

B500-6
N844
13:4

Star of the Republic Museum

Government Publications
Texas State Documents

OCT 3 1989 *pl*

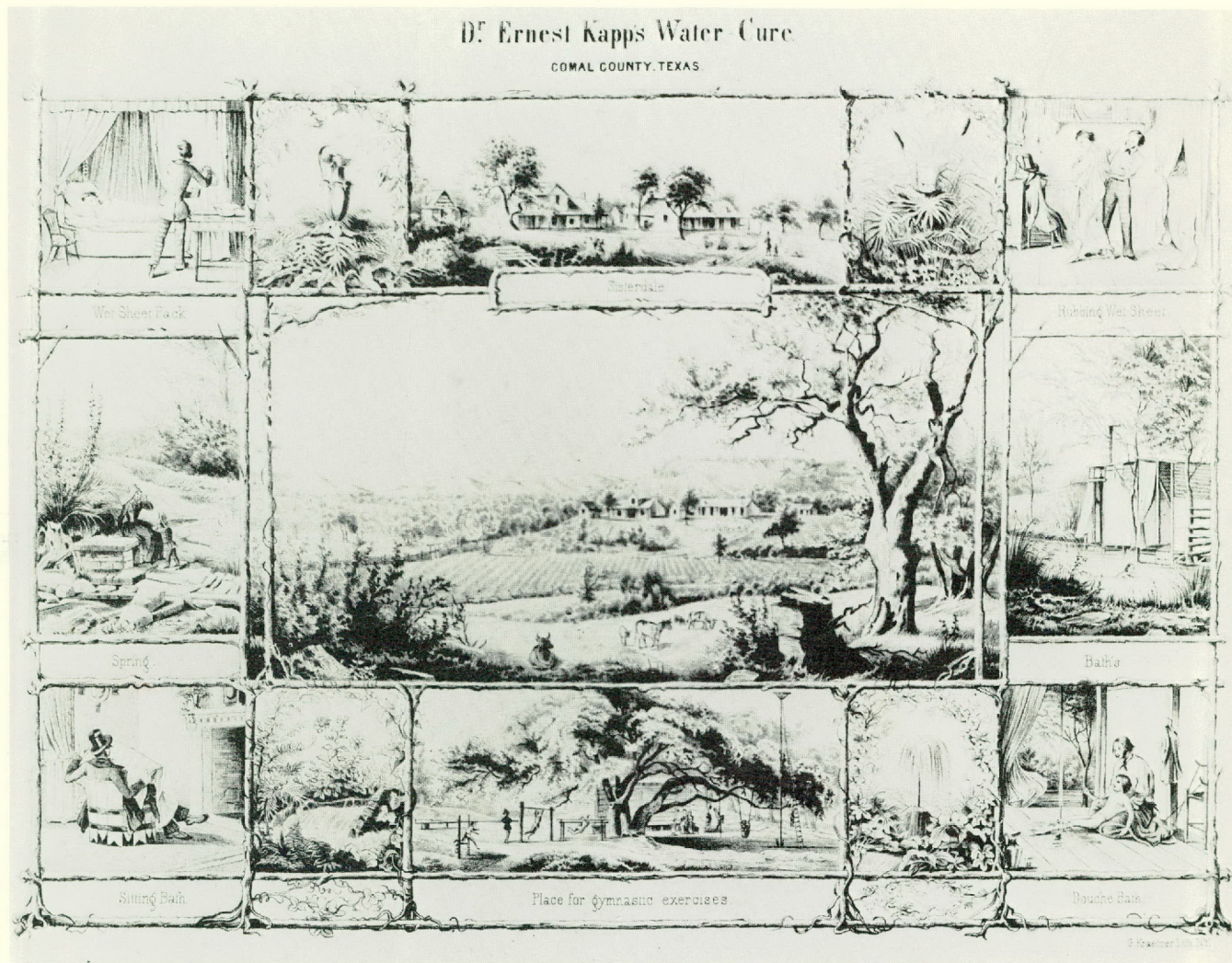
Notes

Vol. XIII, No. 4

Dallas Public Library

Summer 1989

The "Cult of Hydropathy" and "Health Seekers" in Early Texas



"It is possible to bathe oneself back to health."

Vincent Priessniz, founder
"Cult of Hydropathy"



Whether in the first or last stages of illnesses, patients were frequently advised to “go West” for the “climate cure.”

An interesting aspect to nineteenth-century Texas medicine was the role of bathing as therapy for the sick. Bathing itself was suspect, and in 1840 the bathtub was denounced as “an epicurean innovation from England, designed to corrupt the democratic simplicity of the Republic.” One observer noted that “the Texans, as a general rule, were not wasteful with soap and water.” Even on the eve of the Civil War, the *San Antonio Daily Herald* cautioned that “the Bath taken under whatever form produces a shock upon the whole nervous system,” and the editorial advised that the application of water “should be under the supervision of the sound judgment of an experienced physician.”

