



HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEPROSARIUM*

Hearings on leprosy, which had been delayed, but had remarkable results, were held on Capitol Hill in February of 1916. Two days of discussion centered on the subject, "Care and Treatment of Persons Afflicted with Leprosy." The legislation under consideration was S. 4086, a bill introduced by Senator Joseph E. Ransdell, of Louisiana, "to provide for the care and treatment of persons afflicted with leprosy and to prevent the spread of leprosy in the United States."

William M. Danner, appointed Chairman of the American Mission of Lepers in 1911, had become so indignant at the inhumane treatment of leprosy patients in this country that he sought out Surgeon General Rupert Blue of the Public Health Service to urge the establishment of a National leprosarium. Surgeon General Blue referred Mr. Danner to Senator Ransdell, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health and National Quarantine.

"In introducing this bill I had not heard from a single man in Louisiana on the subject," Senator Ransdell explained at the hearings. "This matter was first brought to my attention by Mr. Danner ... He told me of the number of lepers in the United States, of the horrible condition of many of them, some of them being in solitary confinement and suffering like criminals, and his story impressed me with the necessity of something being done, and I introduced this bill at his suggestion."

Seldom has the National scene been better set for an unusual undertaking. Surgeon General Blue himself had worked on leprosy when he served as an advisor to the Government of Hawaii. He had, on his staff in Washington, 2 medical officers, both valued assistants to him in San Francisco, who had even more experience with leprosy in Hawaii. One was Dr. W.C. Rucker, Assistant Surgeon General in charge of Domestic Quarantine, who had campaigned for the appointment of Dr. Blue. The other was Dr. George W. McCoy, Director of the Hygienic Laboratory, who had closed out the Federal Leprosy Experimental Station on the Island of Molokai just before coming to Washington. Both Dr. Rucker and Dr. McCoy testified in behalf of the Ransdell bill.

Chairman Ransdell, of course, represented one of the two States that already had leprosarium, Louisiana and Massachusetts. Their stories were retold in Washington. The presentation made concerning the leprosarium at Carville, Louisiana, was spectacular.

Dr. Isadore Dyer, then the Dean of the Medical School of Tulane University, came to Washington from New Orleans to testify. He was the physician, a specialist in disease of the skin, who had started the leprosarium at Carville about twenty years earlier in the face of odds that were almost overwhelming. His tremendously powerful appeal was a simple summary of how he had succeeded in starting a leprosarium in Louisiana.

Dr. Dyer had a special interest in leprosy as a young professor at Tulane University. The New Orleans Daily Picayune conducted a campaign calling attention to the fact that Louisiana had an unusually large number of persons suffering with Hansen's disease, and that they were not well cared for. Dr. Dyer joined this cause. Kendall wrote an article about eight men and two women victims living together in squalid cottage rented by the city of New Orleans. Dr. Dyer appealed for a home for these (victims).

On June 9, 1894, Dr. Dyer presented the Louisiana legislature with a plan, endorsed by the local medical society, to set up an institution for persons having leprosy. Dr. Dyer planned to create this institution close to Tulane University where it could be used as a hospital for experiments in the treatment of Hansen's disease, and as a laboratory to study the bacillus that Hansen had discovered. The legislature in August 1894, voted a small sum to buy the place, and created a Board of Control of four physicians and three laymen to set up and run the leprosarium. Dr. Dyer was made president of the Board. But the citizenry rose up against him in every place where he tries to set up the institution. He could not buy a single site for the treatment of leprosy in the city of New Orleans.

At last, Mr. Allen Jumel, a member of the House of Representatives of the State of Louisiana, and a member of the board of Control of the Leper Home was able to negotiate a five-year lease on a site eighty-five miles up the Mississippi River. Both Mr. Jumel and his wife owned estates near there. He put the deal over under the pretense that it would be used as an ostrich farm. It was purchased outright by Louisiana in 1905.

Known as Indian Camp Plantation, the leprosarium consisted of a decaying manor house and dingy slave quarters. Its magnificent live oak trees were hung with Spanish moss. A high levee separated it from the Mississippi River. To this run down farmstead five men and two women patients were taken by coal barge on, the night of November 30, 1894. No other form of transportation could be arranged for these unfortunates. The barge was towed by a tug boat containing its captain and crew, Dr. Isadore Dyer, a group of newspaper reporters, a ton of provisions, bedding, and eighty beds donated by the New Orleans Charity Hospital to Carville, and taken there on the first boat run. Mr. Jumel, on horseback, met the tug and its barge. The patients were put into one of the slave cabins in the care of Dr. L.A. Wailes, resident physician, but not to be forgotten by Dr. Dyer.

Late in March 1896, Dr. Dyer made a trip to Baltimore, Maryland to arrange for the nursing of the patients and the household management at Carville. Dr. Dyer contracted on March 25 an agreement with Mother Mariana, in charge of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul at Emmitsburg, Maryland. The State Board of Control of the Leper Home in Iberville Parish, Louisiana, promised to furnish sleeping and living arrangements to the Sisters of Charity to be sent there by Mother Mariana. The Board agreed to set up for them a chapter and to arrange for the services of a priest. The Board would pay each sister one hundred dollars a year "for clothing and other incidentals". The Sister Superior in charge at Carville was to be held accountable to the Board alone for management of the Sisters. They were to have full charge of domestic management of the kitchen and household; and of the detail of nursing which was at all times to be under the direction of the "resident physician."

The final paragraph of the agreement ran: "This contract cannot be annulled except by mutual agreement between the State Board of Control of the Leper Home and the Order of the Sisters of Charity."

The first group of four Sisters of the order founded by St. Vincent de Paul and officially named Daughters of Charity, arrived at Carville, April 27, 1896, with Sister Beatrice Hart in charge.

Dr. Dyer immediately introduced at Carville a medicine long used in India in the care of leprosy-chaulmoogra oil. He found it more useful than any other medicine tried out in leprosy treatment. In the 1916 hearing, Senator Reed Scoot, of Utah, remarked that there is no cure for leprosy.

Dr. Isadore Dyer replied that he had cured thirty cases in the last twenty years, thus dating his first cure back to 1896.

In pleading for the sufferer from leprosy, Dr. Dyer said, "He not only bears all the burdens of his disease, but he also bears the burdens of centuries of opprobrium which make him psychologically different from a patient suffering from any other disease."

William Danner particularly told the stories of two persecuted victims of the disease, Mock Sen, an educated young Chinese who died in a sealed boxcar being shuttled back and forth across State lines to shuffle responsibility for his illness; and John Early, who had been persecuted in the District of Columbia before being sent to Carville. John Early returned to Washington in 1915, and appeared at the 1916 hearing with the statement: "I am Early, a patient from the leper colony at Carville, Louisiana. I have come to tell you gentlemen something about how much we patients need to have that colony made over into a United States hospital." Mr. Early was in and out of Carville until November 1928, when he was discharged as cured. He died in 1938, at 64 years of age.

Senator Ransdell's bill for a National Leprosarium was signed into law a year later, on February 3, 1917. The acquisition of the hospital was delayed for four years more by the First World War, which this country entered on April 6, 1917. Mr. Danner made a trip to Louisiana in January 1919 to revive interest in the sale of the Louisiana home for a National Leprosarium.

The Louisiana Leper Home was purchased from the State of Louisiana on January 3, 1921. The United States flag was raised February 1, with Dr. Oswald E. Denny in charge.

*Excerpted verbatim from A Profile of the United States Public Health Service 1798-1984 Bess Furman, Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, DHEW Publication No. (NIH) 73-369, PP. 308-311.