



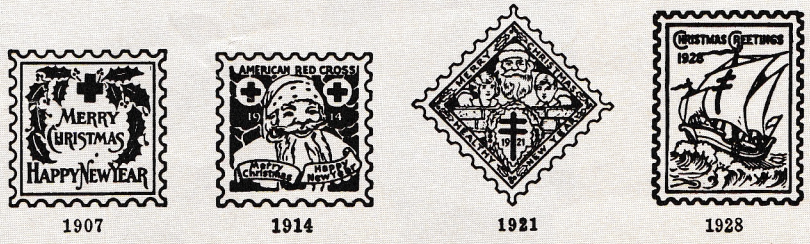
“AMERICA’S MOST USEFUL CITIZEN”

At the turn of the century, leading medical people believed tuberculosis was a hopeless problem. Delaware’s Emily Bissell found the answer: Christmas Seals.

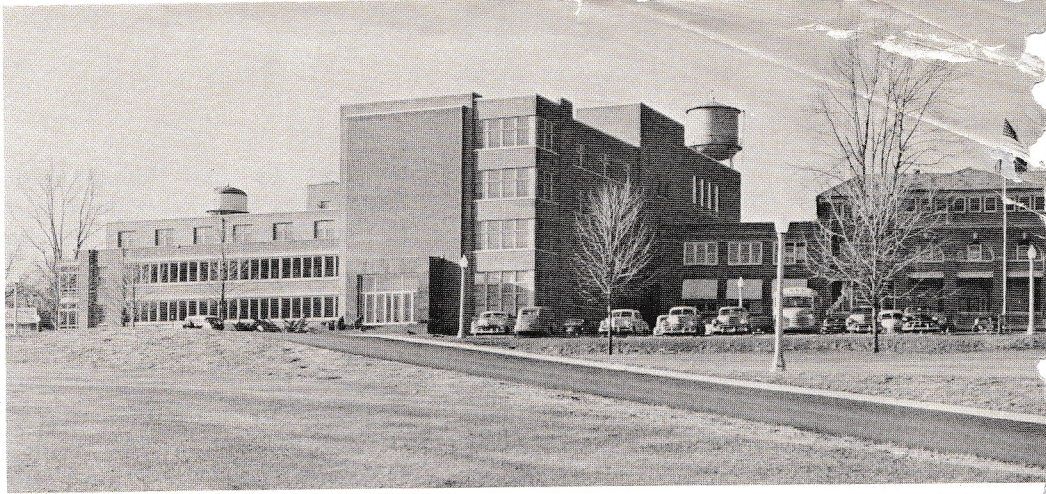
By G. Taggart Evans

THE First State can boast of many important contributions to the nation, but few have had such telling effect on the country’s welfare as have Emily Bissell’s Christmas Seals. Conceived and developed in Delaware, the seals have become as integral a part of American Christmas as tinsel and turkey dinners — and millions of tuberculous patients’ lives have been saved.

Born in an atmosphere of doubts, financial rigors, and pessimism, the annual Christmas Seal Campaign has become traditional in the 53 years since its inception. December 7 is known around the world as “a day of infamy”; but remembrances of Pearl Harbor must share equal attention with more pleasant allusions — for it was on December 7, 1907, that Emily P. Bissell, originator of Christmas Seals, made the first purchase of the seals at a booth erected in Wilmington’s main post office. This event climaxed



Modern Emily P. Bissell Hospital, at right, is far cry from original shack in Timiken Woods, seen under the windmill in the picture below.

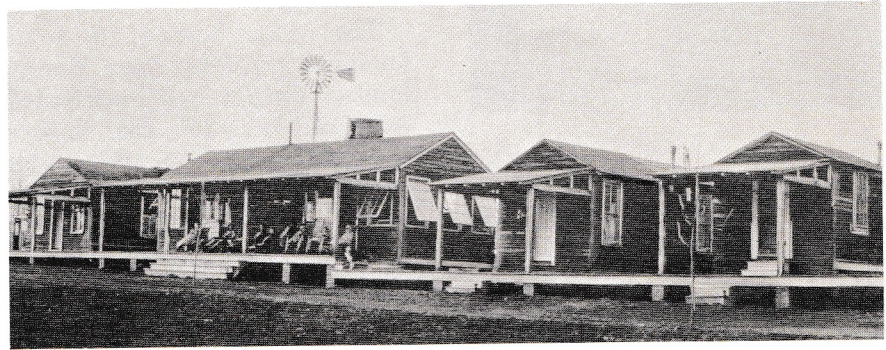


three years of heroic toil in the face of staggering problems.

The Christmas Seal story really began in 1902, when Dr. John Janvier Black published *Consumptives in Delaware*, a comprehensive study of the "white plague" in Delaware and other states in which he had made surveys. He urged segregation of those afflicted, and recommended that the state acquire land and erect buildings for the study and treatment of the deadly disease. Two years later, the Delaware Anti-Tuberculosis Society was organized, and this group appointed a committee to seek a site for a tuberculosis institution. Pioneers in the Delaware project were Mrs. Ferdinand Gilpin, Bishop Coleman, Mrs. Jane Pennewell, and Drs. Albert Robin, Joseph Wales, Irvine Flynn, Peter Tomlinson, and John Black.

