

# St. Michael Historian

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## Smallpox, 1883: St. Michael's Worst Viral Outbreak

By Bob Zahler

Since the publication of *Faith, Family, and Farming* in 2009 when the topic of the 1883 Smallpox outbreak was first covered, the author has discovered new details about the event. Specifically, he has come across the Tenth Report of the Minnesota State Board of Health that was published in 1884 and which covered the previous 18 months. The smallpox outbreak in St. Michael actually took up a fair number of pages in that report. What follows is a version of the events of 1883 that has been updated to reflect this new information.

Before going into the smallpox outbreak, it should be noted that only a few months prior, the community was struck with another disease: diphtheria. Both diphtheria (bacterial) and smallpox (viral) were highly contagious and deadly, and both struck the Village of St. Michael and surrounding Frankfort Township within an eight-month period between November 1882 and June 1883. Seventeen deaths occurred before it was over and many of the survivors were bed-ridden for weeks. Of the seventeen who died, fifteen were under the age of 21. The community, which was already somewhat detached from the rest of the county because of its self-imposed, German seclusion, became totally isolated, at least temporarily, as a result of the necessary precautions taken by neighboring communities to stay away from St. Michael.

The first person who died of diphtheria was Florentine Bodems, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Edward and Christina Bodems, who died on November 10, 1882. The Bodems lost another teenager just a month later. A relative of theirs, John Bodems, who lived on the west side of Pelican Lake, lost six children during November and December as well. Also losing children in December of 1882 were Quirin and Stephanie Gerber who lost an eight-year-old child and a teenager of sixteen. No deaths occurred during the months of January or February of 1883, but then March came along and several more families were victimized. Christian and Mary Eull lost an eleven-year-old child; Anton and Johanna Schumacher a ten-year-old; and Michael and Emily Schumacher lost three children all between the ages of one and nine. In Frankfort Township alone, nine children and teens died before the epidemic ended. Diphtheria re-emerged periodically after 1883, but this five-month outbreak was especially severe.

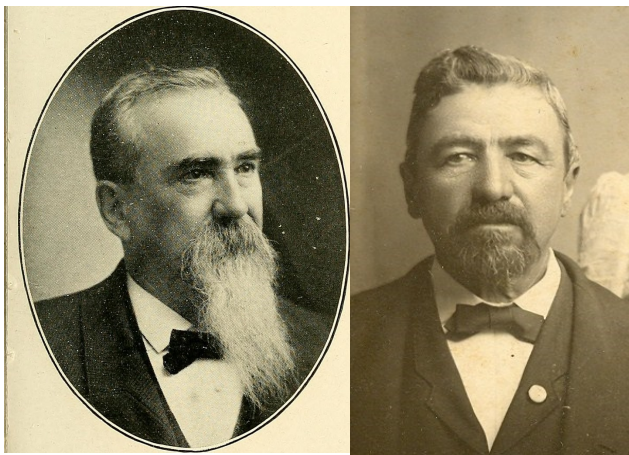
While diphtheria mostly affected children, smallpox struck people of any age; and just six weeks after the community buried the last diphtheria victim, smallpox descended on St. Michael. While vaccinations against smallpox started as early as 1800 in the United States, in rural areas where vaccinations were less available and some were even suspicious of them, smallpox was still virulent. About thirty percent of those who became infected with the virus were likely to die, and many who survived were left with physical scars from the pock marks for the rest of their lives. The mortality rate for the St. Michael area was about fourteen percent of those who became infected. Three



*Above: store and home of Frank T. Aydt where Mary Vetsch died of smallpox on May 11, 1883. By the time of this photo, it was the store of Aydt's son-in-law, Andrew Brixius. Now it is Ditto's Bar.*

things likely helped keep the rate down: the distance between farms, the fact that many of the adults had been immunized as children in Germany, and the eventual willingness among most to get vaccinated once the outbreak began.

Most people at the time presumed that a traveling farm implement dealer picked up the smallpox virus during a stop in an infested store in Minneapolis, and then, asymptotically, brought it to St. Michael when he stopped at Frank T. Aydt's store (now Ditto's Bar) where the first person came down with the disease. The victim was twenty-year-old Mary Vetsch, daughter of Joseph and Josephine Vetsch, who worked in Aydt's store and lived with the Aydt family above the store. On May 2nd, 1883 Mary came down with a cough, fever, and pains in her back. Dr. Gibbs from Monticello visited Mary at the Aydt's on May 4th, but her symptoms at the time were not alarming. Two days later Dr. Gibbs returned to find that pustules (small blisters) had appeared. Because there was no known contact with anyone with smallpox and because of the presence of a cough, Dr. Gibbs declared her ailment to be "black measles", which today would be called hemorrhagic measles. This disease would also require contact with a carrier, but measles was generally survivable with rest and fluids, and most importantly, its existence didn't cause a panic. Dr. Gibbs' diagnoses of black measles, therefore, was the more cautious approach. Dr. Gibbs also noted in his report to the State Board of Health that "I was particularly requested not to visit again on plea of poverty unless called for. I enjoined the friends (of the patient) to notify me of any change in the case and left." Frank T. Aydt was either being cheap or he just didn't trust the professional opinion of Dr. Gibbs.