What finally drew people to bathing was not cleanliness and hygiene but its purported medicinal value. In the 1840’s, the “Cult of Hydropathy” was introduced into the United

States. Its founder was a Silesian peasant named Vincent Priessniz. He proclaimed that it was possible to “bathe oneself back to health.” Relieving his patients of nonexistent diseases, Priessniz had over 1,500 patients a year by 1843.

The cure consisted primarily of drinking and soaking in copious amounts of water. There were tub, shower, and sitz baths, but the mainstay of the system was the use of a wet sheet, since water was thought to heal best when administered gradually through the skin, a process known as “transudation.” Typically, a patient was wrapped in a cold wet sheet and several blankets, then covered with a feather bed. He remained in this cocoon for twenty-five minutes to several hours. The popularity of hydropathy was probably influenced by the negative reactions people had against the alternative “heroic” medical treatments of the day.

In the mid-1850’s hydropathy was practiced in Texas at a sanatorium on the Guadalupe River near Sisterdale. It was founded and operated by Dr. Ernest Kapp, a native of Bavaria, and one of a group of German intellectuals who settled in the area during the 1840’s. Supposedly, he discovered the benefits of water after seeing a deer with a broken leg lie in the running water of a creek every day until the leg healed. He was probably also aware of the water cures in Europe.

The Texas artist and fellow German, Herman Lungkwitz, produced a lithograph of the spa, which was widely distributed in central Texas. The poster details the various elements of Kapp’s water cure program: packing in wet sheets, rubbing in wet sheets, bathing in the Guadalupe River, gymnastic exercise, and sitz baths. Apparently modesty and decorum were the rule of the day, as the poster shows the gentleman in the bath appearing to be fully clothed!

There hardly seemed to be any disease that spring water would not cure, and wherever there was a spring, a resort was bound to be started. An excellent example of these spas was Piedmont Springs, located near Navasota, Texas. The area was the source of three sulfur springs: the water from the first, called White Spring, being drunk for internal ailments; the second being used for immersion; and the third, called Black Spring (because of the color of the water), was used mostly for soaking the feet.

One visitor claimed that the “curative powers” of the waters were so great that “a gallon before sunrise caused him to speak the truth all day long, recollect forgotten things, and guess right every time.” He also alleged that “after a few quarts, scolding women became models of meekness and docility.”

“... after a few quarts, scolding women became models of meekness and docility.”

“Taking the water cure,” was characterized by an increasingly important social component as the century progressed. On the eve of the Civil War, Leon de Cannon built the four story, 100 room Piedmont Inn at the springs. It had a ballroom 100 feet long where

a string orchestra performed, a spacious dining room, a billiard hall, a race track, a huge bathing pool, a barber shop, guesthouses, and bathhouses. Supposedly Sam Houston "danced the minuet" at the Piedmont, along with numerous distinguished guests from Texas and surrounding states. The "Sarasota Springs" of antebellum Texas went bankrupt after the Civil War, but the history of Pied-

The life expectancy in 1840 was approximately 39 years, and the mortality rate in large cities was more than three times higher than today's.

mont Springs illustrates the health consciousness of early Texans.

In the late nineteenth century with the coming of the railroads, Texas (along with Colorado and California) became one of the West's "great meccas for invalids." In central Texas, towns such as San Antonio, Boerne, Austin, Fredericksburg, Uvalde, and Lampassas, along with mineral springs like Sulphur Springs, Luling Springs, and Sutherland Springs, became prominent as health resorts. Relative to the overall ill-health of the North American population, especially in the early nineteenth century, Texas was considered to be a haven for health seekers.

The illnesses and epidemics that were part of the day-to-day lives of nineteenth-century Texans should be placed in perspective. One scholar has estimated that twenty to twenty-five percent of the people immigrating west in this period were "lungers, consumptives, phthisics, coughers, hackers, invalids, valetudinarians, sanitorians, asthmatics, white plagues, and even pukers." Conditions in the east were so bad that many people wanted desperately to escape them. The life expectancy in 1840 was approximately 39 years, and the mortality rate in large cities (about 30 deaths per year per thousand) was more than three times higher than today's.

Numerous Texans emigrated from the Mississippi Valley, a place plagued with yellow fever, small pox, cholera, pneumonia, rheumatism, colds, consumption, and of

course, malaria. Many a westerner remembered his childhood in the Mississippi Valley as a "lantern-jawed shaker" with the ague or malaria. In this period, Missourians were actually nicknamed "pukes" because they frequently "vomited forth" from the state in such miserable health.

Perhaps understanding the concerns of the day, native Missourian and "puker," Stephen F. Austin described the Texas climate to prospective immigrants as "decidedly superior in point of health and salubrity to any portion of North America in the same parallel." Apparently, health was second only to land in attracting immigrants.

