Pioneer Science and the Great Plagues
Cheville, Norman F

Published by Purdue University Press

Cheville, Norman F.
Purdue University Press, 2021.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/84018.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84018

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2892765
residua of his fixation and attempts to date Hix, the police received information that veterinary school professor Snook was the authentic boyfriend.

James Howard Snook was a successful and high-profile professor and head of the Department of Medicine in the veterinary school. He had invented the Snook hook, a surgical instrument used worldwide to retrieve the uterus from the abdominal cavity in spaying dogs and cats. He was a founding member of the Alpha Psi veterinary fraternity and a member of the U.S. Olympic Pistol Team, which won the gold medal in the men’s thirty-meter team military pistol event at the Olympics in Antwerp, Belgium.

Snook had a three-year sexual affair and wanted to end it and eliminate the traces to spare his wife and family from scandal. He was arrested and tried for the murder. The jury was shocked by the activities and the language used to describe their sexual encounters. Words unknown to the jurors were devastating to the case. Hix had been a femme fatale of sorts who used cocaine and barbital as well as cannabis and cantharis (aka Spanish fly), and Snook had helped her to procure drugs from an Ohio State University pharmacy. Worse from Snook’s view was that when petulant she taunted him that his penis was smaller than that of her other lover.

The trial lasted thirty days, but the jury took only twenty-eight minutes to convict Snook. He was sentenced to death and executed in the electric chair at the Ohio Penitentiary on February 28, 1930. Snook was buried in Columbus. His tombstone omitted his last name; it read simply James Howard.

23. PUBLIC HEALTH AND DISTRUST OF GOVERNMENT: THE TUBERCULIN WAR

For rural veterinarians, the 1930s were sobering times. Clients were paying the bills with meat and produce, and often with sewing machines, typewriters, and other accoutrements purchased in better times. Income in rural practices declined with livestock prices, and mass production of the Model T Ford accelerated its takeover of the horse. More veterinarians were leaving practice to work in public health; college courses in meat and dairy products inspection had become an integral part of veterinary education. But still, less than half of the animals produced for meat in the U.S. were subjected to government inspection—most were being killed by the butcher in small towns and villages.
By 1930, it was obvious that bovine tuberculosis was spread through milk to humans and was responsible for a disturbing share of the fatal disease nationwide, yet some farmers still refused to remove tuberculous cattle from their herds. In the United States, fifty thousand people were dying annually of tuberculosis. In humans, tuberculosis was called consumption because it consumed the patients in a protracted agonizing death. Most cases were caused by the human pathogen *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. But cattle carried their own strain, *Mycobacterium bovis*, which caused the same progressively fatal disease in owners of tuberculous cattle and in people who drank raw milk. Contaminated milk was particularly dangerous for young children. The New York Board of Health stated in a report that “a large percentage of infant tuberculosis . . . is of bovine origin.” Ten percent of tuberculosis-causing chronic bone disease and arthritis in humans was due to *M. bovis*.

Cities and towns were establishing public health officers they called sanitarians. Almost all sanitarians were veterinarians, and for them, tuberculosis was a
growing concern—not only because it had such impact on animal and human health in rural areas but because using tuberculin injections to test for TB in cattle had become controversial and sometimes dangerous.

Where bovine tuberculosis was rampant, farmers were still resisting attempts to cull their herd of infected cows—and they were organizing. Called on to prevent the spread of this terrible disease, some veterinarians were caught in the middle of their oath to care for animals and public health and the resistance of angry and hostile farmers to test for the tuberculosis in their herd.

The cooperative federal-state-industry effort to eradicate tuberculosis from cattle had been initiated in 1917, and the Iowa Legislature passed the Iowa Tuberculin Law a few years later. Federal veterinarians were employed to test all cattle herds with tuberculin—injecting tuberculin subcutaneously and measuring body temperature twenty-four hours later: a rise in temperature suggesting tuberculosis. The test’s specificity and sensitivity were problems but it was the only test available, and even though imprecise, tuberculin did detect tuberculosis in seriously infected dairy herds.

