

NPS-100/NOTES

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DR. BERNARD NOTES

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HISTORIAN'S NOTE: PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE DOCTOR AT ELLIS ISLAND, CIRCA 1925

NOTES: Graduated – I'm Bernard Notes – I graduated medicine George Washington University in 1925 and took the internship in the Public Health Service because I wanted some variety of training. And which is what I obtained. Quite a variety -- before I went into my specialty of Obstetrics and Gynecology. In those days, the immigration was already beginning to wane. The immigrants were only part of the care we rendered. So that part of it was rendered to the Marine – Mer-- Merchant Marine. Merchant Marine sailors who -- for whom this -- these hospitals were originally started. The Public Health Service took care of the whole care --that included the hospital care and the immigrant surveillance.

The --- Ellis Island was served by one ferry and a ferry boat used to take us from South Ferry over to the Island. We all had our quarters. The Island itself was composed of a -- in the shape of E -- an "E". Now the two southern limbs of the Island were the hospital and the northern limb was the detention station where the immigrants were processed. The Public Health Service was a tightly-knit group of men, many of whom were from the South, especially the

University of Virginia. Most of whom were very able doctors, intellectually good, but as usual in -- about ten percent of them really carried the load. And amongst the outstanding ones were Dr. Ricky Waugh W-A-U-G-H and Dr. Hollingsworth -- especially. Dr. Waugh was a general surgeon then. Dr. Hollingsworth was an Internist.

We, as interns, did the routine care, all under the supervision however of the regular Corps, who were upper echelon officers. Now, the two hospital Islands contained, amongst other things, a dungeon for deportees who were not citizens and who were there for observation leading to their deportation. And in these dungeons were criminals, insane people, and people who were for -- for deportation but who were otherwise somewhat ill. I might say, as an aside, that they always had these large brown wharf rats running around which were impossible to eradicate because Ellis Island is at a low level as far as the beginning of the bay at -- the size of New York City. But they kept it in good condition. The plant was in good physical condition.

At that time the Public Health Service had a number of Acting Assistant Surgeons who wanted to be close to New York but who did not want to be in the active Corps. There were no women at that time in the Corps that I could see. These men used to climb on the tug boats, go down and climb up the ladders to the -- to liners and inspect the immigrants. And the ones who had diseases, especially contagious diseases, were set aside and had a slip put on their garments. And they were sent in particularly to the hospital at Ellis Island -- the hospital caution -- so that they could be diagnosed, and if found to have contagious disease, were usually returned back to their port of embarkation and there was a fine assessed against the steamship company.

Now -- and while I was there, there was the beginning of the sending of United

States Public Health Service officers to various countries who would examine immigrants. And if they determined they were in good physical condition, free of contagious disease they were allowed to come in. So they were not caught up after they reached United States waters and then have to be deported on account of these diseases. The de—the immigrants that I saw, most of them were from Ireland. These were many young, handsome appearing people, but with no teeth! There were young nineteen year olds, immigrants, with plates, upper and lower plates. And they said then it was poor diet—account of too many potato – too many starches. Potatoes -- they had the potato famine, and so on. In addition we had some from the Mideast and the Mediterranean area. Now the ones from the Mid East – by the way, the ones from Ireland had some tuberculosis. And, of course, we had a tuberculosis ward on the Island.

I might say ,in addition, that there -- we had various diseases come through, particularly things like favus (from the Mediterranean and Mideast areas), trachoma, some tuberculosis, a lot of anemia, and a good deal of worm infestation(ame – amebiasis). I saw there on the Island, leprosy. I saw amoebic dysentery, amoebic abscess of the liver--which Dr. Waugh operated on. A tremendous amount of foul smelling, inspissated pus out of the liver. I saw lots of tuberculosis, a good deal of favus (which we couldn't do anything for), saw a lot of trachoma. We used to treat trachoma with copper sulphate sticks to the conjunctiva, which apparently did very little good. Plenty of syphilis, on which we used the old salvarsan – the [not understood] of salvarsan for; gonorrhoea, anulo ma inguinale, lymphogranuloma and many – many things -- malnutrition, like anemia.

