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Honors 3110

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Primary Source Analysis

Annual Report, Department of Health, City of Nashville, 1945.

Health reports often encompass vital information about a city and its progress. The Nashville Health Department has a rich history that complements the history and growth of the city. Included in the health reports of Nashville are birth and death rates, rates of communicable diseases, and the city's effort to control the quality of its services. The *Annual Report* of the Department of Health in the city of Nashville in 1945 analyzes the city's health and highlights its problems. T. V. Woodring, the Director of Health at the Nashville Health Department, composed the *Annual Report* for the Mayor of Nashville at the time, Thomas Cummings. Woodring was a medical doctor and an Assistant in Preventive Medicine and Public Health at Vanderbilt University Medical School.¹ Dr. Woodring started the report with a general overview of the city's health state and then divided the report into sections, each focused on a medical problem facing the city. Nashville's *Annual Report* from 1945 serves as a guide for the city to evaluate the state of its citizens' health and to identify the role of local government, but the report unintentionally highlights rampant racism dominant in the city at the time.

The *Annual Report* of the Department of Health is a formal document. It is written to inform the Mayor about population health and possible dangers. The Nashville's *Annual Report* was intended for a public audience. It is written objectively, with no room for subjectivity. The

1. "Bulletin of Vanderbilt University," *Vanderbilt University*, 1946, <http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu>.

author, Dr. Woodring, uses graphs to show the birth and death rates over the year, data tables to compare male and female disease incidence rates, and bullet points to list steps necessary for public education and future plans. Dr. Woodring direct requests and explicit description of problems facing Nashville leaves no room for misunderstandings; For example, he directly requested an epidemiologist, a staff nurse, and lab specialists for the venereal diseases department. The report is organized in a way that highlights problems facing the city ranging from prominent diseases to meat quality. Diseases such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, and premature infant death were priorities for the Nashville Health Department. The *Annual Report* of 1945 celebrates the success of the Nashville Health department in reducing the number of cases of communicable diseases like diphtheria, scarlet fever, and measles. The *Annual Report* methodically evaluates health practices in Nashville, shortages facing the department, and the need for more funding. It provides a comprehensive overview for the Mayor to monitor Nashville and the well being of its citizens.

The *Annual Report* of the Health Department for the city of Nashville in 1945 is particularly interesting. The year marks an important point in American history, the end of World War II and the beginning of the civil rights movement.² After WWII, fundamental changes in American history began to take place. Several critical civil rights measures were taken after 1945, which affected health care tremendously. Such measures helped shed light on the state of health of African Americans in the United States. Also, more actions were taken to provide African Americans with medical care to reduce the number of disease incidents and lower the death rates among the population, such actions included an increase in the number of health care

2. "Civil Rights Movement 1945-1965," *California State University*, 2010, <http://www.csun.edu>.

clinics that were designed for African Americans. Public policies enacted after 1945 undoubtedly improved the medical care available for blacks and in turn improved the population overall health.

The 1945 *Annual Report* takes careful note of tuberculosis and dedicates an entire chapter to it. Tuberculosis is an airborne disease that is caused by a bacterium that attacks the lungs and surrounding tissue.³ It was the fifth leading cause of death in Nashville in 1945. Tuberculosis spread through coughing, sneezing, and breathing in an infected person's particulates; due to its methods of transmission, tuberculosis was an immanent threat to the city. Nashville's Health Department created the Mobile Unit on Tuberculosis Control. The Mobile Unit provided fast and free x-rays for industrial plants workers. The Mobile Unit shows the Health Department's effort to control airborne diseases in Nashville. The Health Department saw the merits of early diagnosis, some of which included an overall lower cost of the disease for the community and lower transmission rates among the population.

Death rates due to pulmonary tuberculosis show a stark difference between whites and blacks. The death rate due to tuberculosis was 33% among whites and 85% among blacks. The lack of hospitals, doctors, and medicine available for African Americans could explain the difference in death rate due to tuberculosis. With African Americans having a much higher death rate, it becomes clear that whites had superior medical care and more accessible health services. An additional fact that highlights racism at the time is the average age of death. As the report states, the average death age for Caucasians is 52, while it is 48 for African Americans. The higher death rates and higher disease incidents point to the blatant difference in health care accessibility for whites and blacks living in Nashville. The medical facilities for African

3. "Tuberculosis," *Mayo Clinic*, 2016, <http://www.mayoclinic.org>.

