

The Story of the Christmas Seal

by ELIZABETH COLE

*Christmas
Seals
fight*
TUBERCULOSIS



Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh at Wilmington, Delaware, receiving from Miss Emily P. Bissell a package of Christmas Seals which he delivered to the Mayor of Philadelphia. The flight was made to celebrate the twentieth birthday of the Christmas Seal in 1927

THE STORY *of the* CHRISTMAS SEAL

HOW EINAR HOLBÓLL ORIGINATED A UNIQUE DEVICE
TO FIGHT TUBERCULOSIS IN DENMARK AND EMILY
P. BISSELL BROUGHT IT TO THE UNITED STATES

by ELIZABETH COLE

How simple, I could have thought of that myself!" is what people have often said about the colorful Christmas Seal. But thinking up a new device is only the first small step—there must be also vision, energy, and courage if the thought is to result in any real benefit to humanity.

Certainly it was persistence, hard work, and a sincere belief in this penny emblem that made the Christmas Seal the great force it has become in our country and in many other lands where it is sold to fight tuberculosis.

The Father of the Christmas Seal

LET us go back to December in the year 1903. Picture a post office in Copenhagen, Denmark, where a postal clerk busily stamps hundreds of letters and packages all carrying messages of good will and happiness for the Christmas season. He is a big man—in body and in heart, well loved in his community and fond of children. His name is Einar Holbóll and at that time he is 38 years old. As his hands swiftly postmark the mail his mind too is at work. Why not put a tax on the mail and thereby obtain extra revenue to be used for some philanthropic purpose? For children—children ill with tuberculosis? The tax should be small, he figured, and should carry with it something tangible as a reminder that the money was to help bring greater Christmas joy to many sick boys and girls.

The Christmas stamp, as it was called, was the result of his thinking.

Once the idea became fixed in his mind, he could not rest until he had formulated practical plans for carrying it out. He aroused the interest of various prominent citizens who in turn secured the consent of the reigning King Christian IX to honor the memory of the late Queen

Louise by using her picture on the stamp. The government stipulated only that the stamps should be different in shape and size from regular postage stamps and the Minister of the Interior granted permission to sell the stamps in the post offices throughout Denmark. They were printed in sheets of fifty and sold for 90 oere or if sold separately they were 2 oere each, about half a cent.

And so that first Christmas Seal sale was held in 1904, December 6 to January 6. In the little country of Denmark everybody soon heard of this new way to help sick children and all were eager to buy and use the stamps. That first year over four million were sold, representing an average of about two for every man, woman, and child in the country, and the sum of 68,000 kroner was raised.

The following year, the Christmas Stamp Committee purchased a site for a sanatorium at Kolding and the first result of Holbóll's desire to help tuberculous children came true. The building was completed in 1910.

The 1906 stamp carried the picture of King Christian IX who had died that year.

