

BOOK REVIEW

Buckley, I. T. *Penikese—Island of Hope*. Springer, M. B., ed. North Chatham, Massachusetts: I. Thomas Buckley, 1997; 140 pp., hardcover (ISBN 1-887086-07-2) \$24.95 and soft cover (ISBN 1-887086-06-4) \$15.95. Order from I. Thomas Buckley, d/b/a Penikese—Island of Hope, P.O. Box 766, North Chatham, MA 02650, U.S.A.

I. Thomas Buckley spent 20 years meticulously researching the history of Penikese Island, the site of a leprosy hospital from 1905 to 1921. His sharing of what he learned is a loving account of the human spirit as embodied in those who suffered the disease and those who attempted to find a cure for them as they cared for them.

Penikese is a small island of 75 acres off the coast of Massachusetts, U.S.A., in Buzzard's Bay, 14 miles southwest of Cape Cod. Records of ownership of the island date back to 1641. Its earliest owners and inhabitants eked out a living fishing, farming, and piloting ships. Briefly, in 1873–1874, the island was home to the John Anderson School for naturalist teachers.

In 1905 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts opened a hospital on the island for the treatment of leprosy patients after several people in the eastern part of the state were diagnosed as having the disease. On November 18, 1905, five leprosy patients, four men and one woman, arrived at Penikese accompanied by the new colony's superintendent, Dr. Lewis Edmonds, an assistant, and a married couple who would serve as the island's caretakers. Three of the patients came from Gallops Island in Boston Harbor where the city of Boston had facilities for people with contagious diseases, and the other two came from their homes in Harwich and Wareham. Two of the patients were natives of the Cape Verde Islands, two were Chinese, and one was a Portuguese sailor. In March of the following year, the one woman patient gave birth to a healthy baby boy. The boy was taken away from his mother and reared in foster homes. He lived his adult life in the area and died in 1996.

In 1907, Dr. Frank H. Parker became Superintendent of the Penikese Island Hospital. He spent the next 15 years treating leprosy patients there. In his first year, five new patients were admitted. One was a native of Massachusetts, three were Russian immigrants, and one was from Trinidad in the West Indies. The patients were encouraged to work outdoors and soon there were crops for food and livestock covering 65 of the island's 75 acres. In the following years new buildings, a new dock, and a new boat were acquired.

In 1909 a 16-year-old boy was admitted, and after considerable controversy, his healthy, widowed mother was allowed to come to the island to care for him. At Christmas time in 1909 there were 11 patients on the island. Many gifts arrived from the mainland, including a telegraph set for the 16-year-old boy so that he could receive messages from his former schoolmates.

A new hospital building was erected in 1910 and a Penikese Island Post Office was established. Outgoing mail from the patients was fumigated with formaldehyde vapors produced by burning a formaldehyde candle. In 1912–1914 a change occurred in the perceived image of the island hospital. It was accepted that the public would never allow leprosy patients to be treated on the mainland so it was decided that Penikese should be regarded as a hospital for the treatment of leprosy patients and not merely as an isolated colony to segregate patients. New medical equipment was obtained, an assistant physician was appointed, and the full facilities of the Harvard Medical School were made available to the medical staff. Specialists and medical students were invited to come to the island for study. A chaplain was appointed in 1914. In that year it was learned that Penikese Island was being proposed as the site of a national leprosarium. The idea was abandoned, for the time being, because of the outbreak of World War I.

In 1917 Congress passed a bill to provide for the care and treatment of leprosy patients throughout the country. Penikese Island was again considered, but the lack of

a fresh water supply caused the selection committee to look elsewhere. The following year the federal government purchased the state of Louisiana's leprosy hospital in Carville, which then contained about 100 patients. In 1921 the Carville hospital opened as a United States Public Health Service Hospital and on March 10, 1921, the two women and 11 men who were patients on Penikese Island left by a tugboat for New Bedford where they were put on a hospital train that was waiting for them at the dock and taken to Louisiana.

In the first nine years of the colony, 87 full-time employees were hired, but never

more than 10 were on the staff at any one time. Caring for the patients before there was effective treatment was unpleasant and disheartening. The solitude on the island and the open hostility from mainlanders was difficult to bear.

In 1921 the Penikese Island Hospital had been open for 16 years and had treated 36 leprosy patients. Fifteen of the patients had died, seven were deported, one was released for treatment elsewhere, none were cured, and 13 were transferred to Louisiana.—RCH