Mystic, Then and Now: Cottrell Lumber Yard

By Marilyn Comrie

Mystic River Park will be 25 years old on Oct. 24. Before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Mystic River Historical Society had partnered with the Mystic River Park Commission to help celebrate the park’s anniversary. Part of our contribution was to present a lecture on the history of the park property as the society’s October program. That program has been moved to October 2021, but we wanted to mark the milestone anniversary this year with before and after photos of the 2.3-acre site along the Mystic River.

THEN: For 168 years, from 1820 to 1988, the land that is now Mystic River Park was home to the Cottrell Lumber Company, which was the first lumber yard in Connecticut and the second in New England. This photo shows the site from the Groton side of the river in 1959. The center-left building is the main lumber company building, built circa 1827. The lumber company stacked its lumber where the main park area is today. Joseph Cottrell started the business in 1820, building first his homestead and next to it a warehouse, which still stand today opposite the main lumber company building. Four generations of the family ran the business. Many who have lived in Mystic for decades remember Cottrell’s great grandson Bill Dodge as the face of the lumber company in the 20th century. Cottrell’s was an institution in downtown Mystic. It was more than a place to buy building supplies. The building pictured above sold a whole line of household goods. Across the street, in the building that was the old jail, was a gift shop. The original warehouse building housed a lamp shop. Before the era of malls, Mystic’s children went upstairs at Cottrell’s to tell Santa what they wanted for Christmas. Bill Dodge sold the land and buildings to a developer in 1988 who planned to construct condos on the site, but the real estate market went bust and by 1994 the site was in receivership.

NOW: Today’s Mystic River Park is a testimony to what a group of people – namely the Mystic Fire District – can do to preserve something precious for themselves and future generations. When the Cottrell Lumber Company land went into receivership, John Butler, then president of the Mystic Rotary, floated the idea of turning the valuable waterfront property into a public park. There was no money to buy it, no authority to own it, and no organization to run it. In August 1993, Butler spearheaded the forming of the Downtown Mystic Park Association with the goal of finding a legitimate entity to own and run the park and to find someone to finance the purchase of the property at a Dec. 15, 1993, auction in Boston. Voters in the Mystic Fire District agreed to own and run the park. And the Mashantucket Pequots lent the fire district the money to bid on the property.

(continued on pg. 2)
When word got out at the Boston auction that Mystic was trying to buy the property to preserve it, all the other bidders dropped out. The fire district got the site for $690,000. Butler later admitted that he tried to put the word out to other bidders that they would find it difficult to develop the property. From there the Mystic River Park Commission was founded and work to develop the park was begun. The fire district voted to name the site Mystic River Park. The land still contains six of the original Cottrell Lumber Company buildings, some of the oldest buildings in downtown. The park held its grand opening on Oct. 24, 1995. And in the 25 years since then, the park has become the center of Mystic life, with concerts in the summer and the village Christmas tree in winter. Santa still comes to the property every year, now arriving by tug boat. But most importantly, the park is a lovely place to enjoy to sights along the Mystic River all year long. There are condos north of the bridge and condos directly across the river from the park, but the Mystic Fire District saved a vital section of riverfront for everyone to enjoy.

Reader Tips:

With all the closings and cancellations it can feel as though the summer of 2020 passed us by completely. Just over two hundred years ago, in 1816, New Englanders faced a very different sort of “year without a summer.”

Enjoy a Self-Guided Tour This Fall

As noted in our previous newsletter, MRHS will not be holding any speaker programs this fall. It is hoped that we will be having such programs next spring, although that decision has not been made yet.

In the meantime, we want to remind our members that there are several self-guided walking tours on our website that can be found at https://www.mystichistory.org/self_guided_tours.htm Enjoy the crisp fall air in Mystic and get a little exercise as well!

There are, in fact, five walking tours that are described. Simply print out the two pamphlets and put on your walking shoes! One pamphlet is a tour of Gravel St. and the other contains four separate tours: Through the Heart of Downtown, Along the Riverside, The High Road, and Captains’ Walk.

Finally, assuming that there will be a little bit of Indian summer this fall, for those in good athletic form who have access to a kayak, we also have A Kayaker’s Guide to the Mystic River and its History. Enjoy!

