

THE WATER CURE IN OHIO

Water Cures, or hydropathic institutions, dotted the Ohio landscape in the late 1840s and 1850s. Popular throughout the mid and eastern United States, these institutions offered an alternative to the usual practice of medicine, promising adherents a healthier life through the use of simple, natural means (free of botanical or chemical medicines). This road to health was based on the use of pure, soft, mineral-free water in various forms of baths and wet wraps, and sometimes the use of water to cleanse the body internally. Treatment usually included other "natural" treatments as well, such as exercise, fresh air, and a vegetarian diet rich in fruits and grains. Women and men were often encouraged to wear loose fitting clothing, rather than clothing that was tight. The use of alcohol and tobacco was forbidden.

There were at least 19 water cures in Ohio. Three of them were in Cleveland (Cuyahoga Co.). Others were at Columbus (Franklin Co.), Cincinnati (Hamilton Co.), Yellow Springs (Greene Co.), Green Springs (Seneca Co.), Granville (Licking Co.), Harlem Springs (Carroll Co.), Mogador (Portage Co.), Medina (Medina Co.), Little Mountain (Lake Co.), New Lyme (Ashtabula Co.), Painesville (Lake Co.), Sugar Creek (Tuscarawas Co.), Canfield (Mahoning Co.), Dayton (Montgomery Co.), Salem (Columbiana Co.), and Berlin Hts. (Erie Co.).

The first water cures in Ohio were opened in 1846, at Mogadore, Salem, and Canfield. Cleveland followed in 1849, and the others came soon after. The only pre-requisites for location were abundant soft, pure spring water, a sylvan setting, and easy access by railroad or railroad and coach. The average cost of a stay was \$6 to \$12, including board and treatment. Each water cure had various rooms for baths, commonly a gymnasium, often a bowling alley, and sometimes a swimming pool. There was invariably a "ladies department" catering to gender related problems, and the Columbus and Granville water cures advertised themselves as exclusively for the ladies.

The water cure sanitarium held a special appeal for women. While the medical community treated gender related occurrences, such as menstruation, childbirth and menopause as unnatural occurrences to be dealt with aggressively, the water-curers treated these and other complaints of woman as natural events, the discomfort and problems of which could be dealt with effectively by exercise, diet, calmness, and baths. Further, there were always female hydropathic doctors to attend them. Hydropathic medical schools were among the few places that a woman who wanted to study medicine found acceptance.

Thomas T. Seelye opened the Cleveland water cure in 1849 on a 24 + acre parcel of land filled with clear springs and shady nooks. The main part of the building was two stories, with two wings each three stories. The baths were in the

wings. Seelye claimed that his water cure was unequaled by any such establishment in the Union. At least some of his patients agreed for one noted that "If a person could not get well in such a place, he deserved to die."

The relative of one patient in 1849 described the treatment thus: "He was given a cold bath the first thing in the morning. Then wearing a wet bandage around his chest he took a walk before breakfast. At eleven o'clock he sat down in a tub of cold water for twenty minutes. This was followed by another walk. He was rubbed by a male attendant each time. At three each afternoon he was wrapped in a wet sheet, put to bed and packed down with three blankets and four comforters, everything being covered except his face. After this he got quite warm and frequently went to sleep feeling delightful. For two weeks he was packed at four o'clock in the morning for twenty minutes and then given a bath." As was typical of all water cures, patients coming to the Cleveland water cure were instructed to bring certain items necessary to the treatment: two large wool blankets, three comforts, two coarse cotton sheets, one coarse linen sheet, six towels and pieces of cotton for bandages.

There were few illnesses that were not treated, ranging from colds, weak constitution, fever, poor circulation and gout to inflammation, fits, shock, insanity, and drunkenness. The water cure was popular for several reasons. Physicians of the day relied heavily on the debilitating use of purgatives, emetics, laxatives and bloodletting in treating illness. Since the treatments were often unsuccessful as well as harsh, many people preferred to try some other means of cure, and turned instead to a variety of alternative treatments, such as the water cure, that were gentler and often as effective.

Most of the Ohio water cures disappeared in the 1850s. This was typical of water cures throughout the country. In part it was due to the changing nature of regular medicine, which abandoned the harshest treatments and was moving closer to understanding the causes of some diseases. In another sense, however, the water cure with its soft, pure spring water was being replaced in the public's mind with a new fad - the mineral spring. In the last half of the century, mineral spas like Saratoga Springs, where horse races, gambling, and meeting the right people were as important, or more so, than health concerns, overwhelmed the public's idea of the importance of water.

For further reading, we suggest:

Jane B. Donegan, *Hydropathic Highway to Health. Women and Water-Cure in Antebellum America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986)

Harry B. Weiss and Howard B. Kemble, *The Great American Water-Cure Craze. A History of Hydropathy in the United States* (Trenton, New Jersey: The Past Times Press, 1967)