

WHY SHOULD BIRTHS AND DEATHS BE REGISTERED IN ILLINOIS?

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The basis of all knowledge is carefully observed and accurately recorded facts. If this is true in biology, chemistry, geology or astronomy, it is even more so in the two most important events in the life history of every human being, birth and death. It is indeed strange that our laws provide for records of real estate transactions, transfers of property, patents, inventions and copyrights of books; that we carefully preserve the transactions of all kinds of business, scientific and pleasure organizations, and that those interested have made the most minute records regarding animals and plants, insects and micro-organisms, and yet, in forty out of the forty-eight states that compose this nation, no provision exists for recording the birth of a new life and the appearance on earth of a new individual, while in twelve states, a human being can die and be buried, without any record of the event being made or preserved. This singular disregard for authenticated and attested records of birth and death is one of the evidences of our newness as a nation, and of our defective social organization. In the older civilizations of Europe, positive proof of personal identity, from the time of birth until death, is regarded as of the utmost importance, and is essential to participation in any of the activities of life. In Germany, for instance, the child cannot enter the public school, the gymnasium or the university, without a copy of his birth certificate, to show who he is, who are his parents and when and where he was born. If he does not follow the path of higher education, he cannot secure any employment or be apprenticed to any trade, without first showing this birth certificate. If he desires to leave home and go to another country, he cannot secure a passport to cross the frontier without establishing his identity. If he desires to marry, a copy of his birth certificate and that of his future wife

must be presented before a marriage license will be issued. If he is a candidate for any public office or civil appointment, he must produce his birth certificate as an evidence of identity. Educated Europeans look with amazement on this vast country and its rapidly growing population, which has continued to multiply, either by immigration or by natural increase, for nearly 150 years, without making, until a few years ago, any intelligent effort to record the birth and death of its citizens. The family Bible, with its carelessly kept and incomplete record, often destroyed by fire or disappearing in the course of time, has been the only record which has been made of the appearance and disappearance of millions of our people. As a result, we are practically dependent for information regarding our immediate ancestors on records which are entirely untrustworthy, or on equally doubtful family traditions, handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. This audience today, is probably as typically American as one could secure. It is probable that at least 90 per cent. of the immediate ancestry of those in this room were men and women of more than average education, and, consequently, more interested than the ordinary person, in questions of descent and heredity. Yet I question whether 5 per cent. of us could give the names, the place and date of the birth and the place and time of death of our immediate ancestors in the third generation, while probably not as many of us could give the names of the brothers and sisters of our grandfathers and grandmothers, who are only two generations removed from us. A farmer who did not keep a better record of his stock, would be regarded as a very careless breeder. Those interested in race-horses, bull terriers, angora cats or pouter pigeons, probably know a great deal more about the genealogy and ancestry of their pets than they do about that of their own children. Each of us has two parents, four grand-parents, and eight great-grand-parents. How many of us could, either from present knowledge or after any amount of careful investigation, produce positive proof of the identity of our eight immediate ancestors in the third generation or of our descent from them? How many of us today could produce positive legal evidence of our direct connection with our four grand-parents? Let us bring it even closer and make it more personal. How many persons are there at present within the sound of my voice, who could, if necessary, produce legal documentary evidence of the place and date of their own birth and of their own parentage? Those whose parents are still living could avail themselves of this evidence, but aside from this means, how many of us could produce any positive proof, that we were born at the

time and place, and of the parentage that we have always believed ourselves to be?

It is a singular thing that the American people, coming as we do from various European nationalities, all of whom have some form of birth registration, and most of whom are proud of their immediate ancestry, should have almost completely disregarded, until recently, the importance of registering births and deaths. In a few of the older New England states, this subject has long been regulated by laws. New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, and Massachusetts have had some form of registration since about 1850. Kentucky, South Carolina and Virginia had similar laws at that time, but the disorganization during and immediately following the Civil war put a stop to such efforts, and it is only in recent years that any interest on this subject has been aroused in the South. In 1880, registration of deaths was only enforced on 17 per cent. of the population of the United States, and as late as 1906, less than 48 per cent. of the population of the entire country was subject to any efforts to register deaths of human beings. In the remaining 52 per cent. no more legal or official recognition was made of the death of a human being than was made in the case of a dog, or a cat, or a horse. They died and were buried, and that was all there was to it. No record remained to show when or where they died, what was the cause of their death or where their body was deposited, except such personal records as might be made by immediate relatives.