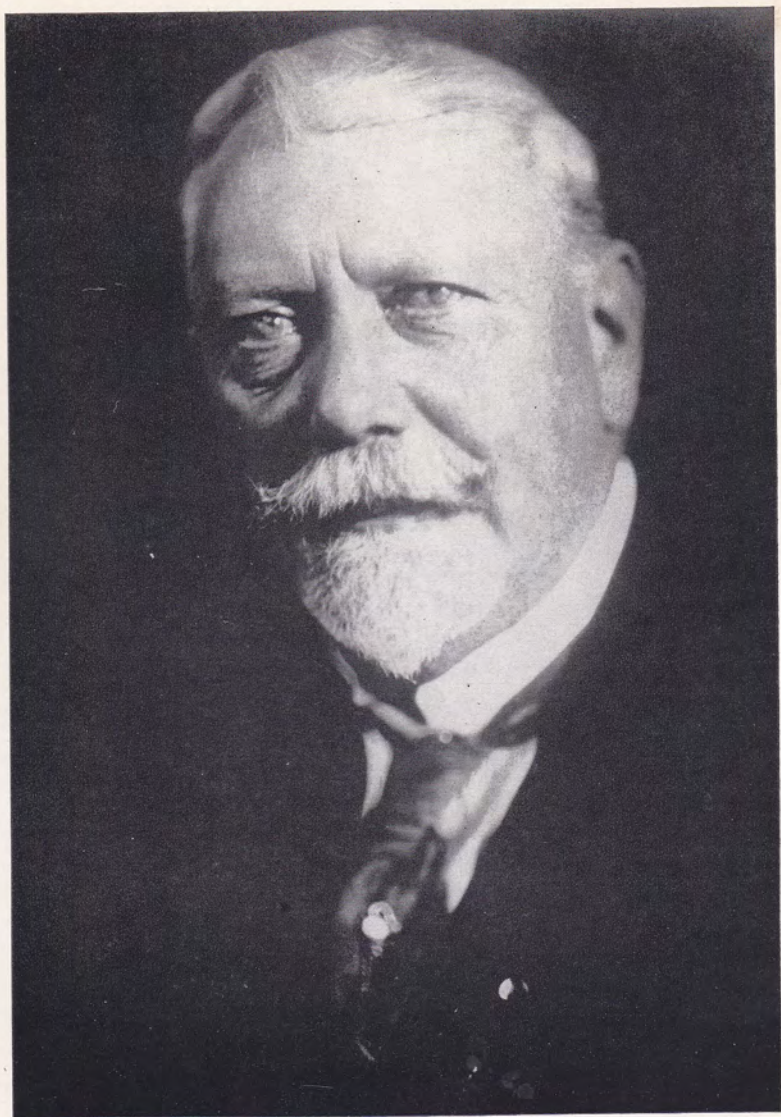
The sales increased and the use of the stamps was popular with rich and poor alike. An amusing custom was to take some inexpensive or ridiculous object such as an old hat, a battered broom, or a funny toy and send it through the mail unwrapped, but completely covered with the stamps. It would be sent from post office to post office and at each place the employees would paste on stamps until it became an unrecognizable object, useless but symbolic of many generous hearts.

Holbóll said of the universal use of the stamps, "Letters without the stamp just simply are no good. Fortunately there are many others who share my opinion. I know an old woman in Nyboder who received two or three letters without it. What did this nice old woman do? She returned them to the writers unopened, declaring that she was not going to know people who did not use Christmas Stamps!"

Holbóll's method to raise money to fight tuberculosis was soon adopted by various other foreign countries. Sweden had a sale of stamps in 1904, Norway in 1906. Belgium, Holland, Switzerland and other countries, more than 40 in all, adopted the idea.

Many honors came to the "Father of the Christmas Seal." In 1909 he was decorated by the king of Denmark and was appointed Postmaster of Charlottenlund, a position much coveted as the king had his summer residence in the palace there. He received decorations from the king of Sweden and from the king of Italy.

In 1924 Holbóll was the guest of honor at the annual meeting of the



Einar Holbøll

National Tuberculosis Association in Atlanta, Georgia. His letters written to the secretary of the Christmas Stamp Committee back home in Denmark bring to life his visit to the United States. In his own words we learn about "this greatest triumph of his life."

"When I arose to be introduced, the whole assembly became enthusiastic," he wrote. "All stood up and applauded for about a minute—and there I stood—my dear friend, and I thought I must be dreaming! Nothing like it have I ever experienced before. . . . When I came down from the platform, they crowded around me. All wished to shake hands and pat me on the shoulder. My head grew dizzy. . . . At last I got away and was driven to my hotel. I went to bed but could not sleep till morning. To tell the truth I lay there crying. Thank God, I could control myself during the meeting!"

This quotation brings better than in any other way a picture of the humorous, kindly man. One cannot look at his twinkling, friendly eyes without realizing that he would indeed well deserve the admiration and love of his people.

