



What Led to Founding the Carville Hospital

A Little Known Chapter

By Professor John Smith Kendall, New Orleans

(From THE STAR 1954)

The power of the printed word, long recognized as an essential factor in the promotion of any cause, is heavily accented in a little known chapter in the history of Carville and how it all began. It was a series of newspaper articles appearing in the New Orleans Picayune early in 1894 that led to the establishment of this institution. The articles were written by John Smith Kendall, the paper's youngest cub reporter. Today, at 80, Mr. Kendall can look back on a long and purposeful career of newsman, war correspondent, teacher and author-historian. But the action he considers his most worthy accomplishment is that 1894 series.

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The medical profession has claimed the credit for establishing the State institution at the old Indian Camp plantation, the predecessor of the present national treatment center at Carville, and rightly so. It was long aware that sufferers from Hansen's disease were at large in the community. It knew that they ought to be hospitalized, both for their own benefit and at the time for the safety of the community. Dr. Isadore Dyer, then professor of dermatology at Tulane University, was deeply interested in the matter, and I believe had been a leader in the use of chaulmoogra oil as a specific, as it was once thought to be. But the medical men had not been able to do much towards achieving their goal. What was lacking was the popular pressure that later developed. All that had been accomplished was to secure from the City of New Orleans (I understand that it was the City, perhaps it was the State) a small appropriation. With this, one-half of a 5-room double cottage of Broad Street (then practically at the edge of the inhabited section of the city) had been rented. A contract was made with Dr. Beard to take charge of the place. Some half-dozen sufferers had been induced to occupy the premises. As I recall, these one woman (maybe two) in the group. It was a matter of persuasion to get these few to accept the not very adequate care that was available. Dr. Beard was in active practice in New Orleans, and could spare time only for occasional visits to the place. I had a long interview with him in which he explained that the compensation that he

received was too small to justify him in giving more time to the patients out at Broad Street. I do not mean that he neglected them, their condition was apparently not so serious as to necessitate more attention than he was able to give. He struck me as an intelligent and well-meaning person. However, the people at the cottage were left largely to their own devices.

At that time I had very recently been hired as a reporter at the Picayune. The city editor was a veteran newspaperman named Robinson. It was the custom to assign a beginning reporter to report the Board of Health. I was expected to transcribe each day the record there of births, deaths and marriages. They were regularly published under the heading "Vital Statistics." The clerk at the Board was Henry Lanauze. It was his custom to scribble the data reported by physicians about deaths in the city on a scratch pad, and after office hours to enter it formally in the register kept for that purpose. His memoranda always included the cause of death. The Picayune did not print this last mentioned detail. However, I noticed that deaths were reported with some frequency as due to "leprosy." I began to keep a record of such cases, and before very long had accumulated a rather startling list of them. Then I wrote an article on the subject. I knew nothing then of the labors of the medical profession, and it did not immediately occur to me to consult anybody but Dr. Dyer, with whom I had an acquaintance of rather long standing. He thought the publication of my article would be a good thing.

I submitted to Major Robinson (he had been a major in the Federal Army during the Civil War and was always accorded his title) an article about a column in length. The Major realized that the publication of it would cause considerable stir. He was reluctant to print it, but finally decided to do so, but in a very abbreviated form, with a small headline and on an inside page. He wanted to give the news for what it was worth, but in as inconspicuous a form as might be. Nevertheless, people read it and letters and visitors began to arrive at the Picayune office in sufficient number to indicate that Major Robinson's apprehensions were abundantly justified. It was then that I began to make inquiries around the city. I found several cases which lent themselves picturesquely to my needs. One was a boy afflicted by the disease who was regularly employed at the French Market to unload vegetables. I went to the home of a family, the head of which was registered at the Board of Health as having died of "leprosy." I shall not forget the reception I got there. I was very courteously furnished with all the information that I desired, until happened to mention that the deceased was reported as having died of the disease which he died of. His wife became very angry, ordered me out of the house, and made a gesture toward a broom which induced me to take my departure at once. She had no idea that her husband had died of the disease, and regarded it, as people did then, as something of a disgrace to have anything of the sort to happen.

I wrote articles about all of this which Major Robinson published as

inconspicuously as possible, but not without an increasingly indignant response from the Picayune's readers. One Sunday afternoon the Picayune was deserted, except for myself and a fellow reporter named Ball. I was reading a book, and Ball was pounding away on his typewriter, absorbed in the article he was writing. The door opened and a shabbily dressed individual came quietly in. He walked over to the ice water tank in the corner of the room, helped himself to a drink from the tin cup which we all used in common when thirsty, and then drew a chair up beside Ball and said, " I'm a leper!"

"What?" yelled Ball. "Say it again!"

"I'm a leper. I'm from Dr. Beard's place on Broad Street. I read you're your articles in the paper and-"

Ball jumped up and sought refuge in a far corner of the apartment. Pointing to me, he said, "That's your man! Don't come near me!"

It was in the ensuing lengthy conversation that I learned for the first time that there was a sort of "leprosarium" already in existence. I made an appointment with the stranger to go there a day or two later. My visit was a revelation. I remember on fact that, when published, provoked the most reverbrating response that the Picayune had so far occasioned. This was, that the people there did their own cooking, and that the cook, every morning, selected the day's meat from a wagon on its way from the butcher shop to the French Market. He handled the meat as he pleased in making his choice. Somehow the idea that the meat was thus contaminated and then sold over the butcher counters at the Market, stirred up more indignation than any other detail that I had unearthed. The result was that the Committee on Public Order of the City Council had to take action. I accompanied the committee when it visited the Board Street place. I was not then assigned to the City Hall; the reporter who looked after the news there was an ex-policeman from New York, named McCarthy He accompanied the committee as the Picayune's official representative, but I was allowed to go along as what Ball called the "leper editor." McCarthy was terrified at his "leprosarium" refused to go further, turning the job over to me.

I wrote an article about the visit. That night, or very shortly thereafter, I attended a meeting of the Public Order Committee at the City Hall. The meeting room was thronged by citizens who wanted to protest against the "leper situation," as it began to be called. The meeting was quite stormy. The committee chairman, a man named Louque, didn't seem to know what to do and wound up by doing nothing. However, other articles appeared in the Picayune, and the Council was, if I remember rightly, finally compelled to take action. But its action was reported by McCarthy (who had no hesitation in writing about "leprosy" from the safe precincts of the City Hall.)

All this happened long, long ago. I was then barely 17 years of age. As a reporter

I had other things to do besides, write articles about Hansen's disease. Moreover, the upsurge of popular indignation which my publication had produced was seized upon by Dr. Dyer and his associates, and used to pry loose some additional appropriations, this time from the State. With the money, the Indian Camp property was obtained. I do not wish in anyway to detract from the public spirit of New Orleans physicians in claiming a considerable share in the movement which led to the establishment of Indian Camp. But they had not been able to make much progress without the support of public opinion, and this support the Picayune's publication had given.

I never visited Indian Camp; I was too busy elsewhere, but I have always had an interest in it.

I am not particularly covetous of honor for my contribution to the story of Carville, but concerned to have an interesting chapter in its story put on record. The credit, of course, belongs really to the Picayune.