This situation, and the lack of reliable records has frequently been discussed in medical and scientific bodies. As far back as 1848, the year following the organization of the American Medical Association, a standing committee on registration of births, deaths and marriages, reported, urging the adoption of proper laws by all of the states. In the transaction of the American Medical Association, the American Public Health Association, the Conference of State and Provincial Boards of Health, and similar organizations, will be found frequent references to this subject, yet in 1880, after thirty years of effort, deaths were recorded in only 17 per cent. of the population, in 1906 in only 48.5 per cent. and in 1912, there were still nearly 40 per cent. of the population without any registration of deaths, while today, forty out of forty-eight states make no record of births.

In 1906, at the annual Conference on Legislation of the American Medical Association, a committee was appointed to draft a model bill for introduction into state legislatures. This committee reported in December of 1907, presenting the draft of a bill suitable for adoption by individual states pro-

viding for the registration of births and deaths, including the uniform death certificate, and introducing the international nomenclature of diseases. This bill has since been endorsed by the American Medical Association and its Section on Preventive Medicine and Public Health by the Bureau of Census of the United States Government, by the American Public Health Association, the American Statistical Association, the American Association for the Study and Prevention of Infant Mortality, the National Conservation Congress, the American Federation of Labor, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the Commission on Uniform Laws of the American Bar Association, and a large number of other organizations interested in improving public health conditions. This bill is drafted in harmony with the experience of public health officers, statisticians, sanitarians, lawyers, judges, administrators and all others whose views and co-operation could be secured. Since it was drafted in 1906, the registration area for deaths has increased from 40 per cent. to 63.1 per cent.

So much for the history for this movement. Let us now consider briefly, some practical reasons why every citizen should be interested in securing adequate birth and death registration for Illinois. On account of the general interest in this subject on the part of physicians, and because birth and death certificates are necessarily signed by them, the public has assumed that this is a question which is of interest to physicians alone. When the public, and especially the members of the state legislatures see physicians, both individually and as representatives of medical organizations, appear before legislative committees in different states, year after year, they naturally assume that birth and death registration is a subject in which physicians have some selfish, personal interest, else they would not devote so much time and effort to endeavoring to secure laws on this subject. Yet, the fact is, that with the exception of their interest as citizens, physicians have probably less interest in endeavoring to secure laws on this subject than almost any other class of citizens. It is no special advantage to physicians, as a class or as individuals, to know the exact number of births and deaths, while the greater part of the labor of filling out birth and death certificates falls on the family doctor. The fact that this work is generally done without compensation, and that the general feeling among physicians and in medical organizations is against compensation for such work, only makes the situation all the more striking.

Why have physicians and medical organizations interested themselves in securing the registration of births and deaths, and what reasons are there, aside from sentimental

ones, why the state should provide the necessary machinery for registering these events? The reason why the physician is interested, is because birth and death registration is, as it has aptly been styled, "the book-keeping of humanity." It is only by carefully recording all births, by observing the number and percentage of births and deaths over a large area with a large population for a long period of time, that any accurate figures can be secured regarding the average birth or death rate per 1,000 or per 10,000 of population, the relative birth and death rate in different localities, races and periods of time, the relative death rate in different periods of life, the average duration of life, and what insurance men call the "expectation of life", the relative proportion of deaths occurring from different causes and the relative frequency of disease. In short, the only way by which any accurate figures can be secured, on which can be based any statements regarding vital facts, is the systematic registration of births and deaths.

