

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

A Chatham Country Doctor

by Spencer Grey

Today we are accustomed to having many doctors, from general practitioners to specialists, available to us not only in Chatham but throughout Cape Cod, and we fortunately have easy access to transportation to visit them when needed. But before about 1950 there rarely was more than one physician serving an entire town and medical services at the Cape Cod Hospital were very limited.

Between 1871 and 1910, the only doctor in Chatham was Benjamin D. Gifford, whose office was in his house on Cross Street on the corner of Shattuck Place. But at a time when transportation was limited to a horse and buggy for the fortunate and walking for others, the doctor had to go to the patient, which Dr. Gifford did in his one horse buggy. He knew, therefore, which ones were really ill and which were simply hypochondriacs. So many people at the time suffered from debilitating conditions, making them unable to do much except sit at home and dwell on their poor health that they often complained to anyone who would listen. Although a very kindhearted person, Dr. Gifford understood that sympathy would only feed their hypochondria, so he often had to be abrupt. When one such woman called him saying that she knew she had a tumor growing in her mid-section, he said, "Tumor nothing! That's fat." Another woman claimed to be so ill that she had to stay in bed, but the doctor could find nothing wrong with her. To check on his assumption he had one of her family keep an eye on her during the night. After the house was quiet and she was sure everyone was asleep, she got out of bed, went to the pantry, climbed up on a step ladder and rummaged around in the cupboards to eat the bread, pies, and cakes that she found there.

Snow and ice during the winter made some of the roads impassable, especially those out to the other side of Ryder's Cove. Under those conditions he often would take his horse as far as possible, leave it at a friend's house and get someone to row him through wind and snow to the other side. If the weather was especially severe, he would have to spend the night, and when he got back the next morning, his horse, having become tired of waiting in the cold, often would have walked home, leaving Dr. Gifford to do likewise.

Winter conditions often resulted in shipwrecks off of Old Harbor. When there was word of a wreck, the doctor would walk along the shore waiting for the lifesaving crew to bring the frozen and battered sailors to shore where he could treat them. One of the homes along the shore would be turned into a hospital where the cold and injured men lay around the floors being tended by neighbors while the doctor thawed frozen feet and set broken bones. As soon as possible, these injured men would be taken to Boston by train for more complete treatment.

Because Dr. Gifford practiced during many years when there was no pharmacist in town, he often mixed his own medicines. If a bottle of medicine needed to be refilled, the patient would bring it to the doctor so that he could smell it or its stopper and determine what it was. Some people were accustomed to having their medicine made in a particular color, and he would be asked to make it pink, blue, or whatever color the medicine had always been. One captain's wife would not take her spring tonic unless it was in a pink bottle, or it would not be the same as she always had. Once Dr. Gifford forgot and sent the medicine in a clear bottle, but back it came with instructions to put it in the pink bottle. In many cases the doctor had to improvise as best he could. If someone had a broken forearm, he often went to Perry's blacksmith shop where he and Mr. Perry would design a splint of perforated tin that was curved and soldered into a right angle so it would fit the angle of the elbow correctly.

In the case of a broken hip, he set up a counter pull by attaching a cord to a flat iron that hung over the footboard of the patient's bed so as to prevent the leg from healing too short.

People seeing him going by in his carriage often would want to know who was sick. Sometimes when he was driving through West Chatham, one particular woman would come running out to make him stop so that she could ask who was sick. If he told her he did not know for sure, she would say, "Well, I'll be out here when you come back to see how they are." Because he usually was in a hurry to get to the patient, he was known for driving his buggy so fast going around corners that he was on two wheels with the sand flying out behind him. His first rig was a chaise drawn by an old bob-tailed horse named Caustis, but that soon was followed by a four-wheeled carriage.

In spite of being endlessly busy keeping up with his practice, he found time to participate in the life of the town. His first year in Chatham he founded the town newspaper, *The Monitor*, but he shortly turned it over to Levi Atwood. He also was active in singing schools, dramatics, in the debating societies and in the ongoing events at the Lyceum, as well as actively supporting the building of the town hall in 1877 and working to get train service to Chatham in 1887. At town meeting in 1885 he made a motion to allow druggists to sell intoxicating beverages for medicinal, mechanical, and chemical purposes. The vote was 18 no and 22 yes. If all that was not enough, when he retired from practice in about 1911, he became a representative to the state legislature.

Dr. Gifford's daughter Minnie, who became a dentist, wrote an informal biography of him that she concluded saying, "...his life is a reflection of that age when the village doctor was a man among men: human, full of frailties but inherently a friend to man, to suffering manhood, and full of sacrifices that no one now can fathom."



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