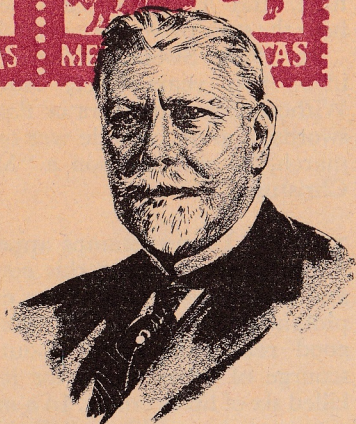


How Einar Holboell, a Danish postal clerk, started a crusade to wipe out tuberculosis

Father of the Christmas Seal

by FRED J. OSTLER



A RAGGED NEWSBOY darted through the throngs milling about in a Philadelphia post office and dashed up to a booth where Christmas Seals were being sold. Standing on tiptoe, he pushed a precious penny across the counter and demanded:

"Gimme one. Me sister's got it!"

That was in 1907. The newsboy's sister had tuberculosis, a scourge of mankind since the dawn of civilization. How, in the last 40 years, millions have been saved from this ancient killer by a tiny stamp, is a tender story of a humble man and the great crusade he launched one wintry night in Denmark.

Just 44 years ago, Einar Holboell, a Copenhagen postal clerk, was stamping letters that carried cheery Christmas tidings. As the letters flowed beneath his fingers he sud-

denly warmed with an idea. He whispered it to fellow clerks, they mentioned it to customers. The customers told their neighbors. Soon the news rang through the winding streets of all Copenhagen.

The idea was simple enough. Einar Holboell knew, because he was that kind of man, that there was much suffering among the tubercular children of Denmark. Hospitals were pitifully few. Why not sell special penny stamps to be used on Christmas mail, and devote the proceeds to building a children's hospital?

The good news spread swiftly until it reached the throne of King Christian IX of Denmark. The King, too, was enthusiastic: Holboell's idea would be tried, and the likeness of the late Queen Louise would adorn the stamps. Thus the

first Christmas stamp was born.

That Christmas, more than 4,000,000 letters carried the stamps of Einar Holboell. Business firms placed the tiny sticker on outgoing mail, and letters which failed to bear the stamps were frowned upon.

In 1904, Sweden adopted the idea; two years later, Norway. Without flying banners or flashing swords, a great crusade was on the march, its only weapon a "Merry Christmas."

IN 1904, DANISH stamps appeared on letters reaching this country and one of them caught the eye of philanthropist Jacob Riis. He had good reason to know about the scourge of tuberculosis, for it had killed six of his brothers. In a magazine article entitled "Christmas Stamp," he deplored the needless loss of life in America through tuberculosis, and urged adoption of the Danish stamps.

It would be pleasant to report that America was aroused to fight a dread foe that was taking a toll of 150,000 lives a year. But response was feeble. A few doctors were interested, likewise a few hospitals, but most people just shrugged. They were hoping for a miracle cure. What could a penny stamp accomplish?

Then into the scene stepped Emily Bissell, secretary of the Delaware Red Cross. Miss Bissell was worried about the impending fate of an impoverished sanatorium on the Brandywine River. It needed only \$300 to stay open. But when she knocked on doors for funds, they were closed against her.

After many discouragements the despairing Miss Bissell recalled

Jacob Riis' article. With spirits suddenly soaring, she sketched a wreath of holly with the words "Merry Christmas" in the middle—the design for America's first Christmas stamp. Now the public would heed her appeal!

Enthusiastically she set out to test the idea—and once more bumped into a wall of indifference and ignorance. Tuberculosis was incurable, she was told. Why fight it? Businessmen smiled. Raise \$300 penny-by-penny? Ridiculous!

But Miss Bissell was possessed of great patience. She coaxed a printer into producing 50,000 stamps on credit, and wrung permission from the postmaster to put the stamps on letters. Soon women's clubs and shopkeepers, schools and civic groups began hearing about tuberculosis, and how lives could be saved merely by saying Merry Christmas with stamps.

Miss Bissell had made a breach in the wall. On December 7, 1907, the great day arrived. A counter was set up in the Wilmington post office, and the first Christmas Stamp sale in America was under way.

Again, it would be pleasant to report that sales spiraled. But despite the fact that the tuberculosis death rate in Delaware was one of the highest in America, too many people hurried by with only a glance at the counter.

The tireless Miss Bissell, convinced that the stamp held the key to conquering tuberculosis, went to Philadelphia and stormed the office of the *North American*, the city's leading newspaper. Surely, thought Miss Bissell, the Sunday editor would listen to her. He did. But when she had finished, again she

received a heartbreaking "No."

Swallowing her disappointment, Miss Bissell walked slowly away. Then, on a whim, she stopped at the desk of a staff writer to tell him she liked his column, "The Optimist." After chatting a few moments, she showed him a sheaf of stamps and began explaining. And the same spark that ignited Einar Holboell and Emily Bissell struck fire in the Optimist. Snatching the stamps from her hand, he slammed into the office of the editor-in-chief.

