

## **Pi Beta Phi Health Care Program**

From the moment Pi Beta Phi established its settlement school on the banks of the Little Pigeon River, the Fraternity sought to improve health care standards in Gatlinburg and its smaller satellite communities. As early as 1914, in fact, three of Pi Beta Phi's twelve founders donated the rather substantial sum of \$150 apiece to be used in the construction of a small clinic on the settlement school grounds. It would, sadly, take six more years for their dream to be realized, for economic difficulties arising from American involvement in the First World War prevented the fraternity from purchasing lumber and other supplies. And so, the settlement school staff did what it could during the intervening years to influence health and hygiene in Gatlinburg, until such time as the clinic could be built and a professional nurse hired to oversee its operation.

The first recorded instance of the settlement school staff taking direct action to improve health and hygiene standards in Gatlinburg occurred during the tenure of teacher Mary O. Pollard (1913-1916). During her three years at the settlement school, Pollard worked tirelessly to eradicate hookworm from the communities within her reach, both by assisting with State Hookworm Clinics held on the settlement school campus, and by spending her summers "walking miles and miles to tell people of the danger of hookworm and urging them to come in to receive . . . treatment at the Pi Phi School." A second staff member who distinguished herself in the field of health reform despite lacking formal medical training was Evelyn Bishop, who served the Settlement School as Head Resident from 1918-1933. During the 1917-1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic, which claimed the lives of approximately 675,000 Americans (and as many as 40 million worldwide), Gatlinburg residents looked to the Settlement School, and Bishop in particular, for help. Although there was little that she could do as a layperson, other than assist

local doctors in caring for the sick, her steady presence paid dividends for the settlement school project. “Since that great scourge,” wrote a Sevierville doctor, “the sentiment is entirely changed toward the school. . . . The people now seem to be working together for the advancement of the school and community.”

Interestingly enough, the pandemic served a second, greater purpose as well; for although Bishop performed admirably during the crisis, it was evident to everyone involved with the Settlement School project that Gatlinburg needed the services of a professional nurse. Without wasting any time, the Settlement School Committee convinced one of the Fraternity’s own, Alberta, Canada native Phyllis Higinbotham, to travel to Gatlinburg and take charge of the community’s health care needs. Following brief stints at New York’s Henry Street Settlement House, where she received her introduction to settlement work, and the Hindman Settlement School in Hindman, Kentucky, during which time she gained valuable insight into the cultural standards of mountain families, she made her way to Gatlinburg in the fall of 1920.

Higinbotham’s job was, by any standard, Herculean; there were “about two hundred families in this [school] district,” most of whom needed some sort of treatment (poor eyesight and tonsillitis were very common among the mountaineers) and most of whom lived at the end of very poor roads. And yet, undaunted, she took to her task with gusto. During her first two years at the Settlement School, Higinbotham made close to 2,000 trips into the mountainous backcountry surrounding Gatlinburg, giving first aid to the injured, examining newborn babies, and administering inoculations to children and adults alike. More often than not, she traveled without the benefit of a map, and so was dependent on the goodwill of the local people to help her find her way. For the most part, Nurse Higinbotham’s only companions on these long and

tiresome journeys were her horse, “Lady,” and a collie named “Rex” which belonged to Settlement School agricultural teacher Otto J. Mattil.

Higinbotham’s efforts received a tremendous boost when, in 1922, the fraternity opened its much-anticipated rural public health clinic--dubbed the Jennie Nicol Memorial Health Center in honor of Pi Beta Phi founder Jennie Nicol--in a renovated cottage on the Settlement School grounds. From the clinic, Higinbotham provided a variety of medical services to Gatlinburg residents and Settlement School students: physical examinations, inoculations, first aid to the injured, and free clothing and medical supplies for those in need. The JNMHC also provided her with a platform from which to educate her new neighbors about the benefits of personal hygiene and preventative health care. By the time Higinbotham resigned her position in 1926, Gatlinburg residents, as well as people from as far away as Sevierville, had grown accustomed to looking to the JNMHC in times of medical crisis. Settlement School alumnae Lucinda Oakley Ogle perhaps spoke for all Gatlinburg residents when she stated that “Miss Phyllis . . . [was] a God-send for the mountain people.”

Following Higinbotham’s resignation, the settlement school saw several nurses come and go in rapid succession. It was not, in fact, until 1935 that Pi Beta Phi acquired the long-term services of Illinois native Marjorie Chalmers, a dedicated nurse (although not a Pi Phi) who would preside over the settlement school health program for the next thirty years.

Unlike Higinbotham, Chalmers had an easier time locating and treating her patients. Possessed of a car, and of a rather profound sense of daring, “Miz Marjorie” spent countless days and nights clattering and bumping along over the region’s poor roads, doing her best to dodge rocks and stumps, and to avoid tumbling over the occasional precipice. Fortunately for her, Gatlinburg mechanics made a priority of repairing her cars. “The boys at the garage watched

over these cars with a very personal interest,” she wrote in her autobiography *Better I Stay*, “for no one knew when they might carry them or one of their folk on a fast emergency trip.”

It was, incidentally, during Chalmer’s tenure that the settlement school health care program realized its primary objective: convincing Gatlinburg residents to abandon their reliance on folk remedies and purely curative care, and instead move towards a reliance on preventative measures such as inoculations and good personal hygiene. Where once, new and expectant mothers sought the advice of “Granny Women” (midwives) as it regarded birth and infant care, they now brought their concerns to the JNMHC; where once, fearful parents refused to allow their children to receive inoculations, they now lined their youngsters up at the JNMHC on appointed days. Furthermore, in most cases, children born with birth defects received the treatment so often denied them in the pre-Pi Beta Phi days. And rare was the child who, known to the settlement school staff, went long without receiving eye and ear examinations (and corrective work or glasses in the event that they were needed). So improved were Gatlinburg children’s hygiene standards, in fact, that they regularly took top honors in Sevier County’s “Blue Ribbon Day,” personal health and hygiene program.

Like all good things, however, the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School’s Health Program eventually outlived its usefulness. Sevier County took over financial responsibility for public health in Gatlinburg in 1965, relieving the fraternity of the need to provide further funding and enabling Nurse Chalmers to embark on a well-deserved retirement. In the end, the program had succeeded beyond everyone’s expectations, garnering accolades from state health officials and Gatlinburg residents alike. Truly, it was one of the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School’s greatest achievements.