If these people had a contagious disease, for instance, tuberculosis, favus, trachoma, leprosy, or the venereal diseases; they were deported and the steamship company was fined. Now the Public Health Service was, as I have

said, a closely-knit organization and (maybe I said this before) but as usual about ten percent of the load --the major portion -- I mean the major portion of the medical load was carried by about ten percent of the officers. Which is typical of a bureaucratic medical organization. Because without an incentive that you have from competition, medical people (just like any other group who don't have to compete) become somewhat indifferent as far as producing service, care.

And that is the reason why I didn't join the Public Health Service--because I was young and ambitious and full of vigor, and I wanted to make something of myself--I didn't want to get -- have a -- a position and draw my check and that was it. Otherwise, I wouldn't have gone to medical school—I've gone into business, or something else. Now the attitude that the commissioned Corps had was a bit stifling too, because it was more of a military attitude than the present-day Public Health Service, which is somewhat emasculated, in my opinion. The -- they were -- some of the people—some of the officers were rather stiff-necked. Martinets, I think you call them. I don't know if that's the right pronunciation or not. They were sticklers for the rules and regulations and those were the people who usually got to the posi-- administrative positions, because of that very thing. Some of those were not very humane, in my opinion. All in all, they wanted to just follow the rules and regulations.

YEW: Can you give me an example?

NOTES: Well, I can give you an example, but cut the thing off!

(Tape interrupted)

NOTES: One of the deportees who was insane--a young woman. She was a manic, and

they had her in a cage, it was essentially a cage. It was a room, but it was an open cage in the – in the lock wards. She used to – she used to write to Vincent Astor before I got there, and after I came she started writing me letters every day! I remember that! And I'll tell you another experience.

There was a middle European family (I think it was Middle European, I'm not sure of that) who lived in – I think it was Cincinnati. But I'm not sure. At any rate, the wife wanted to visit her people in Mid-Europe, so she left and she was overseas a year, away from her husband. And she came back on the boat – she was nine month pregnant! And when she came off of the – off of the boat onto this first Island (you know, the first leg where the immigrants came to) she went into the lady's room and she delivered the baby into the hopper, into the John. And then we were called over--I was called over.

We – we resuscitated the baby--and there was no placenta! Where is the placenta? They said it must be in her – in the uterus, so I was designated because I had an interest in Obstetrics and Gynecology to find the placenta. So they said, "Well, put her over into the Hospital Island. Go ahead and do a [not understood] -- go up into the uterus and pull that placenta out. But she had delivered the placenta. There was no placenta. But that was my first experience in trying to remove a placenta from inside the uterus. Of course, I've had that experience many times, actually removin' 'em --adherent placenta, placenta accreta, and so on. That placenta accrete, but partial -- placenta.

And that there -- woman was put on a boat--she was down in the bay for deportation because her husband said it's not my baby, I don't want her. I won't take her back. Then, he relented and he did take her back, with the baby. And that was a very interesting, true experience. Over all, it was a very interesting

year from the standpoint of an intern. From the standpoint of being a Public Health Service officer, there was very little inspiration except on the part of maybe ten percent of the officers, who carried the load--I'm saying that for the second time. So I had a valued experience that -- many doctors have never seen some of these diseases that I saw.

YEW: Did you ever hear any of the officers complaining about anything?

NOTES: No, there was -- the officers didn't complain. They were getting the checks, they were getting their meals, they had their lodgings. And they had a tennis court. And they were close to New York, where if they were interested in the Stock Market, they were close to that. Interested in the theater, they were close to that. I never heard them complain. They had a nice, soft, easy existence. But not an existence for a young doctor who's just starting and who's ambitious and just out of medical school. By the way, none of these four interns that I remember joined the Public Health Service. Not one of them.

YEW: Do you remember any Psychiatrists at Ellis Island? Any of the officers --

NOTES: There were no Psychiatrists as I remember. The general officers took care of it. They didn't have Psychiatry as well developed as it is now. No, they -- we had a few consultants from New York City but they were generally surgeons, specialized surgeons. But we didn't have many of them. We had no Psychiatrists that I remember. None.