Mayflower II Sails Home to Plymouth

As noted by Marilyn Comrie above, the Mystic River Park provides an exceptional view of the Mystic River, and has become a favorite spot to watch some of the more unusual traffic on the river. This past July, Mystic residents and tourists alike were able to watch the MAYFLOWER II as she sailed down the river from the Mystic Seaport Museum where she had been undergoing a full restoration since 2016.

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With all the closings and cancellations it can feel as though the summer of 2020 passed us by completely. Just over two hundred years ago, in 1816, New Englanders faced a very different sort of “year without a summer.” Read more at Today in Connecticut History: https://todayincthistory.com/2020/07/09/july-9-the-year-without-a-summer-2/
As many of you know, the Mystic River Historical Society lost our long time Collections and Research Manager, Dorrie Hanna, on July 10 of this year. Dorrie has been an integral member of MRHS for decades, serving alternately as volunteer, board member, president and head of the curatorial staff, and her loss has been felt deeply. Our current president, Stephen Menno, reflected back in July that “Dorrie was a bright star and we were fortunate to have her in our lives. She was smart, witty, and above all else, helpful in every way.”

Dorrie’s wit and helpfulness are the qualities I’ve heard praised most often by everyone who’s shared reminiscences of her over the past month. She was the face, and in many ways the brains and backbone, of MRHS, and the first person anyone seeking information at the Downes Building would come across. Over the years she helped countless researchers from diverse backgrounds with a wide variety of inquiries—from family genealogies, to local area history, to Mystic house records—for personal use, as well as for academic papers and dissertations. She also directly contributed to research for a number of books including Mystic by Kent Fuller, Meredith Fuller and Lisa Saunders, Haunted Mystic by Courtney McInvale, Hidden History of Mystic and Stonington by Gail MacDonald, Looking Back: New London County Vol. I & II and When Disaster Strikes, all published by The Day, Mystic Seafarer's Trail by Lisa Saunders, Landmarks You Must Visit in Southeast Connecticut by Constant Waterman, and Grover Insurance: Mystic's Own Insurer by Sherman Butler. She had a knack for working through road blocks, tying up loose ends and deciphering clues in the historical record that eluded most others.

Dorrie originally joined MRHS as a volunteer and member of the Board in 1989, served as President from 1999-2006, and as Collections Manager from 2007-2020. At various times during her tenure she wrote for and edited the Portersville Press and contributed to organizing programs, fundraisers, house tours, and school field trips to Portersville Academy. During her 13 years as Collections Manag-er she accepted and processed donations of items to the collections, followed up with the donors, and reported to the Curatorial Committee.

Especially notable were Dorrie’s contributions as co-editor of both Images of America: Mystic (2004) and the award winning An Account of My Life: The Childhood Journals of Helen May Clarke (1997). Marilyn Comrie, who worked closely with Dorrie on An Account of My Life remembers that “Dorrie is the reason the Helen Clarke diary was published. I transcribed the diary, but when the Historical society finally got around to publishing it, Dorrie did the work that made it a book. Carol Kimball, Judy Hicks, Dorrie and I were the committee to get the diary ready for publication, but Dorrie had the desktop publishing on her computer and she created the book while the rest of us fed her photos, etc. I remember giving Dorrie a list of names and words that I wanted in the index for easy reference and Dorrie created the index.”

It is almost impossible to express how big of an impact Dorrie made on MRHS, or how much she will be missed by those of us who had the pleasure to know and work with her. We offer our condolences to her husband, Doug, and her family.
The Civil War Letters of Jedediah Miner Randall

“I should really enjoy this business more than any I ever had if I could forget the heavy cares resting upon you. I cannot think I am wrong especially, as, while I am really determined about properly directing a company in this good cause and by efficiently doing so am in some account in whipping the Rebellion out I say, while I can do so, you can by not assuming too many new cares and gradually doing away with the old ones, spare me for a short 9 months.”