Americans possibly lacked trained doctors, x-ray machines, funding, and medication, which further contributed to the problem. Due to racism playing a big part at the time, blacks living in Nashville suffered inferior health when compared to whites.

The 1945 *Annual Report* evaluates other diseases in addition to tuberculosis, such as communicable diseases. Communicable diseases are transmitted rapidly in crowded spaces, which makes them the biggest enemy for a growing city. In the 1945 *Annual Report*, the Department of Health in Nashville reported a decline and, in some cases, a disappearance of formerly common communicable diseases. Communicable diseases including diphtheria, whooping cough, and measles almost disappeared by 1945. One factor that aided in the disappearance of communicable diseases is education. Nashville's Health Department organized public lectures and community health fairs to educate the city. The *Annual Report* does not provide information about the location where those activities took place, which limits the reader's ability to understand the effects of racism on health education at the time. With a growing city like Nashville, health education programs were the Department's only hope in controlling and eradicating communicable diseases, however, it is very likely that education was limited to whites only.

Venereal diseases were on the rise in the 1920s. The U.S. Army Medical Department recognized the extent of the problem when it lost more than 10,000 soldiers in one day due to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).⁴ In 1940s, the U.S. Army Medical Department started using antibiotics, which decreased the number of incidents, but in 1945 STDs were increasing again. Venereal diseases in Nashville grew to become an emerging health crisis by 1945. The

4. Sandee LaMotte, "Meet the shady ladies of 'penis propaganda': Anti-VD posters of WWII," *CNN*, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com>.

Annual Report timidly discussed the topic. It wishfully sets its long-term goal to completely eradicate venereal diseases from Nashville. Diseases like gonorrhea and syphilis were as prominent among men as women. Gonorrhea affected 1005 males and 992 females. Venereal diseases in the United States were blamed mostly on women; however, contrary to popular belief at the time, women were not the only carriers of STDs. Posters and ads made by the U.S. Army Medical Department called women who carried STDs “victory girls” and prostitutes. The ads were trying to protect men and keep them away from women who were viewed primarily as carriers and transmitters.⁵ The increase in STDs in Nashville is evident by the Nashville’s Health Department request to expand its venereal disease control division in the *Annual Report* of 1945.

The quality of city services is often one of the most important parts of the Health Department’s *Annual Report*. In the 1945 *Annual Report*, Dr. Woodring highlights some of the activities of the Health Department laboratories. The laboratories tested water quality, milk quality, meats and livestock, human specimens, and tissue cultures. The laboratories’ presence was crucial to the city’s overall health. The laboratories provided new tests and techniques to diagnose diseases such as tuberculosis and gonorrhea. For example, The *Annual Report* highlights the new tissue culture method that was being used to diagnose gonorrhea; it was a faster method that identified the exact phase of the disease. The laboratories also tested the water quality in Nashville. The *Annual Report* claims that water quality in Nashville was above average, but the report fails to pinpoint the exact location from which water samples were taken. With racial discrimination playing a big role in Nashville, it is possible that water quality differed greatly from one area to the next. It is highly probable that environmental conditions

5. Sandee LaMotte, “Meet the shady ladies of 'penis propaganda': Anti-VD posters of WWII,” *CNN*, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com>.

differed greatly between living areas for whites and blacks, which could have been a big contributing factor to African Americans having poorer health in general. However, due to the lack of information in the report about the topic, such conclusions need more comprehensive research.

Nashville's Health Department *Annual Report* for 1945 shows the clear advances that the city was making to improve the overall health of its citizens. Ranging from public education to free x-rays, the report gives an overview of the city's health and the actions being taken to eliminate some diseases. The Health Department recognized the need to expand some of its departments due to the city's population growth; the population in Nashville at the time was 174,508, with 124,822 whites and 49,686 blacks. The *Annual Report* also provides a look at racism and its effects on the citizens. African Americans had an overall worse health and higher mortality rates. Blacks, in Nashville, suffered poorer health perhaps due to the lack of health clinics in their areas, the expense of health services, and poor environmental conditions. As evidenced by the higher death rates and number of disease incidents among blacks, Nashville's fight to control diseases in 1945 was trumped by racism, a problem that still faces the city today, more than seventy years later.

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