It is, accordingly, only in a state or a community in which births and deaths are carefully observed and recorded, and in which the recording system and the nomenclature used are uniform with those of other states and countries that the community can learn whether it is gaining or losing in population, whether the birth rate is increasing or decreasing, whether the death rate, either as a whole, or from some single cause, is increasing or not, whether the efforts to improve sanitary conditions are successful or not, and what is the relative value of different methods. Just as a business man who kept no books would be unable to determine his financial condition, or whether he was making or losing money, so the health officer who is without carefully recorded vital statistics is equally at a loss. General impressions are notoriously untrustworthy. A community may believe that it is unusually healthy, yet a careful record of deaths may show that the death rate is fifty, seventy-five or even one hundred per cent. in excess of the normal, and this from thoroughly preventable causes. Dr. W. S. Rankin, Secretary of the North Carolina State Board of Health, says: "Applied vital statistics is the most essential and powerful remedy for the improvement of the health or social organizations for bringing about sanitary reforms, for preventing diseases, for postponing death, and for adding years to the duration of the average life that we possess." Just as accurate book-keeping with carefully drawn balance sheets and an exhaustive analysis of expenses will enable the merchant to save money, so carefully kept records of mortality will produce longer life. Dr. Rankin illustrates

this by giving an instance of a city of 20,000 people in North Carolina. On his arrival in the city, he called up five representative citizens on the telephone, and asked them their opinions as to the health of their city. One was a college president, one was a city official, one a practicing physician, one was a banker and the other a leading merchant. All unhesitatingly answered that the health of the city was good. They were then asked, "How many people do you think died in your city last year?" Their guesses ran all the way from 60 to 300 deaths a year. As a matter of fact, there were 508 deaths, or nearly as many as all their estimates put together. These five representative citizens had no knowledge of the number of deaths that were occurring in their city, and consequently, had no idea how many of these deaths were preventable, or whether the death rate was increasing or decreasing.

But what would be the advantage of knowing all of these facts regarding the death rate and the occurrence of deaths, if it were only to satisfy curiosity, or to furnish scientific data on the subject? Very little, if no other end could be served. And this is the reason why laymen and members of legislatures have, until recent years, taken but little interest in this subject. What is the benefit to the community of knowing how many deaths resulted from malaria, or typhoid fever, in a given area in a given time, if it is not possible to use this knowledge for the prevention of disease, and the reduction of the death rate? In previous generations, when the causes of these diseases were unknown and there was no way of preventing them, mortality reports had only a statistical value. But health is today no longer an accident, and disease and death are to a very large extent, controllable. The advance in scientific knowledge in the last forty years, has placed in the hands of the medical profession, positive means for the prevention of many of the diseases which in past generations inflicted the heaviest loss upon humanity. There is no longer any excuse for any community suffering from typhoid and typhus fever, malaria, yellow fever, bubonic plague, Asiatic cholera, syphilis, gonorrhoea, hookworm, diphtheria, and tuberculosis. These diseases are all solved problems from the scientific point of view. The specific cause and the life history of the organism, the means of transmission and the methods of prevention of these diseases are known. Their prevention only requires the practical application of well known and demonstrated facts. The problems presented by these diseases are not scientific at all, but purely sociological. Typhoid fever is no longer regarded as due to a visitation of God, or to a judgment from Heaven. It is due to

dirty water, dirty milk or flies. Malaria and yellow fever are not "pestilences which walk in darkness." They are, on the contrary, due entirely to the presence of a particular variety of mosquito which bites the person suffering from the disease, and then, by biting a well person, conveys the disease to him. Yellow fever and malaria can, therefore, be absolutely prevented, either by destroying the breeding places of the mosquito, or by screening all patients suffering from these diseases. Asiatic cholera is due to polluted food or water. Bubonic plague is transmitted by rats and fleas. Rocky Mountain fever is carried by the tick. Typhus fever, known in past ages as ship fever, jail fever, prison fever, camp fever and famine fever, is now known to be carried by the louse. We are just beginning to realize the cold, practical truth of Louis Pasteur's statement, now nearly half a century old, "It is within the power of man to cause all contagious diseases to disappear from the earth." Public health is no longer a question of accident, it is purely a question of money. A health department with an appropriation of forty cents per capita per year, can save so many lives. A health department with an appropriation of \$2.00 per capita per year, can save many more. We can save these lives if we are willing to pay the price. Our cities and states can reduce their death rate if they are willing to spend enough money. The number of deaths which occur in any community is, within certain limits, entirely within the control of the people of that community.