The dedicated work of the Society succeeded in raising some \$4000, and an option was taken on a site near Bellevue. Opposition from neighboring landowners forced abandonment of this property, but Alfred I. du Pont stepped in to offer as much ground as was necessary, at a token rental of \$1 a year.

With the first hurdle cleared, a large shack was erected in Timiken Woods. This meagre begin-



ning provided space for eight tuberculous patients. A smaller structure was built for food-preparation facilities.

Faced with severe financial trials, the little shack seemingly was doomed in 1907. The Anti-Tuberculosis Society was in desperate need of funds, and popular opinion provided further difficulty; at that time, most persons (including medical men) shared the long-held belief that the disease was hereditary — and incurable.

Dr. Joseph P. Wales, a cousin of Emily Bissell, appealed to her for help. He knew she had often spurred fund-raising for worthwhile causes, and he was sure she would find a way this time. Miss Bissell, then Secretary of the Delaware Chapter, American Red

Cross, realized what the closing of the little shack would mean to the patients and their families; but \$300 was required to keep it in operation. She decided that the money would be raised — quickly.

In her *Story of the Christmas Seal*, Miss Bissell wrote: "I belonged to the minority who thought something could be done about it, and I knew the Brandywine shack was showing encouraging results. But to convince others wasn't easy, and conviction is a first step toward contributions! Where was I to seek them? While wondering, suddenly I recalled Jacob Riis's story, in the *July Outlook*, of a 'Christmas Stamp' originated in Denmark in 1904 by Einar Holboell, a postal clerk. It was sold



1935



1942



1949



1953



1956



Mr. and Mrs. Carl Holboell chat with Emily Bissell. Mrs. Holboell reigned as Miss Denmark at the New York World's Fair back in 1939.

in post offices (but not for postage), to raise money for a sanatorium for tuberculous children.”

Miss Bissell asked, in the same article, “Why should we not have a Christmas Stamp for the purpose of rousing up and educating our people on this most important matter? Why not get out one to raise money for the shack? On letters and packages, it would serve both as a holiday greeting and a bearer of good news to the people of Delaware, then cursed with one of the highest tuberculosis death rates in the nation. Why shouldn't our Delaware Red Cross sponsor it?”

There's little wonder as to why Theodore Roosevelt termed Miss Bissell, “America's most useful citizen”.

And so, it was persistence and a sincere belief in the penny emblem that proved responsible for Emily Bissell's first Christmas Seal Campaign in America. She designed a seal bearing a holly wreath, and persuaded two women friends to give \$20 each to pay for the printing costs of 50,000 stamps. She enlisted the aid of the post office, women's clubs, newspapers, shop keepers. The sales kept booming even after the enthusiasm of the first few days died down. Miss Bissell next turned to the Philadelphia *North American*, a popular newspaper of the period. A columnist

on that journal, Leigh Mitchell Hodges, shared her vision and included the story in every issue of the paper from that time until Christmas.

The results turned out to be far more gratifying than Emily's fondest dreams had anticipated; \$300 had been her goal to keep the shack in operation — but \$3000 was raised. Delaware became thoroughly convinced of the need of tuberculosis work, and through appropriations a state tuberculosis commission was created.

During the following year, Miss Bissell and columnist Leigh Hodges inspired the American Red Cross to take over a nationwide Christmas Seals Campaign. Famed artist-illustrator Howard Pyle, a friend of Miss Bissell, designed the 1908 seal. Emily planned a publicity program, and circularized 6000 newspapers across the country offering material for release a week before the sale opened. An astounding \$135,000 was realized through the sale of the 1908 seal.

The Red Cross and the National Tuberculosis Association (formed in 1904) joined forces in 1910, and annual sales were conducted by the Red Cross; funds raised were put to use by the National Association. For ten years this joint operation was

maintained, and the seals bore the Red Cross emblem. In 1919, the double-barred cross, international symbol of the NTA, was also embodied in the design of the seal. The next year, the NTA became the sole sponsor.

The rest is history. More than \$490,000,000 has been raised nationally since 1907, and Christmas Seals in Delaware have helped make possible the Emily P. Bissell Hospital (originally the Brandywine Sanatorium); nursing service for indigent patients; health education; rehabilitation; and case-finding X-rays. Christmas Seal funds also initiate vital scientific research and improvements in medical-care methods.

The National Tuberculosis Association estimates that, since the first Christmas Seal Campaign was inaugurated, more than 9,000,000 lives have been saved, and the tuberculosis death rate during the period of the Christmas Seal Campaigns has been reduced more than 80 pct. Since 1937, Delaware has maintained the highest per capita Christmas Seal contribution in the continental United States.

When you buy your Christmas Seals for Yuletide greeting cards, remember the story of Emily Bissell and her benevolent vision. It has spelled hope and salvation for millions.

