester Public Library (RPL).
2. Letter from Health Officer George Goler to Dr. Charles R. Sumner, chairman of the Rochester Sanitary Committee asking permission to withhold records from "infant food concerns" who counter physicians' attempts to encourage breast-feeding. December 15, 1898, Vital Statistics File, Goler Collection T-Z, Local History Division, RPL.
3. "History of the Health Department," manuscript based on compilations of annual reports of the department and observations of nearly 40 years as a health officer, by George Goler, M.D. No date or page number; unpublished; in holdings of the Office of the City Historian, RPL.
4. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1868**, Henry H. Langworthy, M.D., health officer, pp. 11-12, 32, RPL.
5. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1873**, Thomas Collins, M.D., health officer, p. 19, RPL.
6. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1870**, Bleecker C. Hovey, M.D., health officer, p. 21, RPL.
7. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1884**, W.F. Sheehan, M.D., health officer, W.W. Morrison, printer, Rochester, p. 23, RPL. quotes for entire paragraph.
8. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1874**, Wallace Sibley, M.D., health officer, p. 15.
9. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1897**, George Goler, M.D., health officer, p. 9.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
11. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1898**, George Goler, M.D., health officer, p. 5.
12. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1871**, Harvey F. Montgomery, M.D., health officer, p. 15.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 15,16.
14. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1897**, George Goler, M.D., health officer, pp. 14-16.
15. **The Common Good of Civic and Social Rochester**, June, 1911, Vol. IV, No. 9; p. 15; published by Edwin Rumball, editor. City Historian's collection, RPL.
16. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1900**, George Goler, M.D., health officer, p. 72.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
18. **The Common Good of Civic and Social Rochester**, June, 1911, Vol. IV, No. 9; p. 15.
19. **Syracuse Herald**, July 27, 1907, quoted from a poster at Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum exhibit, "A Century of Childhood," May, 1984.
20. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1867**, Henry Langworthy, M.D., health officer, p. 6.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1870**, Bleecker C. Hovey, M.D., health officer, p. 18.
24. **Annual Report of the Health Department, 1872**, David Little, M.D., health officer, p. 22.
25. *Ibid.*
26. A 1984 study of 428 women living in the tenth ward of Rochester in 1900 suggests that those women who lost a child to death gave birth to twice as many children as women who lost no children. The study is being expanded by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck and Dr. Steve Kral of Empire State College. It is possible that the decline in infant mortality had the side effect of reducing the birth rate because fewer women lost children and felt the need to replace them. Thousands of women reacting individually to reduced infant mortality gave the illusion of a mass movement to reduce the birth rate.

Notes on "Poverty in The Nineteenth Century"

1. **Rochester Daily Advertiser**, January 11, 1850, p. 2.
2. **Rochester Daily Democrat**, May 31, 1845, 2-5.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Brighton Town Clerk's **Record** of births, marriages, and deaths for the years 1847-1850. Local History Division, RPL.
7. **Rochester Daily Advertiser**, January 11, 1850.
8. **Rochester Daily Democrat**, October 12, 1841, 2-1.
9. Brighton Town Clerk's **Record** for 1847-1850.
10. **Rochester Daily Democrat**, October 12, 1841, 2-1.
11. Brighton Town Clerk's **Record** for 1847-1850.
12. **Rochester Daily Democrat**, October 12, 1841, 2-1.
13. **Rochester Daily Advertiser**, October 12, 1833, 2-4.
14. *Ibid.*
15. **Rochester Telegraph**, January 4, 1825, 3-3.
16. **Rochester Daily Advertiser**, October 12, 1833, 2-4.
17. **Rochester Daily Democrat**, October 12, 1841, 2-1.
18. Brighton Town Clerk's **Record** deaths for 1849.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. See preceding article in this issue of **Rochester History** for more information about unsanitary milk-related infant deaths.
26. The symptoms in the Brighton Town Clerk's **Record** along with physical evidence from the skeletons may indicate the actual causes of death in some cases.
27. Brighton Town Clerk's **Record**, 1849; **Rochester Daily Advertiser**, October 4, 1850, 2-5.
28. **Rochester Daily Advertiser**, June 20, 1849, 2-2.
29. A photograph tentatively identified as Adoniram Perkins is in the collection of the Rochester Museum and Science Center, Research Division.