

Exploring the Cemetery – Consumption

Consumption is a descriptive term for the disease tuberculosis because extreme weight loss is one of its most pronounced symptoms. An individual is consumed by the disease and wastes away. The history of the disease is as old as mankind, but the bacterium causing it, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, was unknown until 1882. Even after the cause was identified, there remained a certain stigma attached to it and a sense that it “ran” in certain families. Of course it did, but the mode was not a genetic frailty but rather a contagion. Tuberculosis is a very contagious disease.

At times the disease was called the “White Plague” because it caused severe anemia, resulting in an extraordinarily pale patient. The normal progress of the disease was exceedingly slow, but it could, at times, proceed very quickly, in which case it was called “galloping consumption.”

I have not been able to identify the cause of death for everyone in the cemetery, but I have been able to identify at least 42 deaths due to tuberculosis. The average age at time of death was quite young, about 38, as was true of tuberculosis in general. Many families lost several members.

There was no cure. Fresh air, rest and good diet were thought to be restorative, but little was effective for this long-term illness. And not all tuberculosis was pulmonary. The microorganism could be found in joints, lymphatic and spinal fluids, bone, etc.



Consider the sad case of the Ruth family. Father Jacob F. Ruth died of tuberculosis on Mar. 25, 1907, at age 60. Jacob was one of the cadre of Rothsville boys who enlisted in the 5th Pa. Heavy Artillery in 1864, as described in a previous article. He was married first to Catharine Buch, whom he divorced, and then to Caroline Frymyer.

By the time Jacob died, two of their sons had already succumbed to tuberculosis: Jacob Jr., age 23, in November 1899 and Samuel, age 23, in April 1903. In November 1907, shortly after the father’s death, another son, Abraham, died of the same illness at age 20. And the death toll increased with son Leroy, age 27, in 1918, daughter Mamie (Ruth) Boudier, age 38, in 1923, and son John’s wife, Anna Geyer Ruth, age 49 in 1920 – all of tuberculosis.

In 1946 the antibiotic streptomycin was introduced and was found to be effective against the disease. Accordingly, the last death from tuberculosis that I can identify is Leroy Sweigart in 1952.

It is scary to consider that we may be entering another age of vulnerability to tuberculosis due to increasing antibiotic resistance. *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* is a fastidious organism that is slow to multiply and difficult to grow in the laboratory, but with many defenses against our usual therapies.