"Here's a way to wipe out tuberculosis!" he shouted.

"What do you mean?" snapped editor E.A. Van Valkenburg.

The Optimist explained rapidly.

The editor thought for a moment. Then orders crackled. "Tell Miss Bissell the *North American* is hers for the holidays. Give this your whole time. Take all the space you need. Ask her to send us 50,000 stamps by tomorrow."

At last, a great campaign was on: front-page stories about the stamp, endorsement from civic, religious and political leaders, from Teddy Roosevelt, Secretary of State Root, Secretary of War Taft, and Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore. The great crusade was marching with banners flying.

Soon, from the city and its suburbs, came spontaneous reaction. Offers to buy and to help in selling poured in. Everyone bought the stamps—gladly, happily. Thirty thousand stamps—enough to make up the hospital deficit of \$300—were sold two days after they arrived. One city had learned how to fight the White Plague.

But Miss Bissell and her co-workers were already planning for

a national drive. Smiling at publicity experts who predicted a fiasco, she won the support of the Red Cross for a coast-to-coast Christmas Seal program in 1908. Stamps started to roll from the presses by the millions. The drums for the great nation-wide campaign began to beat. But would the people of America buy?

The answer came swiftly. Forty-eight hours after the national sale began, Washington headquarters of the Red Cross had to hire 20 clerks to handle orders. The *North American* again led the publicity, headlining the sticker as a daily news feature. The first year's sale netted \$135,000, and a nation-wide war on an ancient enemy was under way. Last year's sales soared to a new high of \$17,000,000.

WHERE DOES THE MONEY go? Ninety-five per cent of it remains in the individual state for carrying on tuberculosis control work. The other five per cent goes to the National Tuberculosis Association to finance a year-round research program and to aid the work of thousands of tuberculosis associations in all 48 states.

Each year's sale is conducted on a mammoth scale, involving designers, artists and thousands of volunteer workers. Seals are shipped to Puerto Rico, Hawaii and other U.S. possessions, and the plate for the seal has been given to many countries, including England, Bermuda and Newfoundland.

Each new design is carefully selected; sometimes 18 months elapse before one is approved in detail, even though the work is done by such top-notch artists as Rockwell

Kent, Steven Dohanos and Thomas M. Cleland.

Stamp collectors are keenly interested in each new design, and catalogues, covering Christmas Seals exclusively, are issued for philatelists. A single Holboell original, by the way, is worth \$5. And some sheets of the early Delaware stamp bring as much as \$500.

The identifying feature of the Christmas Seal is its famous double-barred cross, official symbol of the National Tuberculosis Association. Appearing for the first time in 1919, it is a modification of the Lorraine Cross, emblazoned on the standards of the ancient Crusaders.

Just what have Einar Holboell's seals accomplished? Has the long battle against tuberculosis been worth while? The record shows that through lean and fat years, through two great wars, the fight has reduced the death rate from 188 per

100,000 in 1904 to 36 per 100,000 in 1946, a total saving of millions of human lives.

One writer has said: "When some future historian tells how this plague was laid on the shelf . . . he will have to say it was killed by Merry Christmas."

Einar Holboell died in 1927. But he lived to see the seals erect sanatoriums and homes for boys and girls. He was decorated by the kings of three countries. At the time of his death, 45 nations were using Christmas Seals to fight a common foe in one of mankind's greatest international movements.

But the battle is not yet won. Holboell's crusade will march on until the menace of tuberculosis is wiped out—until the day when no one, anywhere, need place a penny on a Christmas Seal counter with the words:

"Gimme one. Me sister's got it!"

Wise and

Otherwise



👑 He makes you feel more danced against than with.—*Pipe Dreams* . . . There are two periods in a man's life when he doesn't understand a woman. Before marriage and after marriage . . . Once in a while you see a man who doesn't want any more money. He's usually holding a lily.—*Buffalo Evening News*

👑 Every man has his day. The pedestrian has the right of way in an ambulance.—*Anahcim Plain Dealer* . . . Romance, like a ghost, eludes touching. It always is where you were, not where you are.—A. CURTIS . . . Lettering on the birdhouse

in an East 80th Street garden: "Home Tweet Home."—*Caravan*

👑 "He's just a second-rate writer—sort of a Heming-and-hawing-way.—MICHAEL BARTLETT . . . One more good man on earth is better than having an extra angel in heaven.—*Chinese Proverb* . . . He: "Do you mind if I snap off the light? I freckle easily."—*Peterson Wingspread*

👑 He's the sort of man with whom one should eat, drink and be wary.—PHYLLIS KUEL in *Stats* . . . The man who saves money today isn't a miser, he's a wizard.—*Mutual Moments*