As a result, the death rate, and especially the infantile death rate, becomes an index not only of the sanitary condition, but also of the intelligence and public spirit of the community. It is the record by which the modern public health officer demonstrates his fitness, and shows the results which he has secured. If these facts were only known and appreciated by the public, the annual report of the local health department giving the death rate for the year, would be looked forward to far more eagerly and scrutinized much more s archingly than the tax list or the reports of real estate sales.

Carefully kept records of births and deaths are, therefore, an absolute necessity for modern public health work. For the good of the community, they should be demanded by every citizen, since they offer the only standard by which the condition of public health in the community can be determined, or the effectiveness of the public health organization can be measured.

But while the public health value of vital statistics is probably its most important function, there are other results

almost as valuable, which comes from a careful recording of births and deaths. To the lawyer, to the parent and to the man of property, they are of the utmost importance. It is difficult to understand why the legal profession of the United States has for years permitted such disgraceful conditions regarding birth registration, when one considers that on the proper registration of births depend the solution of questions of identity, parentage, legitimacy, descent, inheritance of property and relationship. In this connection, a number of interesting instances have been reported. Dr. J. N. Hurty the efficient Secretary of the Indiana State Board of Health, tells of a farmer's daughter, whose father, dying, left his property in trust in the hands of his brother, her uncle, to be turned over to the daughter when she became of age. When her eighteenth birthday arrived, she demanded the property, and was informed by her uncle that she was mistaken regarding her age and she could not gain possession of her father's estate for two years more. She had no record of her birth, both her father and mother were dead, and there seemed no way of establishing her age by evidence. Finally a neighboring farmer remembered that a calf had been born upon his farm the same week that the girl was born. He produced his stock record showing the date of the birth of the calf, and made affidavit that the girl was born at the same time, and by the record of the calf's birth the age of the girl was legally established.

Another occurrence illustrates the importance of proper birth registration. A young German came to this country some fifty years ago. Landing in New York, he remained there for a couple of years and married. Later on he came west, with his wife and baby. The child grew to manhood, and both father and mother died. Recently a German lawyer came to this country looking for heirs to the estate of the father of the young German, the grandfather of the boy. He had no difficulty whatever in locating the young man, who was naturally overjoyed to learn that he was heir to a considerable estate. But when an effort was made to secure legal evidence of parentage, as well as legal evidence of the marriage of the father and mother, no record could be found. The young man knew by family tradition that the wealthy man who had died in Germany was his paternal grandfather but he was unable to produce any evidence that would be acceptable to the German authorities, and as a result, the entire estate was lost to him.

Registration of deaths is equally important from a legal standpoint. It frequently becomes necessary not only to

prove the actual fact of death but to prove the time and circumstances, the cause of death, the duration of the last illness, the place of interment, etc.

While death registration is progressing faster than birth registration, there are still eleven states in which no authentic record is kept of deaths. Of this number, I regret to say is our own state of Illinois. There is at present upon the statute books of the state, a law providing that all births and deaths shall be registered, but providing no adequate machinery for carrying out these provisions. The result is, that outside of Chicago and a few of the other large cities, there is today in Illinois no record of either births or deaths worth considering. How many people died from tuberculosis last year in Illinois? No body knows. How many people died from typhoid fever? How many babies died under three years during the past year? How many people died of preventable diseases? Is the death rate increasing or decreasing? No one has any idea nor can they know, until a law is passed which will provide for registration of births and deaths in accordance with the methods used in other states.

