

Some things have changed
in the past 27 years.



Some things have not.

Since 1988, physicians have trusted us to meet their professional and personal insurance needs. Working with multiple insurers allows us to offer choice, competitive rates, and the benefit of one-stop shopping. Call us.

800-559-6711



RIMS-IBC

1915: Poison Pies on the Fourth of July Create Panic in Westerly & Stonington, CT.

MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

Francis T. Brightman, 72, and his wife, Georgiana, 68, were returning home from the First Baptist Church in Westerly on Sunday, July 4th, 1915 when they stopped for lunch at Alexander Ray Gavitt's restaurant. Known for its homemade pies, the restaurant was located on the bridge spanning the Pawcatuck River between Westerly, RI, and Pawcatuck, CT. For dessert, they each had a slice of pie.

Three days later, the Civil War veteran and his wife were dead. The holiday weekend proved deadly for two others who had also consumed the restaurant's pies. Timothy J. Sullivan, 49, was the first fatality. He exhibited symptoms of severe food poisoning seven hours after eating

Two More Westerly Pie Victims Die of Poison

Mr. and Mrs. Brightman Succumb to Effects of Poison Taken in Food—Eight New Cases Reported to the Authorities Today—No More Deaths Are Expected.

the pie and died 36 hours later. Two family members who had eaten the pie became very ill; his young daughter was in a coma for several days, while four other family members who had not eaten the pies were fine.

The fourth victim, Horace Rodman, lingered for three weeks before succumbing. In addition, more than 60 people in southern Rhode Island and bordering Connecticut, all suffering from acute gastroenteritis, violent vomiting and nausea, and severe stomach pain, kept area physicians busy making house calls.

It didn't take long for the pie panic to spread throughout southern Rhode Island and over the border. Physicians called it an epidemic and sprung into action to determine the cause.

Investigators, both medical and legal, stated the following facts which local newspapers reported:

- Gavitt's pastry chef, Thomas Fantano, mixed the dough for the holiday pies on Friday, July 2.
- On Saturday, July 3rd, he made 11 coconut pies, six custard, six squash, four lemon, three blueberry, four chocolate and eight apple pies.

Stonington Court of Inquiry Probes Pie Poisoning Cases

Testimony of Doctors Leaves Doubt as to Whether Poison Is from Ptomaines or of Arsenical Nature--About 50 Witnesses Were Summoned to Tell What They Knew About the Cases--Statement of Medical Examiner Scanlon.

- On Sunday, July 4th, second pastry cook Fred Steiger made two custard and four coconut-custard pies.

DR. M.N. SCANLON, medical examiner for Washington County, which includes Westerly, later testified to attending to several patients about midnight on July 4, all of whom had eaten the custard pie at Gavitt's.

On the morning of July 5th, Alexander Gavitt himself came to Dr. Scanlon's office with gastroenteritis and leg cramps.

Later that day, Dr. Scanlon went to Gavitt's restaurant and ordered him to stop selling the pies. He took samples of everything used for cooking in the restaurant and sent them to Providence for analysis by bacteriologists.

At first, Dr. Scanlon and area physicians thought that arsenic or mercury had gotten into the pies or that ptomaine poisoning had resulted from bacteria present in one or more of the pie ingredients. The food samples were initially tested for heavy metals and alkaloids, with negative results.

THE DAY, THURSDAY AFTERNOON, JULY 15, 1915.

Westerly Restaurant Keeper Tells How His Pies Are Made

Alexander Gavitt Tells Stonington Court of Inquiry That He Cannot Believe Poison Cases Came from Food Sold by Him--Continuance of Investigation Taken Pending Report of Chemists--Disagreement Over the Autopsy.

A court inquiry was held in Connecticut, where many of the victims, as well as Gavitt himself, lived. As physicians and those who had recovered sufficiently to testify, a startling fact emerged – those who ate only the pie filling did not become sick. But those who ate the pie and crust did.

Pathologists **HARRY S. BERNSTEIN, MD**, and **EZRA S. FISH, MD**, of the Rhode Island Board of Health, conducted the investigation which ultimately concluded the outbreak was due to the organism *bacillus paratyphosus B* which their lab isolated from the pie crust and from samples provided from an autopsy of one of the victims, as well as a dozen blood serums provided by physicians tending those seriously ill who had eaten the pies.

In a report published in *JAMA* the following January, Drs. Bernstein and Fish noted striking similarities in a food epidemic resulting from pork pies which occurred in 1910 in Wexham, England: 107 persons in 56 families became seriously ill after eating pork pies; five of them died. The pork pies

all came from the same bakery. Health authorities were able to detect *bacillus paratyphosus B* in two of the specimens of the pies eaten, and it was also found in the “agglutins for the organism in five persons who had eaten the pies in question.”

The Rhode Island doctors concurred with their English colleagues that “paratyphoid carriers may cause infection not only directly but also by contaminating sound food.”

They emphasized the importance of protecting public food supplies from “disease carriers.”

In the Westerly pie epidemic, the disease carrier was not identified in the medical literature or general press of the day, nor were there any reports of the restaurant staff being tested. ❖