Many of the Republic's founding fathers and heroes came to Texas for health reasons. In 1817, David G. Burnet left Louisiana with a "graveyard cough" in the terminal stage of pulmonary consumption, and was restored to health after living with the Comanches on the upper Colorado River. He went on to play a prominent role in the history of Texas, dying in 1870. A "near fatal seige of yellow fever" drove Ben Milam to Texas and a hero's death at the Alamo. Mirabeau B. Lamar, the second President of the Republic, came to Texas from Georgia suffering from tuberculosis, which six months earlier had killed his wife. Anson Jones, the last President of the Republic, was gravely ill with malaria when he entered Texas in 1834.

Immigrant guides and other assorted promotional materials consistently described

The consumptive editor of the *New Orleans Picayune* said of Texas, "if a man wants to die there he must go somewhere else."

the healthfulness of Texas in laudatory terms. In 1839, John M. Niles wrote: "In no part of the earth have the first settlers of a new country suffered less from diseases of any kind." While making an exception of the coastal area, William Kennedy noted in his book, *Texas: The Rise, Progress, and Prospects of the Republic of Texas*, that: "No part of the globe is more friendly to the regular action of the human frame. Pulmonary con-

sumption, so destructive in England and the northern states in the American Union, is almost unknown in Texas."

During the same period, Arthur Ikin wrote in an immigrant guide, that "throughout nearly all the country west of the Colorado, the rosy cheeks of the children are alone convincing evidence of the absence of miasma." In the 1850's, D.E. Braman in his *Information About Texas*, emphatically stated that Texas "is infected with none of the pestiferous miasmatic vapors which arise, in many otherwise desirable, localities. The climate is healthy, and restorative to shattered constitutions."

The claims concerning the healthfulness of the Texas climate reflected a certain amount of exaggeration, if not outright falsehood, and often completely ignored the ill health associated with the coastal areas. Newspapers were especially reluctant to mention the extent of illness in their city unless an epidemic was full-blown. In 1862, the editor of *The Semi-Weekly News* in San Antonio, was perhaps "whistling in the dark" when he noted: "We are beyond the reach of small pox, yellow fever and abolitionists."

Ultimately these health claims became part of a Texas mythology which satirically suggested that it was almost impossible to die in the Lone Star State. The consumptive editor of the *New Orleans Picayune*, George Wilkins Kendall, was so impressed with the healthfulness of the Texas climate that he quoted an old saying of the country: "If a man wants to die there he must go somewhere else."

Finally, there is also the story of some immigrants entering Texas from the Red River area. Supposedly they met an old man whose "features were scarred and shrunken by the hand of time. He was rushing with all speed to the boundary of the state, and when asked the reason for such haste, he neither stopped nor paused, but murmured in passing: 'I am tired of life and of the monotony of the ages. I am weary of the slow steps of time and the dragging march of the centuries, and I am hurrying out of Texas that I may find some place where people can die'."

Ever “gone a milking,” learned how “arrow-heads” were made, watched a “live” snake program, or seen a bullet being molded? Once again, the Star of the Republic Museum and the Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historical Park invite area youngsters to spend a very special Saturday at Pioneer Day Camp. The children will step back into time and discover the way people lived before electricity, cars, and television.

Mr. Jay Wilson and Mr. Kenneth Welch, “decked out” in buckskins and pioneer clothing, will enthrall children with demonstrations of black powder shooting, molding bullets, and various aspects of pioneer life. Ever started a fire without a match? Mr. Jay “Three Bite” Wilson will show you three different ways: friction sticks, flint and steel, or magnifying glass. Mr. Welch will examine Indian lore, including how arrowheads are made. Children will discover the world of snakes, with unique programs by Mr. Don Plitt and Mr. Jeff Camper which will include numerous live snakes, and the kids will also take an ecology field trip along the Brazos River with Mr. Dennis Jones. Mr. Tom Sears from the Houston Story Tellers Guild, will captivate everyone with a wonderful selection of Texas “tall tales.” Ms. Nancy Goodwin will demonstrate traditional pottery making with a “potter’s wheel.” At the Anson Jones home, Park interpreter Ms. Judy Carnes will demonstrate pioneer cooking over an open fire. As an extra treat, every child will have a chance to *milk a goat*.

In addition to these programs, throughout the day, the children will have the opportunity to participate in many pioneer activities, including traditional games, food preparation (grinding corn and making butter), carding and spinning cotton, “marbling,” candle making, and playing with folk toys. Mrs. Eleanor Nance will teach the children to make cornhusk dolls and horses.