But the registration of births and deaths has more than a legal and sanitary value. Good health either of the individual or of the community, is today a business asset. That community which has the lowest death rate and the lowest proportion of illness and disability from preventable diseases, is the most desirable for residence, for the investment of capital and for the establishment of manufacturing enterprises. This fact is just beginning to be realized. Consequently, the accurate registration of births and deaths as the only means by which the death rate of a locality can be determined should be of the utmost interest and concern to all business men of a community. An illustration of this occurred a few years ago in a southern state. A land improvement company in one of the largest southern cities was putting forth special efforts to interest northern capitalists and manufacturers, looking for suitable sites. A prominent northern manufacturer was shown a tract of land which exactly suited his purposes, and was prepared to invest a large sum of money in purchasing the land and still more in erecting a large factory. After all the other conditions has been discussed, he stated that the only reason he hesitated, was fear that that particular portion of the state was unhealthful and that it would not be safe for him to take his family and make his home in the southern city. The representative of the land improvement company indignantly insisted that the locality was one of the most healthful in the country, whereupon the northern manufacturer asked for the death rate for that section of the

state for the last five years. The Secretary of the land improvement association at once wrote to the Secretary of State, asking for the desired information. The Secretary of State referred him to the Secretary of the State Board of Health, who replied: "Neither I nor anyone else can tell you how many people died in this state, or in any portion of it, either last year, or the year before, or for any period since its organization as a state. We have no registration of births and deaths. [We cannot tell whether our death rate is higher or lower than that of any other state, or whether it is increasing or decreasing. You can find out how many horses and cattle and pigs there are in the state and what diseases they suffer from and how to prevent them, but no one in the state knows anything about the births and deaths of human beings."

This situation came with such a surprising shock to the members of the land improvement association that they immediately began an agitation for a registration law, which, I am glad to say, has since been secured.

Such a law is quite as important to laboring men and women, as it is to capitalists and land owners. Labor unions have, for many years, been endeavoring to secure laws for the prevention of child labor, the desirability of which hardly needs to be discussed. But such a law, in order to be effective, must fix a definite age before which employment will not be permitted. How can such a legal age be established in an individual case? Only by the presentation of a certified copy of the birth certificate. Unless this is done, violations of the law are not only frequent, but their detection and punishment are practically impossible. The child comes to the employer with a false statement from his parents that he is over fourteen or sixteen years of age, whatever the legal limit may be. The employer accepts the statement and employs the child. If the inspector finds the child to be under age, the responsibility for the deception is divided between the parents and the employer. The honest employer never knows when he is breaking the law, while the dishonest employer can not be convicted. If the child were required to present a certified copy of a birth certificate, there would be no question about his real age, and the responsibility could be definitely fixed on the employer who knowingly violated the law, while the law-abiding employer would be protected from deception.

All of you doubtless remember the terrible mine disaster which occurred at the Cherry Mine a few years ago? But how many of you know that it was a child under the age of sixteen, illegally employed on an illegal school certificate issued by the school authorities and sworn to by its parents, who

pushed the bale of hay into the lighted lamp, and that it was another child under the age of sixteen, employed on a notary public's affidavit on the perjured testimony of its parents, who pushed that bale of hay into the mine, causing one of the most frightful disasters in the history of the mining industry of the country. If every birth was registered, the enforcement of the child labor laws and factory laws would be greatly simplified and strengthened.

Women's clubs and social organizations should also demand the passage of such a law for the protection of women and girls. Laws regulating the age of consent are equally valueless without birth registration. In practically all prosecutions for the protection of children and young girls, the contest comes over the age of the girl. If this fact was a matter of official record, the enforcement of the law and the punishment of its violators would be easy.

To sum up the entire situation, in so far as it interests us as citizens of this state, the proper registration of births and deaths is fundamental to any proper and adequate social organization. It is to our discredit as citizens that Illinois is not one of the eight states which register births, nor one of the thirty-six states that register deaths. Outside of Chicago, Peoria and a few of the larger cities, there is no death registration, while even in Chicago the birth registration is incomplete and unsatisfactory, and elsewhere in the state it practically does not exist. The present law is ineffective and inadequate. It has been a dead letter ever since its passage in 1903. For the sake of future generations, as well as for the enforcement of law and order and the securing of better sanitary conditions, it is the duty of each one of us to use all his influence in enlightening the public and demanding from the state legislature, the passage of a modern, up to date, scientific registration law in order that this blot on our state may cease to exist.