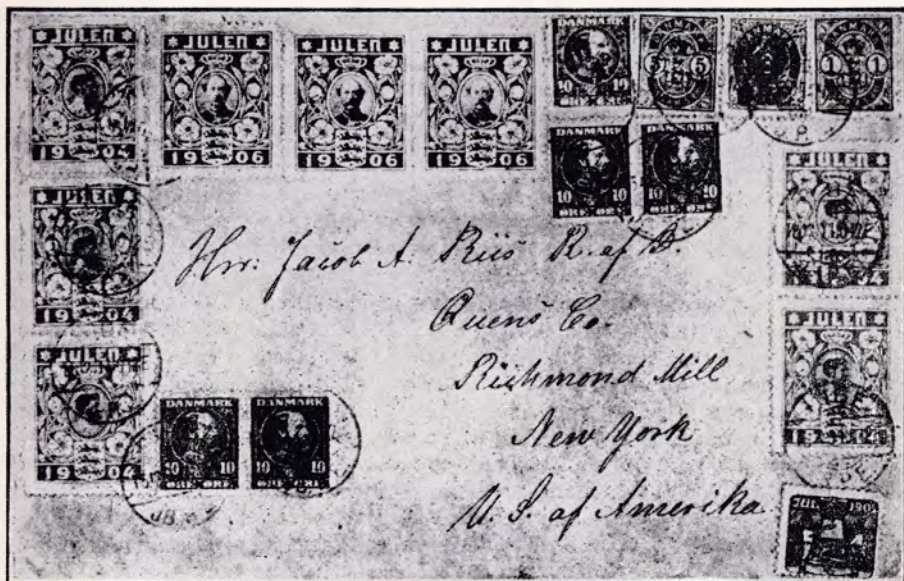
His death February 23, 1927, from a heart attack, was mourned by many. That year to pay him honor Denmark used his portrait on its national seal. A memorial was erected over his grave and carved in stone under his name are the words, "The Father of the Christmas Stamp." At his funeral the minister said this of Einar Holbóll, "Our Lord says that we shall not hold in contempt the mustard seed, the smallest seed of all. If it falls in the right soil, it grows up into a tree in whose branches the birds of heaven build their nests. So it happened with the seed which Holbóll sowed. I believe that our Lord placed his blessing upon it because Holbóll was working for others, not for himself—and it is very difficult to cross out self."

The Danish Seal Comes to America

ON a letter from his native Denmark the bright colored Christmas stamps came in 1904 to one who quickly grasped the significance of using the new device to help conquer tuberculosis in our country. This was Jacob A. Riis, immigrant himself and friend to immigrants, author, reporter, and a pioneer in the field of social service. In a foreword to his best known book, *The Making of an American*, Theodore Roosevelt called him "America's most useful citizen." Jacob Riis it was who told the readers of the *Outlook* magazine about Denmark's great success with the Christmas stamp. In this story published July 6, 1907, he

urged its adoption here, writing, "Nothing in all the world is better proven today than that tuberculosis is a preventable disease and therefore *needless* . . . yet it goes on year after year killing an army of 150,000 persons and desolating countless homes in which half a million men and women are always wearily dragging themselves to graves dug by this single enemy. Perhaps I feel strongly about it, and no wonder. It killed six of my brothers and I guess I know. That was in the days when there was no help for it. There is now."

Why should not the idea be adopted here? he asked, and emphasized the fact that not only would it bring in revenue but the seal would be an educative medium in fighting the White Plague. "The season of good will opens hearts and minds and pocketbooks as nothing else can," he wrote, "and takes the growl out of it, if there is any." That and more he wrote and his "mustard seed," too, was not sowed in vain.



A facsimile of the letter received by Jacob A. Riis from Denmark in 1904 and reproduced with his article, "The Christmas Stamp," published in the Outlook July 6, 1907. He wrote: "Look at the photograph of the three-years-old letter here. It is just as it came to me, except that in the upper row, whence collectors had pirated three stamps, three of last year's have been pasted in instead, while in the lower right-hand corner I have placed one of the 1905 kind, so that all three years are there represented. Assume that the practice became general of putting on letters even one or two Christmas Stamps instead of eight as on this letter, and think of Uncle Sam's mail in the same breath!"

Miss Emily P. Bissell Launches America's First Christmas Seal Sale

IN Wilmington, Delaware, was a little open air shack on the Brandywine where poor victims of tuberculosis were brought back to health. For lack of funds the modest little hospital was about to be shut down. Miss Emily P. Bissell, then secretary of the Delaware branch of the American Red Cross, knew what the closing of the cottage would mean to those helpless patients and their families. She made up her mind that money *must* be raised. Miss Bissell, at the time on the editorial staff of the *Outlook*, had been greatly impressed by Mr. Riis' article. "Why not try the Christmas Seal device in Delaware?" she thought. Again it was persistence, vision, and a sincere belief in the penny emblem that were responsible for Miss Bissell's first Christmas Seal sale in America.