-Jed Randall, Camp Russell, Norwich, Sept. 14, 1862

The Stonington Historical Society has recently donated transcriptions of 22 letters from Jedediah “Jed” Randall to his parents Isaac and Adelia Randall, from September 1862 to January 1863 during the American Civil War. Jed enlisted in the Union Army on September 3, 1862 with an enthusiastic and optimistic belief that the “Southern Rebellion” would be put down easily in a few short months. At the age of 26 he was made Captain of K Company in the 26th Regiment of Connecticut Volunteers alongside many other Mystic men. His letters describe the earliest days of his service at Camp Russell, Norwich and Camp Buckingham, Long Island, his journey south on the steamship EMPIRE CITY, and his early days at Camp Parapet, New Orleans. They are full of anecdotes about daily camp life, personal philosophy about the war, and mentions of his fellow Mystic soldiers including Orville Tift, Simeon Fish, John Rathbun, Oliver Lewis, Alfred Wilcox, Charles Niles and William Eldredge.

Roughly four months from the date of his last letter, on May 27, 1863, Jed was wounded in the company’s first real battle at Port Hudson, Louisiana. He spent the following two weeks in a field hospital before eventually succumbing to his wounds and a fever on June 9, 1863. He is buried in the Lower Mystic Cemetery.

The original handwritten letters are available at the Woolworth Library in Stonington. Additional Civil War era letters, including several written by Jed’s brother, John Randall, are available to researchers in our archives.

The Autobiography of Albert Crary Burrows

Albert Crary Burrows (1837—1904) was one of a long line of Burrows family sea captains, and one of Mystic’s most successful. His career began at the age of 14 when he went to sea aboard the whaler ROMULUS on a three year voyage to the Pacific. He quickly moved on to cargo ships and spent the greatest part of his career on steamers engaged in transatlantic trade, particularly between the ports of New York to Liverpool, England and Galveston, Texas. After surviving numerous shipwrecks and fires including the famous 1882 wreck of the RIO GRANDE, he was lost at sea in Vineyard Sound, just two days shy of his 67th birthday, when the barge he was captaining was sunk by the steamer TALAHASSEE.

The autobiography was written in 1864, while Burrows was in the port of Hong Kong on business. In the preface he reflects that “during the first few years of my seafaring life, I kept a journal daily which grew to be several books, when an unlucky accident deprived me of the whole since which time I have lost all taste for journalizing. Now I am going to make an effort to revive it...I am going to write...from my earliest recollection for my own amusement.” It contains a candid account of his childhood in Colchester and Mystic, Connecticut, along with vivid descriptions of his international travels—the places visited, people encountered and experiences had.

This handwritten account (with a typed transcript) is part of a larger collection of papers and photographs related to A.C. Burrows and the Burrows family donated by Carl, Carol and Jean Wilkinson Sommer. Additional information can be accessed on our webpage through our virtual exhibit: “The Albert Crary Burrows Collection.”

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Gail MacDonald was scheduled to speak at our April 29th membership meeting but something unexpectedly got in the way. We will ask Gail to give her talk when group meetings are once again happy events, but, in the meantime, I highly recommend that you read her book.

The title of Gail B. MacDonald’s new book *Hidden History of Mystic & Stonington* is true to the contents. I have read many books and documents about our local history and find that a great deal of the stories in this book are new to me. Once I began reading I did not put the book down until the last page was read. The Contents begin with very pleasant Acknowledgements followed by topics: Natives’ Land, Perseverance amid Prejudice, Forgotten Places in a Changing Landscape, Immigrants Shape the Community, Women of Distinction, Only in Mystic and Stonington, and Events Forge Community. Six pages of bibliography attest to the breadth and depth of Gail’s research which is presented in clear, interesting, readable, and enjoyable prose. The photographs scattered throughout the book support the stories, and it is a pleasure to see how many of them are from the Mystic River Historical Society. Gail’s special thanks to Dorrie Hanna epitomizes the relationship between an author and MRHS.

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**Catching Up with the History Book Club**

The Mystic-Noank Library will continue hosting meetings of the History Book Club by Zoom on the second Wednesday of each month at 7pm.

September 9:  *The Pioneers: The Heroic Story of the Settlers Who Brought the American Ideal West*, by David McCullough, 2019


November 11:  *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power 1492-1763*, by Henry Kamen, 2003 (1st half)

December 9:  *Empire: How Spain Became...* (2nd half)


June 2020 Meeting Minutes

The Board of Trustees of the Mystic River Historical Society were unable to meet in person due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Instead, the agenda for the meeting was discussed via email.

