

Fatal Fever: Tracking Down Typhoid Mary

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The book “Typhoid Mary” talks about a disease called typhoid fever and three individuals who were brought together because of it: Mary Mallon, George Soper, and Sara Baker. George Soper was a person who lived in the state of New York, which was crowded and unsanitary. During the time when George Soper was alive, many diseases took the lives of many people, such as tuberculosis (which had taken the life of Soper’s father). One of the most important, however, was typhoid fever, which was one of the deadliest diseases. The disease has affected people since prehistoric times and wasn’t discovered until the late 1830’s. Also, it could be easily transferred to other people and caused 35,000 people to die at the beginning of the 20th century. One of the most important causes of typhoid fever was sewage and waste contaminating water sources. Symptoms of the disease included headache, weakness, loss of appetite, and even death. George Soper tried to help with these diseases, especially typhoid fever, by getting a degree in engineering and making a business where he studied sanitation systems and tried to fix them. Soper and others believed that sewage polluting water sources in New York was one of the major causes of typhoid fever, and when fixed, would decrease the death rate caused by typhoid fever. Eventually, after trying to deal with sewage polluting water sources, the death rate caused by typhoid fever decreased in the USA, but many places in New York still had a high death rate as a result of typhoid fever, such as rural areas and urban cities. One place that started seeing more people getting sick because of typhoid was Ithaca, New York. In Ithaca, people started dying because of typhoid fever starting at the beginning of 1903. When people tried to figure out what caused people to get sick, they realized that the water that Ithaca used came from two creeks. They also realized that the water that people drank in Ithaca came from a creek called Six Mile Creek. When Six Mile Creek’s water was tested, the water turned out to be contaminated by bacteria that is found in human waste. In order to deal with this problem, the health officer of Ithaca told everyone to boil water that came from the creek. However, the number of cases related to typhoid fever continued to increase in Ithaca, especially cases related to students at Cornell University. As a result, many students decided to leave Cornell University and Ithaca to avoid getting typhoid. To try to solve the problem, the New York State Commissioner of Health (Daniel Lewis) communicated with George Soper after seeing what he had did in Galveston, Texas after a hurricane occurred.

When George Soper returned to Ithaca, he took the typhoid outbreak problem very seriously, which gave hope to those who lived in Ithaca that someone was finally taking action. Soper decided to go to the two creeks that were being used by Ithaca. He realized that waste was accumulating in the creeks as a result of outhouses located near the creeks. Using this information, he concluded that Six Mile Creek was the reason for the typhoid outbreak. To solve the problem, he decided to add a filtration system. As for the people who already had typhoid, Soper advised that each place where typhoid bacteria could possibly exist should be disinfected with lime chloride and mercury chloride. He also hired a team of people to disinfect the

outhouses in Ithaca. Drinking water was also taken from private wells in Ithaca, and these wells were also tested to make sure that they didn't have any typhoid bacteria. Finally, Soper made sure that the bathrooms and plumbing of Cornell University was checked. In order to pay for all of this, the total costs for Soper's services for six months was \$2,300, and the total cost for helping the city was over \$100,000. This cost was affordable for most people, but it wasn't for those who were affected by typhoid. However, a wealthy industrialist named Andrew Carnegie helped with these costs for many people. After the costs were dealt with, Soper, hearing about how many people's hearts had been broken due to the epidemic, decided to prevent the same problem from happening in other towns and cities. Soper was later contacted about how some members of a family had contracted typhoid while on vacation at Oyster Bay. However, he was also told that no one had ever contracted typhoid before while on vacation at Oyster Bay. After asking some questions to the Warren Family, Soper realized that these cases of typhoid didn't have to do with water sources or food, but they had to do with their cook during the vacation, Mary Mallon. After looking at Mary Mallon's employment history and whether or not the people she worked for contracted typhoid, Soper realized that in most of the households that she worked for, at least one person contracted typhoid. Soper also realized that Mallon never actually fell ill with the typhoid. This information showed that Mallon was a case of a healthy typhoid carrier (the first case, in fact). However, to the community, if she was a healthy typhoid carrier, then she was considered to be dangerous to others. In order to figure out that this was true, however, he would have to test Mallon for the typhoid bacteria. However, Mallon wasn't willing to let him test her, as she was angry when Soper requested if he could test her for typhoid bacteria. He continued to try to convince her to be tested for typhoid bacteria, but she still refused. Soper decided to ask Hermann Biggs what to do about this problem. He decided to assign the job of getting body specimens from Mallon to test for typhoid bacteria to Dr. Walter Benschel. Dr. Benschel decided that Mallon would more likely cooperate with a female inspector, so Benschel decided to assign Dr. S. Josephine Baker to that job. Sara Baker had graduated from a medical school in Manhattan and took an internship in Boston before working as a medical inspector. However, even when she asked Mallon if she could test Mallon for typhoid bacteria, Mallon still said no. Baker tried again the next day, this time with police officers, but Mallon knew that she was coming and escaped. Baker and the policemen tried to look for Mallon, but she was long gone. However, after Baker came back to Mallon's house, Baker and the policemen managed to find Mallon and catch her successfully. Mallon was then sent to Willard Park Hospital, where she was tested by Dr. William Park. After testing her, Park realized that Mallon's blood sample had antibodies against typhoid bacteria and her feces sample had typhoid bacteria. However, when she was tested to see if she had symptoms of typhoid fever, the results showed that she did not have any symptoms of typhoid fever. However, the typhoid bacteria must have entered her body in the past because she had typhoid fever before. Therefore, it was confirmed that Mary Mallon was the first ever healthy typhoid carrier in the United States.

