

Privies and the Public Health Service

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The lowly privy might not seem to be a subject worthy of much attention in the history of the Public Health Service (PHS), but in the early decades of this century, the privy was an important focus of PHS work in rural sanitation. The campaign for improved privies facilitated PHS's efforts to organize public health at the local level while helping to curb infectious diseases such as typhoid fever.

In turn-of-the-century America, typhoid fever was still a serious infectious disease problem, with a death rate of 31 per 100,000 in 1900. Typhoid received increased public attention beginning about 1906 thanks to the publicity given to the case of "Typhoid Mary," a New York City cook who became the most famous carrier of the disease. When Rupert Blue became Surgeon General of the Public Health Service in 1912, he placed typhoid high on the list of diseases that he wanted to see eliminated.

Even before Blue became Surgeon General, however, the PHS was actively combatting the disease. A study conducted by the PHS in the period 1906–1910, for example, identified contaminated milk and water as major factors in the transmission of the disease in Washington, DC. One of the participants in this study, PHS medical officer Leslie Lumsden, became a typhoid expert and conducted similar investigations in a number of states. For instance, he traced a violent outbreak of the disease at a girls' school in Forest Glen, Maryland, to a polluted spring from which the school received its water supply.

In May of 1911, Lumsden was



An example of a poorly constructed privy.

sent to Yakima County, Washington, at the request of state and local health authorities to investigate why that area had an incidence of typhoid fever that was three times the national average. It had been recognized in the 19th century that typhoid could be carried in feces, and Lumsden's thorough study of the situation in the state of Washington led him to conclude:

The high rate and prevalence of typhoid fever in North Yakima in the summer and fall of the years 1908, 1909, and 1910, was due for the most part to the local dissemination of human excreta from the insanitary privies, privy vaults, cess pools, septic tanks, and bedsides of the sick to the

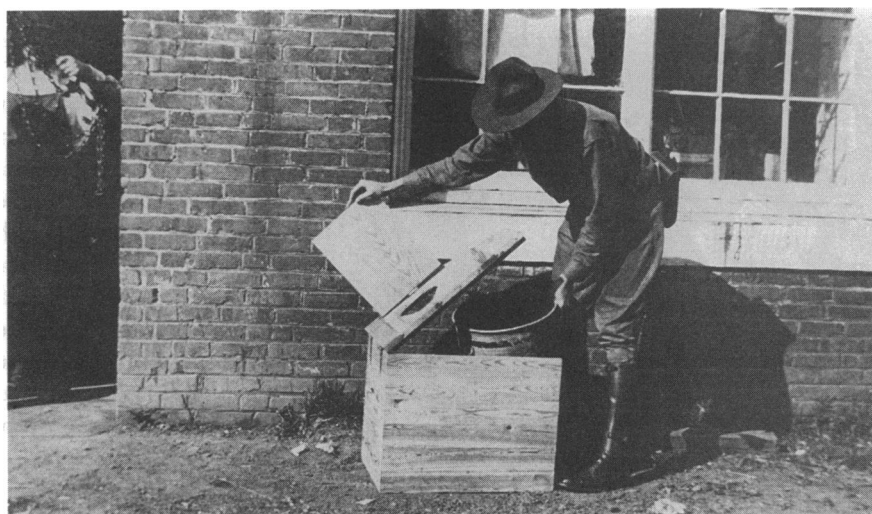
mouths of persons by fingers, flies, foods and water.

His first recommendation was to abolish every unsanitary privy and septic tank, replacing them with sanitary facilities. He also suggested the establishment of a county health organization and prepared a detailed blueprint for creating one. Yakima County accepted Lumsden's recommendations and established one of the first—if not the first—full-time county health departments in the United States.

At the direction of Surgeon General Blue, Lumsden authored a monograph on the causes and prevention of typhoid fever. He also gave instructions on the building of sanitary privies and the organization of a county health service. This publication became, accord-

ing to Fitzhugh Mullan in *Plagues and Politics: The Story of the United States Public Health Service*, "something of a bible for rural sanitation work as well as a blueprint for the development of county health departments."

Proper waste disposal was a key element in the PHS rural sanitation campaign. Supporting the construction of sanitary privies was an important part of this effort. Lumsden was at first opposed to the use of pit privies, because he believed that they could not really be made sanitary. He favored a privy consisting of a box and a removable bucket. Local authorities could then collect the full cans at specified intervals and appropriately dispose of



PHS officers were trained for the rural sanitation campaign and taught proper waste disposal methods.

(To Be Tacked Inside of the Privy and NOT Torn Down.)

Sanitary Privies Are Cheaper Than Coffins



For Health's Sake let's keep this Privy CLEAN. Bad privies (and no privies at all) are our greatest cause of Disease. Clean people or families will help us keep this place clean. It should be kept as clean as the house because it spreads more diseases.

The User Must Keep It Clean Inside. Wash the Seat Occasionally

How to Keep a Safe Privy:

1. Have the back perfectly screened against flies and animals.
2. Have a hinged door over the seat and keep it CLOSED when not in use.
3. Have a bucket beneath to catch the Excreta.
4. VENTILATE THE VAULT.
5. See that the privy is kept clean inside and out, or take the blame on yourself if some member of your family dies of Typhoid Fever.

Some of the Diseases Spread by Filthy Privies:

Typhoid Fever, Bowel Troubles of Children, Dysenteries, Hookworms, Cholera, some Tuberculosis.
The Flies that You See in the Privy Will Soon Be in the Dining Room.

Walker County Board of Health

This poster for sanitary privies (about 1920) is an example of the posters used in the PHS rural sanitation campaign conducted in cooperation with county boards of health.

the contents. The privy owners would then be given clean, empty cans.

Eventually, Lumsden came to accept that pit privies, which were more practical, could be made sanitary. The acceptable pit privy was screened, ventilated, and provided with seat covers designed to exclude flies. As part of its rural sanitation campaign, PHS placed a seal of approval on properly designed privies.

During the Depression, the Civil Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration developed privy building programs that advanced the cause of public health. Thousands of sanitary privies were constructed in rural areas of this country, thereby reducing the incidence of typhoid and certain other infectious diseases. The campaign for sanitary privies was an important part of the PHS strategy to institute rural sanitation measures and to organize public health at the county level.

Dr. Parascandola is the PHS Historian. The photographs were provided by the Media Arts Branch, Program Support Center, Department of Health and Human Services.

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