The minutes for the 18 May 2020 meeting were approved.

President (S. Menno): Finished first cut of the video for a virtual tour of Portersville Academy yesterday for Connecticut Open House Day via CT.gov. • Gail MacDonald, author of ‘Hidden History of Mystic and Stonington,’ is donating $5 to MRHS for every book bought by an MRHS member. She recently sent us a check for $75. • A decision regarding next spring’s programs will not be made until at least September in order to see how life proceeds after the COVID-19 pandemic. • An annual meeting did not take place in May. No new board members were elected last month. Margaret and Steve reached the end of our three-year terms last month and both will continue to stay on. Lois has agreed to stay on and Richard has completed his service. There are some potential board members, but no one will be added at this time. • The reopening of the Downes Building to the public still has to be determined. To be discussed with Dorrie, Betsy, and Louisa. • June meetings usually would have elections for officer and committee positions. Reviewing the current positions the following is noted: Lou agreed to an extension on the board as well as another year as treasurer; Cindy agreed to stay on for one more year as membership chair as she has one more year on the board; Margaret actually has been doing the program chair for an extra year, so she will no longer be in that role. She continues as vice president; Steve will take the program chair slot in the interim. • The Board will meet on the following dates for the 2020-2021 season: September 21, October 19, November 16, January 11, February 8, March 15, April 19, May 17, June 21.

Treasurer/Finance (L. Allyn): As of June 14, 2020 - Cash in the Bank is $6,500.77 • Steve Jones’ check for $1,000 in January has been reclassified to Donation Unrestricted to Membership Lifetime. Total Dues year to date are now $10,700 versus a budget of $10,500 while Donations are $1,530 versus a budget of $2,600.

Due to the closing of the Downes Building, curatorial staff expense is $4,951.63 through May versus $6,095.50 for the same months last year. • $100 was paid to the Congregational Church for use of the hall in February. • All other expenses are normal.

Corresponding Secretary (N. Potter): Nancy will send a thank you letter to Gail MacDonald (who donated $5 to MRHS for every book bought by an MRHS member).

Curatorial (D. Hanna): This past May, the Downes Building remained closed to the public. Dorrie mainly worked from home via email on several topics, including a couple of queries and the donation of letters found at 28 New London Road, which she will write about for the summer newsletter.

Information Technology (S. Thorp): The system administrator performed IT the monthly data backups on June 1. • The data files from PastPerfect, Virtual Exhibit, System Desktop files, working folders and images were backed up for offsite safe-keeping. • The computers were each checked for updates to the operating system and the security systems for applications and machine settings. Updates were installed on all of the computers including BIOS updates on all three machines. • The computers were checked for proper networking and connections to the printer. All equipment appeared to be in good working condition and functioning properly.

Membership (C. Allyn): No report.

Programs (M. Austin): Email was sent to our members on May 27 letting them know that we have cancelled our fall speaker programs. Margaret notified the Congregational Church about our fall cancellations, and Marilyn let Leslie Evans know that we cancelled her September talk on women’s suffrage.

Social Media (L. Pyrke-Fairchild): We achieved two great milestones this past month. The MRHS Instagram account now has over 1,000 followers. And the MRHS Facebook page now has over 2,000 followers!

Next Meeting — 21 September 2020.

Respectfully submitted,
Cara Lopilato
Recording Secretary

Thank You, Louisa Watrous

We are sorry to report that one of our longtime collections assistants, Louisa Watrous, will be moving to South Carolina and completed her long service to MRHS at the end of July. Louisa has been an integral member of our curatorial staff, and has worked for MRHS since 2005. She has been instrumental in cataloguing some of our most important collections. In addition to her duties with MRHS, Louisa was employed by the Ledyard Historical Society and the Noank Historical Society. She was also the intellectual property manager at the Mystic Seaport Museum. We will greatly miss her and we have lost one of our most ardent and competent archivists. We wish her and her husband, Walt, well in their new life closer to their grandchildren!
Disease has always been with us. Epidemics and pandemics have been a part of human existence for thousands of years. For example, archeologists have seen evidence of wide-spread malaria 12,000 years ago in Africa. The death toll was in the millions. Today, although the mortality rate from malaria is less than 1%, the threat level remains quite high in much of the world.