**Above left: Ignatius Gutzwiller, St. Michael pioneer and in 1883 the editor of the *Delano Eagle* newspaper. Right: Frank T. Aydt pioneer merchant. The two battled over the politics of smallpox.**

The day after Dr. Gibbs' visit, Dr. Cady from Buffalo stopped in to see Mary. Dr. Cady also declared Mary's sickness to be black measles and ordered that the store be quarantined to prevent its spread, but it is doubtful that F.T. Aydt followed that order as reports indicate that many people had access to her. Dr. Cady returned four days later on May 11th with Dr. S. E. Dean who became Cady's business partner in 1881. Bringing Dr. Dean along suggests that Dr. Cady had doubts about his own original diagnosis. By this time, Mary's sickness had progressed and things were looking dire. It is unclear from the record, but either Dr. Cady or Dr. Dean was now convinced that it was smallpox, but the other doctor was still thinking it was measles. For Mary Vetsch, the exact diagnosis no longer mattered. She died upstairs of Aydt's store that evening of May 11, 1883.

When the *Delano Eagle* first reported the news of Mary's death on May 17th, they stated that Mr. Aydt adamantly denied that her death was the result of smallpox, as if the appearance of the disease would somehow be pinned on him. Unlike diphtheria, smallpox was better understood, and quarantining the victims would have been the prudent response. Perhaps because at least one doctor from Buffalo was uncertain of the diagnosis, there was enough doubt for Aydt not to sound the alarm. Whether it was doubt or fear of the reaction that would occur once word got out, it seems that Mr. Aydt hoped Mary's death would be the end of things and so nothing more was said about smallpox. To be fair to Frank Aydt, he was not alone in his dismissiveness of the disease. The events that followed indicate that many in the community were not taking things as seriously as they probably should have.

Several days after Mary's death, it was noticed that others were also becoming sick. Again, there was unusual hesitation to call a doctor. In fact, according to the State Health Board report, two of the town supervisors independently contacted Fr. Schroeder, St. Michael's priest, for his opinion on what the sickness was rather than turning to medical professionals. Despite the fact that people were getting sick within days of Mary's death, Dr. Cady was not called back to St. Michael until May 22nd to visit several families. By this time Cady was certain of the diagnosis. He publicly declared the disease to be smallpox, and he quarantined all of the affected families. On May 24th Dr. Scoboria of Elk River notified Dr. Pinault of Osseo of two cases of smallpox in the Otsego/Frankfort area. This seems to be the first that Dr. Pinault was made aware of the situation and he immediately notified the State Board of Health by telegraph. Within two days Dr. Pinault was appointed by the State Board of Health to be the Health Officer in charge of Frankfort and the Village of St. Michael.

According to the *Delano Eagle*, by May 27th there were already twenty-eight confirmed cases of smallpox in St. Michael and Frankfort Township. The spread of the disease was traced to the fact that when Mary Vetsch died, various women came to the Aydt home to prepare her body for burial without taking any precautions. At least one of these women was also housing the son of Peter Dehen who was boarding with her while he attended the Catholic school in town. The boy picked up the virus from her and brought it back to his family when Fr. Schroeder finally closed the school and sent boarders home. Complicating matters was that even after it seemed clear that the disease was smallpox, the Town Supervisors were slow to react and seek help. Dr. Scoboria, who also contacted the State Board of Health on May 24th noted, "Supervisors taking no action. Many people must have been exposed to the first case. I was confident from general aspect of things that you had not been notified." However, the very next day, the Secretary of the State Board of Health, Dr. Charles Hewitt, received a telegram from Frankfort Town Board Chairman, Stephen Schumacher that read "Twenty-five cases small pox in Frankfort; come at once to St. Michaels!" But Hewitt was already informed.

Within two days both Dr. Hewitt along with Dr. Leonard, another member of the State Board of Health from Minneapolis, made a personal visit to St. Michael to assist organizing the response to the outbreak. On May 29th Dr. Leonard recorded the following, "Just returned from Elk River. Went over towns of Otsego, Dayton and St. Michaels with Dr. Scoboria. The matter is bad enough and will probably be worse; twenty cases now, three deaths in one family where disease first appeared." And then after summarizing the known progression since the first case he added "All roads between St. Michaels and Mississippi River blocked up. The priest too indifferent about vaccination; said he should oppose it, but leave the people free to do as they thought best. Shall send vaccine to Dr. Scoboria to-night; think he will succeed in vaccinating many."