In 1930, the inaccurate temperature test was replaced by a new reliable and proven-effective skin test using an improved tuberculin. The test was done by the veterinarian, who lifted the tail and, using a tiny needle, injected a very small
amount of tuberculin into the hairless fold of skin under the tail head. The veterinarian returned the next day to “read” the test. If the cow was normal, so was the skin at the injection site; if the cow had tuberculosis, the injection site would be inflamed—red, warm, and swollen. The federal program was carried out by the Bureau of Animal Industry, who produced and used a new purified and standardized tuberculin for all tests, labeled PPD, for purified protein derivative.

The federal tuberculin testing law over which controversy arose provided that Iowa was defined as an accredited area for the eradication of bovine tuberculosis. Cattle were required to be tested and to be condemned if the tuberculin test was positive. Under the provision of the law, indemnities were paid to farmers whose cattle reacted to tuberculin. But some farm groups were resisting. In 1931, the fight against tuberculin testing flared intermittently until March, when objectors refused to permit testing of cattle on several occasions, gathering in force to prevent tests from being done.

On March 9, 1931, when veterinarians attempted to complete the tuberculin test on cattle at the William Butterbrodt farm near Tipton, Iowa, a force of twenty state agents and deputies was called in for protection. They were defied by several hundred farmers. The deputies were armed but had instructions not to fire. Nonetheless, several vigilantes were hit in the back of the head and the sheriff, receiving a blow in return, called the state’s Department of Criminal Investigation, saying the situation was beyond his control. Peter Malcom, chief of the Iowa Division of Animal Industry, was attacked, the radiator of his car filled with mud, gas line broken, tires slashed, and windows smashed. Newsmen and photographers were called unkind names; some were beaten.

A judge issued an injunction restraining the farmers from interfering with the tests, but on August 21, veterinarians were repulsed in attempts to test cattle at three other farms. The farmers were cited for contempt, and farmer Fogg pleaded guilty and was fined $50. The others pleaded not guilty and were released on $100 bonds. Their fight was carried on in the courts and in the state legislature, but an attempt to obtain repeal of the compulsory test law failed in the general assembly. Several times, test suits instituted in various counties were carried to the Iowa Supreme Court but were dismissed when that body held that it did not constitute a federal question.

Mr. Lenker, the state president of the Farmers Protective Association, and Curtis McKinnon of New London, vice president, broadcast objections to the test over an Iowa radio station at noon. “We are opposed to the bovine
tuberculin test as it is administered because we consider it unreliable, inaccurate, because it doesn’t detect the worst reactors, because it ruins our cattle, because many of the tested cattle die while others abort and give milk that is unfit for human consumption,” said Mr. McKinnon, adding that “the present program was put over by fraud and misrepresentation.” C. F. Curtiss, the dean of Agriculture at Iowa State College, was attacked for being a director of Armour & Co. “God gave us the cow, and what God gave us, no veterinarian can do better,” concluded McKinnon.

Deputies met at the courthouse at Tipton shortly after noon Monday and then went to the J. W. Lenker farm southeast of Tipton, near Wilton Junction. They were followed by a crowd of about four hundred objecting farmers who had defied a posse of sixty-five deputies and had driven them from the farmstead. Clubs and showers of mud were used by the crowd of defiant objectors to drive the deputies from the farm. After several automobile windows were smashed and several deputies injured, the deputies abandoned their attempt to enforce the test and left the farm. Tear gas bombs had proved ineffective and it was decided that a stronger force was needed to carry out the objective.

Iowa governor Dan Turner, on a mission to Washington, D.C., issued a proclamation with a message for the press: “If we don’t have law and order, we haven’t got anything,” Governor Turner said. “The tuberculin test law is the plain law of the state and will be carried through. We are not going to let up a bit.” National Guard adjutant general W. H. Bailey was instructed to order out soldiers to enforce the bovine tuberculin test law. By Monday night, a force of 1,880 troops had been mobilized. Mobilization orders were underway for thirty-one units, one-third of the National Guard strength of the state. Troops convened in Des Moines, then left on the Rock Island train at 7 a.m. the next morning. National Guard units that mobilized came from twenty counties. Service units also mobilized included medical units but not the band. Although the cavalry troops were used, their horses were not taken to Tipton.