Archeologists have also discovered a mummy from Ancient Egypt with scars that look very like smallpox. This would have been about 1500BCE, and it spread around the area to what is now modern-day Turkey, to Syria, in Greece, and over to Athens, Greece, over the next 1000 years. Smallpox made its way to China, the Korean Peninsula, and Japan after that.

These infections could have been measles, but then again, it’s hard to tell measles from smallpox, or probably even chickenpox, or cowpox. A similar disease appeared in about 570CE, among an army from Abyssinia (Ethiopia) that attacked the Arabic capital of Mecca. These smallpox outbreaks continued, scattered around the world, for centuries afterwards.

In Athens, 2400 years ago, a plague of unknown origin struck down an estimated 75,000 people, out of a total estimated population of 300,000, a mortality rate of about 25%. Scientists have speculated that this plague could have been typhoid, or measles, or smallpox, or Ebola. But the actual cause is still unknown, and that means that the threat level today is also unknown. This plague went on for years, waxing and waning. Survivors were immune to future infections, and were considered as heroes, because they were able to nurse the ill without succumbing again. This plague is even considered by some as a morality tale, addressing those who cared for the sick and those who stood in contrast, enjoying themselves, wasting money they decided they couldn’t take with them, and breaking the law because they believed they wouldn’t live to stand trial. Beth Skwarecki discusses this in her book, Outbreak! 50 Tales of Epidemics that Terrorized the World, an entertaining read, especially if you like horror stories.

This list goes on to the present day: smallpox, bubonic plague, smallpox again and again, leprosy, bubonic plague…over and over, sweating sickness (another disease that’s still a mystery), influenza…over and over and still…, yellow fever, tuberculosis, cholera, puerperal fever (childbed fever with substantial loss of mother’s lives), measles, rabies, typhoid, typhus, diphtheria, polio, dengue, primary amebic meningoencephalitis (brain-eating amoeba), anthrax, AIDS, MRSA, SARS, MERS, Ebola, and of course, COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2).

The plagues listed above are all caused by our tiny friends that we grew up calling ‘germs’, better known to us now as bacteria and viruses. That these even existed only became known within the last perhaps 150 years. Researchers prior to that suspected such things existed but couldn’t prove it until the technology caught up with the theories. Microscopes and testing protocols had to be developed to show that these little critters were real things. This was vitally important because for many thousands of years, the establishments (the medical establishment, the political establishment) believed that the suggestions and recommendations of researchers were complete hoaxes that researchers were attempting to perpetrate on innocent civilians.

Plagues have changed the course of history. For example, back in C.E. 169, the co-emperor of Rome, Lucius Verus, died of the current plague, probably smallpox. According to Skwarecki’s book, so many Romans had died by this point that the other co-emperor, Marcus Aurelius, had to hire foreign mercenaries to defend Rome, and he paid many of them with land in lieu of cash. There is a school of thought among historians that this was the beginning of the end for the Roman Empire. And ironically, Marcus Aurelius himself died of the disease in C.E. 180.

History is filled with stories of wars lost because the mortality rate of infected troops was astronomical, including Napoleon’s troops in Haiti the early 19th century; and the battle for Quebec during the Revolutionary War, when Americans fell victim to smallpox, and, after burying their dead in mass graves, “retreated in disorder from Quebec.” Viruses interfered in the US/Canada relations, such that they were never able to unite into a single country. Viruses destroyed much of the native population wherever Europeans tread…Incas in Peru, Hawaiians in the Hawaiian Islands, as examples.

This vicious method of population control applies to other plagues as well. Once a disease of any kind destroys a big enough share of the population, that population cannot thrive. There is no one left to plant, harvest, feed the hungry, nurse the sick, or bury the dead.
This situation arose over and over wherever diseases such as bubonic plague, smallpox, and others appeared.