She designed a seal with a holly wreath, and persuaded two women friends to loan \$20 each to pay for the printing of 50,000 stamps. She secured the interest of the post office, women's clubs, newspapers, and shop keepers who promised to help, and on December 9, 1907, at a table in the corridor of the Wilmington post office a girl in Red Cross uniform sold envelopes enclosing 25 seals each to all passersby. On the envelope was printed this message:

25 CHRISTMAS STAMPS

One Penny Apiece

Put this stamp, with message bright
On every Christmas letter.
Help the tuberculosis fight,
And make the New Year better.

*These stamps do not carry any kind of
mail but any kind of mail will carry them.*

The sales were good even after the enthusiasm of the first day died down. Miss Bissell, however, realized she could extend the sale further and turned to the Philadelphia *North American*, popular newspaper at that time for all nearby cities and towns. It was a columnist on that

paper, Leigh Mitchell Hodges, who shared her vision and put the story into every issue of the paper from then on through Christmas. It was he too who guaranteed to sell all her 50,000 stamps, telling her to print more. They were put on sale in the street floor office of the newspaper.

Mr. Hodges told the story in many ways, with a five column head on the first page of the paper, with editorials and with news stories. One editorial was especially appealing and concluded with

And with confidence we call upon every man, woman, and child whose heart pulses with the warmth of humanity to join our ranks in driving this curse from the land; to buy these stamps according to the measure of each one's means, and to mail no letter and send no package not decorated with these best of Christmas symbols of good will toward men.

From Jacob Riis came this message to Miss Bissell on December 19: "Good for you and for the Philadelphia *North American*. Keep it up. I am glad the little seed I sowed in the *Outlook* last summer has borne fruit."

One incident of the first sale has become historic through Mr. Hodges' telling, that of a little ragged newsboy. Reaching up to the marble counter higher than his head, this grimy child put down his penny saying, "Gi'me one. Me sister's got it."

"Those seven words settled it," says Mr. Hodges in an article thirty years later published in the *Reader's Digest*. "If a street kid could get the message, the messenger was the kind we needed."

That first sale netted Miss Bissell far more than in her fondest dreams she had anticipated. Three hundred dollars had been her goal to save the shack, but \$3,000 was raised, \$1,013.97 from the *North American's* sale alone. Delaware was thoroughly convinced of the need for tuberculosis work and through state appropriations a state tuberculosis commission was created.

*The little shack on the
Brandywine in Delaware.
To keep this running Miss
Bissell held the first Christ-
mas Seal sale in the United
States in 1907*



The Christmas Seal Becomes Nation-Wide

THE following year Miss Bissell and Mr. Hodges persuaded the American Red Cross to take over a nation-wide Christmas Seal sale. Howard Pyle, a friend of Miss Bissell, designed the 1908 seal. She planned a publicity campaign and circularized 6,000 newspapers all over the country, offering material for release a week before the sale opened. Miss Bissell said the orders came with such a rush that the Red Cross had to put on twenty extra clerks. Women's clubs, religious groups, and many publications gave their support, and by united and enthusiastic effort \$135,000 was raised.

In 1904 the National Tuberculosis Association had been organized in Atlantic City, New Jersey, by a group of physicians and laymen. Education as the method of combating tuberculosis was the objective and the three points emphasized were (1) that tuberculosis is infectious, (2) it is preventable, and (3) if taken in the early stages it is curable. These pioneers had the support of the foremost scientists but very few funds to work with. In order to strengthen this youthful organization's work the American Red Cross and the National Tuberculosis Association joined forces in 1910 and annual sales were conducted by the Red Cross while the funds raised were used by the National Association in its campaign to control tuberculosis. The value of this financial and moral sponsorship by the American Red Cross during the early years of the tuberculosis movement would be difficult to estimate.

For ten years this partnership was maintained and the penny Christmas Seals bore the emblem of the Red Cross. In 1919, however, the double-barred cross, international emblem of the anti-tuberculosis campaign and trademark of the National Tuberculosis Association, was also embodied in the design of the seal. The following year the National Tuberculosis Association became the sole sponsor and since then the seals have carried the double-barred cross and have been known as Tuberculosis Christmas Seals.