However, the more important problem was how they would prevent Mallon from infecting anyone else. One possible method was by removing the gallbladder, but Mallon did not approve that method. In fact, Mallon was angry about what the doctors had told her about how she had the typhoid bacteria in her, because she knew she had never had typhoid fever before. Because she was a carrier for the typhoid bacteria, she was held prisoner at the hospital. George Soper

came a few days later to the hospital to ask Mallon questions relating to her having typhoid in the past so that he could use the information to write a book about typhoid carriers, but Mallon was so mad at him that she refused to listen. Mallon's feces continued to be tested, and each time, the typhoid bacteria was still present. Although a hospital in New York had never put someone under custody, it was allowed by the New York State Legislature since it was an action to protect the health of the city. Mallon was later transferred to a hospital in North Brother Island. She was given many drugs that would hopefully get rid of the typhoid bacteria in her, but nothing worked. Mary continued to stay isolated on the island for two more years. She was also referred to as "Typhoid Mary" and the most dangerous woman in America in the newspaper. However, an attorney by the name of George Francis O'Neill tried to help her by arguing that the reports relating to Mallon from Ferguson Laboratories showed that Mallon was not dangerous because she did not have any typhoid colonies in her. Unfortunately, this didn't work since the justice agreed that it was important that the Typhoid fever would not be spread to other people. That meant Mallon would continue to stay quarantined in North Brother Island. Another person named Reuben Gray tried to help Mallon by giving her a home, but when he asked Health Commissioner Thomas Darlington, he did not accept because of Gray's town's disapproval towards Gray's offer. After these events, Mary Mallon's anger increased. However, many people argued that Mallon was only one of many healthy typhoid carriers in the city, and to isolate everyone that was a carrier was unfair. They believed that instead of isolating carriers, the activities that they do should be limited. As a result, Mallon was finally brought back to the city after promising that she would not work as a cook. However, now she had to find a new job (since her previous job was cooking and handling food), but no one would hire her because of all the events in the past. To deal with this, George O'Neill decided to sue the Department of Health of New York and several people responsible for Mallon's problems, such as George Soper and Park. However, a year later, the case was canceled. Meanwhile, more things were being done to prevent more people from contracting typhoid, such as better sewer systems and even the creation of a vaccine. A vaccine for typhoid was being worked on since 1896. The vaccine for typhoid was finished in 1909, and when it was given, it turned out to be effective against typhoid. However, at the same time, a typhoid outbreak had occurred at a hospital. The person that was responsible for the people sick at the hospital was, once again, Mary Mallon, as she had been cooking at the hospital. Because she broke her promise of not spreading the typhoid bacteria by cooking and could no longer be trusted, she was forced to live in North Brother island for the rest of her life. She continued to live there until November 11, 1938, when she died. Her nickname, Typhoid Mary, however, remained famous. After realizing how much danger Mary Mallon had caused, the health department continued to watch those who were considered to be typhoid bacteria carriers. Typhoid fever continued to cause death, but they had dropped a lot ever since the beginning of the 20th century. After the typhoid problem had been solved, Soper continued to work as a sanitation engineer, and Baker continued to work as a medical inspector and established the Division of Child Hygiene in 1908. The amount of deaths caused by typhoid fever continued to decrease due to improved sewage disposal and water filtration. In addition, the typhoid vaccine that was first used in the 1900's has also improved. There are also many antibiotics that can cure typhoid fever. Although typhoid fever outbreaks still occur during the 21st century, they occur a lot less than in the beginning of the 20th century.

There were many things that I liked about this book. One thing I enjoyed was how this book was informational about the typhoid fever and what people tried to do in order to deal with the typhoid fever. I also liked how the book provided more information about the typhoid fever at the end of the book, such as famous people who died because of typhoid bacteria, a timeline of important events related to the typhoid fever, and other informational websites and articles related to the typhoid fever. However, I didn't like that some of the information was very scary and frightening, such as cases of people who contracted the typhoid fever and the symptoms of typhoid fever. I would recommend this book to ages 11 and up because of how some of the information was very scary, but also because how informational this book was. I would definitely recommend this book to someone else.

Recommended Titles:

Red Madness: How a Medical Mystery Changed What We Eat by Gail Jarrow

Blood and Germs: The Civil War Against Wounds and Disease by Gail Jarrow

Very, Very, Very Dreadful: The Influenza Pandemic of 1918 by Albert Marrin