Estimates of pre-history population are pretty rough. Just for perspective, it’s thought that humans may have gone through a population bottleneck from Africa with somewhere between 1,000 and 10,000 total surviving individuals, back about 70,000 BCE. If this estimate and an estimate of 50-60 million people in the 4th century CE in the combined eastern and western Roman Empire are both anywhere in the ballpark, and if we extrapolate on a straight line, then the population in the period of time 12,000 years ago might have been about 25 million. No doubt there were plenty of other people on the planet outside of the eastern and western Roman Empire, so that figure is very possibly a low estimate.

Another characteristic of the plagues caused by bacteria and viruses is how easily they are spread from place to place and country to country, not to mention person to person (coughing, sneezing, speaking, singing). In the very ancient days, and for thousands of years forward, most people never left the places they were born and raised. The spreading was done by commercial vessels plying the Mediterranean and other bodies of water, filled with trade goods. A ship would pull into port, members of the crew could be already infected, and as soon as those sailors hit the shore, they started infecting the locals.

Discussion of the spread of disease by travelers is repeated in book after book (see the Bibliography following this article), in anecdote after anecdote, as they appear in history. One of the few ways to repress disease is by staying put and not carrying, or chance to carry, disease, by moving from place to place...whether it’s the next town or the next state or a foreign country.

Another characteristic to consider is how much the risk of disease is reduced by habits of cleanliness. This includes ridding our environment of lice, fleas, ticks, and mosquitoes, which carry many kinds of bacteria and viruses. I’ll include mention here of Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE), babesiosis, and Lyme disease, all of which crop up in our area regularly.

Mosquitoes carry the virus for yellow fever, among other things. This disease was the bane of Cuba and the Panama Canal and in much of the southern US. Philadelphia suffered much from yellow fever, including an outbreak in 1793 that caused not only regular citizens to flee, but also George Washington and the rest of the US government, in spite of a law stating that the government must not leave the city (this was when Philadelphia was the capital).

Yellow fever invaded the American South in the late 1800’s, moving up the Mississippi River with the ships that carried cargo and passengers back and forth from New Orleans to Ohio. In 1878, it was reported in the West Indies. From there, it traveled as cargo up the Mississippi to Memphis, where physicians and health board members who had not forgotten a similar outbreak in 1873 argued for rigorous quarantine measures before the city council. “But business interests on the council rejected quarantine for fear of disrupting their lucrative trade.”

By July 26 it was in New Orleans; by July 27 in Vicksburg. By mid-August, Memphis was experiencing a full-fledged epidemic, and people began to leave the city, with all their belongings piled onto their wagons. Towns along their paths refused them entry, and enforced their quarantines with rifles and shotguns. In Little Rock, Arkansas, trains from Memphis were refused entry, and riverboats were also refused permission to dock.

I will stop the horror story at this point, because what we’ve been reading about Covid-19 is practically a reprint of that yellow fever experience. But it was a long time before we learned that the disease was carried by mosquitoes and could be eradicated by getting rid of mosquito breeding sites, such as water barrels and puddles. I’ll also refer you to David McCullough’s book, The Path Between the Seas, which goes into agonizing detail about yellow fever and the mortality rate during the building of the Panama Canal.

We all had measles as children (and mumps, and chickenpox, and rubella). But before there were vaccines, measles were deadly. (Who knew? If my parents knew, they certainly didn’t tell us about it.) According to Wikipedia, the virus is highly contagious and is spread by coughing and sneezing via close personal contact or direct contact with secretions. Measles, the most contagious transmissible virus known, is so contagious that if one person has it, 90% of nearby non-immune people will become infected. Humans are the only natural hosts of the virus, and no other animal reservoirs are known to exist. Most measles casualties have always been very young children. According to Skwarecki, measles still kills over 100,000 people every year...in spite of the availability of a very effective vaccine.
The issue of disease reservoirs is very pertinent to understanding the entire spectrum of disease. According to Wikipedia.com, in infectious disease ecology and epidemiology, a natural reservoir, also known as a disease reservoir or a reservoir of infection, is the population of organisms or the specific environment in which an infectious pathogen naturally lives and reproduces, or upon which the pathogen primarily depends for its survival. According to cdc.gov, reservoirs include humans, animals, and the environment.