By the end of May five people had died including Josephine Vetsch, Mary Vetsch's mother, and her brother John, who was just eighteen years old. Also, two children of Adam and Theckla Neiss, a two-year-old child and a nine-month-old baby, died within six days of each other. Business and social activities in the Village of St. Michael suddenly came to a halt. There was no mail delivery in or out of town; trains did not stop at the station, the Catholic school was closed along with the saloons, and roads leading into the town were all posted to warn travelers. According to the report filed by Dr. Hewitt on or about June 1st and published in the *Delano Eagle*, the epidemic was likely to be contained, but he was disappointed in the hesitant reaction of the people of St. Michael. He stated specifically in his report that

a very large proportion of the people refuse vaccination. Even in infected families it is refused, and so a large mortality in such families is unavoidable, chiefly with children. The people quote to me the teaching of a Roman Catholic newspaper published in Baltimore. From whatever cause, this opposition to vaccination is our greatest obstacle. We are using every means to overcome it, but we will be too late to prevent many an innocent child's death, I fear. Another difficulty was the wide diffusion in Frankfort of the poison before the disease was recognized and quarantine established on the 22nd. Again, the Sisters' school in St. Michaels was closed on the 23rd after all the children had been more or less exposed. Unvaccinated, those living outside the town went to relatives or home. They have already caused at least two new centers of infection, which are, however, under our control .

Printed immediately following the doctor's report, the editor of the *Eagle*, Ignatius Gutzwiller Jr., himself a Catholic and St. Michael founder, went to great lengths to explain that the articles warning against vaccinations referred to by Dr. Hewitt were not espousing church doctrine, but rather were simply expressing the views of a few doctors who were concerned about people receiving tainted vaccines. The German Catholic newspaper, the *Baltimore Volks Zeitung*, carried a lot of weight in the community. Gutzwiller, trying to walk a fine line between protecting the health of the community and offending religious sensitivities, went on to mention that while risks were involved with vaccinations, they were still the best known means of prevention.



**Above: Fr. John Schroeder, St. Michael's pastor. Parishioners often sought advice from their priest on all matters, but he may have let them down during the smallpox outbreak of 1883.**

While the editor of the *Delano Eagle* tip-toed around religious sentiment regarding vaccinations, he took a more direct tone with Frank T. Aydt and his delay at admitting to the existence of smallpox in his home. An unnamed “special correspondent” wrote in the paper that “there is considerable feeling that the disease was unnecessarily allowed to spread, and much of the blame will necessarily rest with the party or parties, whatever their motive may have been, who tried to conceal and even denied it after they were positively informed of the nature of the disease.” To the extent that this was a serious accusation or just a way to increase readership with sensationalism is not known.

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Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

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Aydt responded with his own letter to the editor stating “I will give your correspondent from here one hundred dollars if he can prove what he says against me and about smallpox...either tell the truth or shut up!” Aydt probably should have done more, but his hesitant response seemed to mirror that of the community’s. What is clear is that besides misery for many families, business for Aydt and others in the village came to a halt.

As outbreaks of smallpox extended into Otsego and Rockford, the County Board of Commissioners met in a special session on May 30th to pass resolutions relating to the prevention of the spread of the disease. Chief among the resolutions were the closing of the court house in Buffalo for twenty days beginning June 1st and an order for people living in the infected districts to not visit the court house until July. The commissioners were not messing around. Closing the court house was no small action, but carelessness in regard to smallpox could be devastating to the entire county. Dr. Hewitt of the State Board of Health also advised that no person from infected families be permitted to transport wheat to Elk River. Additionally, he instructed that the Health Officer ensure that all materials used for grain handling be disinfected and that any person going to market “be in their persons and clothing entirely free from infection.”

In all, 17 families in St. Michael were affected, 59 individual cases. Joseph Vetsch suffered the most losing his wife and three children to smallpox. Stephanie Gerber also died. She was the wife of Quirin Gerber who had lost his wife to smallpox and two children four months earlier to diphtheria. Finally, the last victim of smallpox was fourteen-year-old Anthony Schumacher, son of Peter and Theresa Schumacher, who died on June 19th. The final death toll due to smallpox in Frankfort and St. Michael was eight. Had most people not changed their minds about vaccinations, it could have been much worse.

For nearly a month the roads to the town were barricaded. As one person was quoted saying in the newspaper, “We were for a few weeks like in jail, and it was hard to be isolated, cut off from neighbors and the outside world; but we had to submit.” The paper also reported that F.T. Aydt’s entire home and store was white-washed and fumigated and his entire stock aired out. No doubt F.T. was not taking any chances at losing his business altogether. The correspondent to the paper added, “About two weeks more and we expect to look upon the smallpox affair in this town as a thing of the past.” His statement was either pioneer optimism or simply an attempt to let the rest of the county know that St. Michael was once again open for business. The quarantine was finally lifted July 19.

## Upcoming Events

All public events are on hold until further notice due to the current pandemic and the health concern of our members.

Please stay safe!