Field headquarters of the 113th Cavalry was located three miles north of Durant at an appropriately named site, the Bunker Hill School. Its duties were to block the roads leading to farms where veterinarians were testing cattle. Cattle testing was to begin as soon as all were in camp. Military units encamped at the county fairgrounds. Army life in Camp Bovine wasn’t all that great for the troops. Arriving after dark Tuesday night, soldiers had to pitch their tents by artificial light. A drenching rain fell at 6 a.m. Wednesday as reveille sounded,
but skies cleared before noon. Four members of the Centerville football team that had gone through the 1930 season 10–0 were scheduled to play Moulton on Friday. A Centerville player said there was one consolation: “We understand two members of the Moulton team also are in camp.”

All passes to the camp were revoked after 6 p.m. But further relief had come when some of the objectors drove up to the camp during the afternoon with a wagonload of watermelons and distributed them among the troopers. The astonishing civility between troopers and farmers was seen again the next day when farm wives served coffee and cake to the soldiers and veterinarians—a quirkiness of Iowa civility no longer seen.

The *Des Moines Register* headlines on Thursday morning, September 24, were “STATE TO TEST CEDAR COWS TODAY” with subheadings of “Troops Ready to Use Force if Necessary” and “Lenker Farm Believed First on List: Says He Sold Herd.” The 168th Infantry was moved to the Lenker farm north of Wilton early in the morning of September 24 to protect the state’s cattle testers.

Cattle testing began the next day. Veterinarians worked in four groups, each group accompanied by a troop of 113th Cavalry and a machine gunner from the 113rd Infantry. On Friday morning, September 25, the *Des Moines Register* headlines were “STATE TESTS LENKER CATTLE HERD.” The subheadings of “Believe Cedar Resistance Is Near An End” and “Soldiers Locate Stock After Chief Objector Is Arrested” told the story. Reporting from Tipton, the *Des Moines Register* stated that “the backbone of resistance to enforcement of the bovine tuberculin test in Cedar County seemed to have been broken Thursday night when veterinarians and guardsmen climaxed the arrest early in the day of J. W. Lenker, principal objector, with the discovery and injection of his herd during the afternoon.” Lenker was sent to prison in Anamosa.

A petition was circulated at a mass meeting of Henry County residents that threatened nonpayment of the remainder of the year’s and 1932 taxes if Governor Dan Turner did not accede to their request that Lenker be released from the Anamosa Reformatory and that soldiers be removed from Cedar County. Further resistance to state veterinarians attempting to test cattle for tuberculosis under the state law occurred on Sunday, when one thousand men and women gathered in a protest meeting under leadership from the Des Moines County Farmers Protective Association.

On October 23, the foes of the test dispersed as the crisis neared and as all of the fourteen hundred members of the National Guard encamped at the
fairgrounds in Burlington were activated. The last of the guardsmen arrived by train from northwest Iowa on Thursday evening. There was no active resistance as the cattle were tested by twelve veterinarians.22

Most farmers understood the long-term benefits of having tuberculosis-free herds. But with the overzealous push by the organizers, it was understandable that farmers with productive purebred herds were those most angry about the test program. Loss of high-producing cows would take their profit, and in some cases their business, as the indemnity paid would not cover the price of an expensive purebred animal.23

At the other extreme there were poor-quality herds where a scammer welcomed the test. During the waiting period, after tuberculin had been injected under the skinfold, these scalawags would severely pinch the test site with pliers, causing acute inflammation that would be read the next day as positive. They would be paid indemnity for the worthless cow that greatly exceeded its price on the market. So it goes with any federal program ever devised.


C ontradicting most predictions in the 1930s, veterinary colleges were having steadily increasing enrollments—up at both rural Iowa State College and urban Penn. The economic downturn had restricted incomes of rural veterinarians, but it had also reduced the “opportunity cost” of college. During good times, the cost of lost earnings by going to college is high; in the 1930s it was low—high school graduates, facing scarce jobs and poor wages, were increasingly leaning toward college. Veterinary medicine was changing focus, and that, too, was a pull into the profession.

At the 1933 annual meeting of the American Veterinary Medical Association in Chicago, Iowa State College dean C. H. Stange, with no small prescience, argued that educational change was required to meet “difficulties in getting some members of our profession, who were educated primarily in diseases of the horse, to interest themselves in diseases of cattle and swine. . . . The lack of interest in food hygiene in many sections is undoubtedly due very largely to the fact that the veterinarians as students received little or no instruction in this subject . . .” From Kansas State College, Dean Dykstra writes to Stange, congratulating him