The reservoir may or may not be the source from which an agent is transferred to a host. For example, the reservoir of Clostridium botulinum is soil, but the source of most botulism infections is improperly canned food containing C. botulinum spores. In the case of swine flu, swine are typically the reservoirs. In the case of avian flu, birds (chickens, ducks, etc.) are typically the reservoirs. That means that the particular animal hosts the pathogen (bacteria or virus) in its body, but the pathogen doesn’t sicken the host. It’s not until the pathogen gets out of the host and into another animal, or person, that illness occurs.

HIV was transmitted from a chimpanzee. All coronaviruses — SARS, MERS and COVID-19 — are transmitted from bats with a secondary host. In SARS it was a cat, in MERS it was a camel, and COVID-19 it was a pangolin.

Centuries of research went into these discoveries: that many diseases, including those that become epidemics, originate in an animal of some kind (including humans), and are transmitted either by a bite from an animal (e.g., mosquito), or by contact with bodily fluids from an animal (including human) who is ill, or an animal (including human) that is not ill, but serves as a reservoir of one of more viruses.

The familiar story of Typhoid Mary is a perfect example of this, although certainly not the only example. Mary Mallon emigrated from Ireland in 1884 at the age of 15. She contracted typhoid fever, it is thought, from peach ice cream (I found no explanation for this conclusion) and poor hand hygiene. She worked as a cook for several wealthy families, and as members of each family sickened, she moved on. Authorities identified her as an asymptomatic carrier and made her promise not to work as a cook any more. She promised. A few years later, typhoid cases starting popping up again and she was discovered to be working once again as a cook. After years of ‘cat and mouse’, the authorities arrested her and confined her to what amounted to a prison, where she finally died in 1938. Mary Mallon, the first known case of a healthy carrier in the United States, was proven responsible for the contamination of at least one hundred and twenty two people, including five dead.

The flu pandemic that struck in 1918 and killed at least 50 million people, about 3% of the world’s population, was classified as Influenza A, subtype H1N1. It was a swine flu, and very likely started in the USA, Kansas, on a hog farm.

A century later, Covid-19 struck. As of 8/12/20, about 20.6 million cases of COVID-19 had appeared worldwide, although it’s possible that there are many more that have been uncounted because of deficiencies in testing. One difficulty that has surfaced with Covid-19 is that we’re in the middle of it, and scientists and doctors have really only scratched the surface, as far as understanding the disease and its effects. For instance, doctors are now realizing that the bigger problem than the virus itself may be the “cytokine storm” that results in many patients. The cytokine storm is the individual patient’s immune system’s response to the virus. Treatments to stop the cytokine storm from overwhelming the patient’s systems are just starting to be identified and developed.

COVID-19 is another in a long line of contagions. And it won’t be the last. That long list of diseases identifies illnesses caused by bacteria and viruses that have been with us for many thousands of years, and will be a threat to the human race for the foreseeable future.

To be continued in the November edition of The Porterville Press.

Bibliography:

Skwarecki, Beth, Outbreak! 50 Tales of Epidemics that Terrorized the World
Bollet, Alfred Jay, MD, Plagues & Poxes: The Impact of Human History on Epidemic Disease
Oldstone, Michael B. A., Viruses, Plagues & History
Rosen, George, A History of Public Health
With additional thanks to Wikipedia, the National Institutes of Health, Biography.com, and other web-based information sources.
Events Calendar

7pm Wednesday, September 9, 2020
History Book Club—MRHS & Mystic-Noank Library Partnership
The Pioneers: The Heroic Story of the Settlers Who Brought the American Ideal West, by David McCullough

7pm Wednesday, October 14, 2020
History Book Club—MRHS & Mystic-Noank Library Partnership
The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World, by Andrea Wulf

Speaker Program Note
We hope to resume our program of speakers in the spring of 2021. Our goal is to reschedule all of our cancelled programs based on speaker availability.

Bring a friend! All meetings are free and open to the public! Donations are always welcome. Renew or become a Member of MRHS for updates about our events. Contact us at info@mystichistory.org

Membership Updates
We welcome new members Barbara LHomme, Sherri & Brian Gill and Annie & Tom Haling, and regret the passing of members Rhona Heyl and Dorrie Hanna.

-Cindy Allyn, Membership