The full-day camp is \$20.00, which includes refreshments and numerous take-home crafts. The children will provide their own lunch. Camp dates are as follows: June 10, (6-8 yr. old.); June 24 (9-11 yr. old.); July 8 (6-8 yr. old.); July 22, (9-11 yr. old). The day’s activities will begin at 9:00 a.m. and conclude at 4:00 p.m. Space is limited, so please contact the Museum immediately to register your child. For further information, contact Ellen N. Murry at (409-878-2461).

A portion of the Museum’s general operating funds has been provided through a grant from the Institute of Museum Services.

Front page illustration: *Scenes of Dr. Ernest Kapp’s water cure facilities at Sisterdale*. Herman Lungkwitz, ca. 1855. Private Collection.

The Star of the Republic Museum has recently received an “Outstanding Exhibits” award from the Texas Historical Commission for the Museum’s 1987-88 exhibit, “As A Twig is Bent: Childhood in Texas, 1800-1900.” The purpose of these awards is to recognize museums that have contributed to the preservation, understanding, and appreciation of state or community history in Texas. The Star of the Republic Museum has won this award for four of the past five years.

The Museum has also just received two Mitchell A. Wilder Publication Design Awards which were presented at the Texas Association of Museums Annual Conference in Beaumont, on April 12-15. A Merit Award was given to the Museum’s quarterly publication, *Notes*, and a Silver Award was given to the Museum for its new video orientation program, *The Republic of Texas*, narrated by Bill Moyers. The awards are named in honor of Mitchell A. Wilder (1913-1979), an early advocate of excellence in museum publications, and the founding director of the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth. By offering awards to recognize achievement in graphic and video design, the Texas Association of Museums encourages museums to strive for quality publications.

EXHIBIT SCHEDULE

“Wond’rous Cures Performed”
March 5 through October 1989

MUSEUM SCHEDULE

Open Daily
10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m

Administered by Blinn College, Brenham, Texas

Director Houston McGaugh
Curator of Exhibits Sherry B. Humphreys
Curator of Education Ellen N. Murry
Administrative Assistant Suzette S. Jensen
Editor. Ellen N. Murry

*Subscriptions are sent upon request.
Articles may be reprinted with permission.*



It is time again for us to update our mailing list.

Would you like to continue receiving our quarterly publication *Notes*?

YES_____ NO_____

We would also like your assistance in completing this questionnaire. We want to better understand our visitors, so that we can provide the most interesting and effective programs and exhibits possible.

1. Resident County: _____
2. Did you visit the Museum this year? (June '88-May '89) Yes_____No_____
If Yes, How many times?_____ If No, When last did you visit the Museum?_____
3. Did you come alone_____ or with a group: Family Group_____ Tour Group_____ Other_____
4. How did you travel to the Museum? (Check all roads driven en route)
US 290_____ Highway 6_____ FM 1155_____ FM 105_____
5. Do you have any comments or suggestions that would enable us to better serve our visitors?

We have several projects in mind for the future, and would appreciate your comments.

6. Our new exhibit for next year will concern the early Texas landscape prior to settlement, and how it changed during the years after settlement. We would like to offer several guided field trips to observe some preserved natural areas such as the Big Thicket, the San Marcos River, the Aransas Wildlife area, and a native prairie to see some of the wildlife and natural environments that were once common throughout Texas. Would you be interested in attending such field trips for a modest fee? Yes_____ No_____
If yes, please check the trips that you are interested in.

Big Thicket_____ Native Prairie_____ San Marcos River_____ Aransas Wildlife Refuge_____
7. We receive numerous compliments each year on the *Notes*, and we are considering compiling issues from the past several years into a book. This book would be updated with additional information on each topic, and include numerous images relating to social life during the Texas Republic. If we published such a book, would you be likely to purchase a copy? (Price range \$9.00-15.00) Yes_____ No_____

In order to supplement our budget, most of which comes from state appropriations, we would like your comments about the following possibilities.

8. To help us offset the increasing costs of printing and postage, would you be willing to pay a subscription fee to continue receiving the *Notes*, and support the Museum? Yes_____No_____

If yes, at what rate would you subscribe? \$5_____ \$10_____ (Indicate \$ amount) More_____ Less_____
9. The Museum currently has a support organization, the Washington-on-the-Brazos State Park Association, which assists both the Park and the Star of the Republic Museum. The Association also sponsors and funds the annual Texas Independence Day Celebration, and is currently raising funds for several important Park and Museum projects. If you are not currently a member, would you like to receive membership information about the Park Association? Yes_____No_____

Thank you for your assistance and time in completing this questionnaire.

P. O. Box 317 Washington, Texas 77880

Notes

Star of the Republic Museum

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 6
Washington, Texas
77880

If you wish to continue receiving the Star of the Republic Museum's "Notes," and keep informed of upcoming events at the Museum, please tear off this sheet, fold, stamp, and return with our address facing on the outside.

Place
Stamp
Here

Star of the Republic Museum
P.O. Box 317
Washington, Texas 77880