

THE ADVENT OF CHRISTMAS SEALS

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It is safe to say that this year we all look forward to a holiday season where, with good fortune, the development of COVID vaccines, and appropriate safety precautions, we can gather with family and friends to once again share our treasured holiday traditions. For most of us, were we to require health care, we would hopefully have some type of health insurance to ease the cost burden. While health care cost and access inequities have long existed, health insurance has helped relieve this burden for many. However, if we were to travel back to the Christmases of the early twentieth century, we would find a country in transition where health insurance was almost completely non-existent and the burden of disease treatment weighed heavily on all but the wealthy. Today, we can easily look back and romanticize a time of families snuggled around the fireplace, snow falling, and the sound of jingle bells as visitors arrived in horse drawn sleighs, or one of the early automobiles.

However, this was not the reality for many as the 20th century dawned. There were relatively few families with the financial means or insurance to cover illness and one of the most feared diseases was tuberculosis (TB). This is understandable when we consider the high death rate (1 in 7), the stigma, the necessary long-term recovery for those fortunate enough to recover, and the tremendous financial and interpersonal toll on families. As the 19th century waned, tuberculosis was an omnipresent and feared disease. While no respecter of class or finances, it did take its toll on those down on their luck, living in crowded conditions, and suffering from poor nutrition. Caused by the mycobacterium tuberculosis, discovered by Dr. Robert Koch in 1882, substantive “curative” treatment was still nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of a century away.

Although the development of tuberculosis sanatoria first started in the mid-19th century it was in the early 20th century that it took off at lightning speed in the United States. The cornerstones of treatment at that time consisted of long-term rest, fresh air, and good quality nutrition. Unless a family had considerable means the cost was prohibitive. State hospital sanatoria were developed to care for those unable to afford this care. The need for sanatoria was always greater than the supply. As the demand and cost increased, one sanitorium in Denmark found a unique way to help with those costs. In 1903, a postmaster in Denmark developed the first holiday seal to help children with TB. Astonishingly successful, 4 million seals were purchased by the Danish people. Well of course this caught the attention of a Red Cross worker and volunteer at a small Delaware



sanatorium about to close its doors because of a \$300 shortfall in funds. That Red Cross volunteer, a social worker named Emily Bissell, was also an experienced fund raiser and activist. Thus in 1907, holiday seals as developed by Emily Bissell and her cadre of volunteers were sold at the post office for one cent each. Wildly successful, after an initial misstep, that effort in 1907 raised 10 times the original goal and Christmas Seals became a fixture for Christmas fundraising in the United States.

The initial stamps, developed by the Red Cross, were taken over 12 years later by the National Tuberculosis Association, the predecessor to the American Lung Association. These Christmas Seals are still vital to the fund-raising efforts of the American Lung Association that now focuses on a broad array of lung diseases.

So, as we reflect on holiday giving this year, it is well to remember the groundswell that one small stamp created. We here at the museum wish Happy Holidays to everyone and we hope for a healthy and happy New Year as we celebrate the health care workers, researchers, first responders, and fund raisers who have worked so hard to bring us safely through current and past pandemics.

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University of Virginia Claude Moore Health Sciences Library

<http://exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/alav/seals/>

The American Red Cross and The First Christmas Seals



<https://www.redcross.org/about-us/news-and-events/news/Early-Christmas-Seals-Join-the-Fight-Against-Tuberculosis.html>