A Growing Power

PREVIOUS to the first Christmas Seal sale only eight states had active tuberculosis associations. The Christmas Seal, however, stimulated state after state to organize groups of men and women who in turn influenced local groups to carry on campaigns in their own communities. By 1917 every state in the Union had its own tuberculosis association and now, led by the National Tuberculosis Association, there are nearly 2000 affiliated associations that conduct a country-wide well organized program.

Christmas Seal funds are used in the communities where the seals are sold, with the exception of five per cent, paid by each state to the National Association. Under the leadership of this organization, methods and programs have been standardized and tuberculosis work can be more effectively carried out in all parts of the country. Throughout the years over eighty million dollars have been raised and expended under a definite plan worked out to serve community needs.

And what is some of the machinery that has been made possible through funds from the annual sales of Christmas Seals? It includes free clinics, nursing service, preventoria, tuberculin testing, X-rays, rehabilitation, medical and social research. Public opinion has been aroused to the need for institutions that can be maintained by official agencies, state, county, municipal or federal. Laws have been passed and enforced through intensive educational propaganda.

The movement has also allied itself with federal and other official agencies such as the United States Public Health Service, the Veterans' Bureau, United States Bureau of Education, and other government bodies through which it reaches the public.

So far reaching is its appeal that the Christmas Seal has become an annual institution recognized by rich and poor alike as a tangible way in which they can take part in a worthy cause. Just as the idea was given encouragement that first year by a generous newspaper so today are editors and publishers among its valued assistants. Women's clubs, business men's clubs, motion picture theatres, industrial plants, Boy and Girl Scouts, parent teacher associations, also contribute interest and active help, without which the annual Christmas Seal sales could never have been successful.

Honors to Miss Bissell

ON the twentieth birthday of the Christmas Seal Miss Emily P. Bissell received congratulations from many of her friends throughout the country. Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh flew from Wilmington to Philadelphia, taking from her a package of Christmas Seals which he delivered to the Mayor of Philadelphia—the first Christmas Seals to go on sale there that year.

In 1936, the year of the thirtieth Christmas Seal an anniversary luncheon was given in her honor in Wilmington, Delaware, with Leigh Mitchell Hodges as toastmaster. Nearly 500 men and women were present to pay tribute to the continuous and devoted service Miss Bissell has given to the tuberculosis movement. Hundreds of telegrams

and messages of congratulation were sent to her not only from this country but from many foreign lands where Christmas Seals are sold. One letter, most prized by her, was from Mrs. Einar Holbóll, widow of the father of the Christmas Seal in Denmark. Mrs. Holbóll sent a block of nine Danish seals and wrote in part:

November 27, 1936.

Dear MISS BISSELL:

As I know that 30 years have gone since the introduction of the Christmas Seal, by your great interest, Miss Bissell, has been on sale in the United States—well a memory year it is, and so I will not let nineteen hundred and thirty-six pass without sending you my best regards, congratulations, and my warmest wishes for a continually good sale of this Christmas Seal in the future. I remain, Miss Bissell, yours sincerely,

BERTHA HOLBÓLL
Charlottenlund
Denmark

On the site of the first little Brandywine cottage near Wilmington a tablet was unveiled on November 24, 1937 to commemorate the first Christmas Seal sale in this country. State and local tuberculosis associations made this bronze plaque possible through their contributions, and at the ceremony Dr. Otto Wadsted, Danish minister to the United States, brought greetings from the land of the first Christmas Seal.

Miss Bissell is the president of the Delaware Anti-Tuberculosis Society, a member of the board of directors of the National Tuberculosis Association, and is active in many other branches of local welfare work. Her enthusiasm and interest in the growth of her "little mustard seed" are still an inspiration to all who take part in the tuberculosis movement.

The penny Christmas Seal indeed has been a mighty power in bringing about a healthier world to live in. During these years of concentrated effort to control that ancient enemy of mankind, the death rate from tuberculosis has been cut two-thirds for all age groups. For the age period 15 to 45, however, tuberculosis is still the leading cause of death. Until tuberculosis is "wiped out" entirely the penny Christmas Seal has work to do. Its gay and colorful appearance each Christmas season continues to bring a message of hope—that tuberculosis *can* be controlled and that some day the tiny seed will grow to full fruition.