

# ✠ THE STORY OF THE CHRISTMAS SEAL

THE Christmas Seal was born in Denmark . . . the birthplace, too, of the tender fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen.

It was a busy afternoon just before Christmas in 1903 and holiday letters and packages were pouring in to the post office in Copenhagen. Einar Holboell, postal clerk, expertly handled the mail, lovingly sorted it and sent it on to its happy destination. Like all Danes he knew the Andersen tales and he thrilled to the task of spreading joy to boys and girls and grown-ups in his beloved Denmark. As he worked he pondered on an idea which was destined for a great future.



Why, he thought, wouldn't it be a good idea if each letter or package carried another penny stamp the sale of which would swell a fund to build hospitals for children. There are so many children, he mused, and so many who are ill. It would cost each giver so little to share in giving this great gift to those sad little people. Everybody could help. The stamps could be bright and cheery and everyone who bought them or who received them on their Christmas mail would be made happier. He liked the thought and he smiled as he worked. He just had to tell someone and so the word got around and before long the post office hummed with talk about the Christmas stamps. The clerks could not resist telling the stamp customers and with so many people hearing about it something was bound to happen.

The idea was soon presented to King Christian who immediately warmed to the thought. Not only should Holboell's idea be tried but the King himself would authorize the Seal and it should bear the likeness of his beloved Queen. More than 4,000,000 Seals were sold in the Copenhagen post office that year of the first Seal Sale, which opened December 6, 1904.

Einar Holboell died in 1927, but he lived to see a tuberculosis sanatorium, bigger and finer than anything he had dreamed, three Christmas Stamp Homes for boys and girls, a children's sanatorium in Greenland, and the establishment of several "funds" for war sufferers and hungry youngsters, all made possible by the Christmas Seal he had originated.

He lived to see the idea travel round the world with Christmas Seals sold in Austria, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, French-Indo-China, Finland, Sweden, France, Italy, England, India, Korea, all the states of the United States . . . 45 countries had used Christmas Seals by 1927, Mexico was added to the list in 1943 when it held its first Seal Sale. The idea, born in Denmark, was supplying funds all over the world to carry on the fight against tuberculosis.

In 1904 the Danish Christmas Seals were appearing on letters to people in America. One of these caught the attention of Jacob Riis whom Theodore Roosevelt called "America's most useful citizen." In the July, 1907, issue of *The Outlook*, Riis published an article "The Christmas Stamp," urging the adoption of the idea in America as a means of

"setting everybody thinking of a great wrong that can be righted through everybody's thinking of it."

He wrote:

"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 and desolating countless homes in which half a million men and women are 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," asked Riis, "should not the idea be adopted here?"

The article stressed one point which has become the keynote of the work of tuberculosis associations in America. Riis said:

"The Christmas Stamps should be sold . . . not for the purpose of building a hospital . . . let each state or town build its own . . . but for the purpose of rousing up and educating people on this most important matter. It is because they do not know a few amazingly simple things that people die of tuberculosis."

On that idea the "people's war against tuberculosis" is based. Teach people how to prevent the disease, demonstrate ways to meet the problem within the community!

But, in 1907, most people who read the Riis article thought the problem much too great to be affected by so small a thing as a penny stamp. "It's a good story," they said, "but so are other stories of heroic but futile effort."

That year, tuberculosis killed 156,000 people in America. "How can this killer be stopped except by a miracle?" people asked. A penny stamp was far from a miracle. A few doctors were interested in the problem, a few hospitals had been established, a few people were being cared for in these hospitals . . . it was all too late and too little.

Late in the Autumn of 1907, Emily Bissell, a young public health worker in Wilmington, Delaware, became concerned about the fate of a little sanatorium on the Brandywine River. She was told it would have to close because there were no funds to keep it open.

"It must not close," she insisted, "I will do something!" But the people of Delaware who could have helped her were not interested.

"It only needs \$300," she repeated over and over, and the reply was always the same: "Better use the money for something less hopeless. You can't cure those people."

In her blackest moment, Emily Bissell recalled the Jacob Riis article. The penny stamp was the answer to her problem! She sat down immediately and sketched the design of America's first Christmas Seal . . . a wreath of holly with the words "Merry Christmas" in the circle.

Next day when she tried to interest her friends, she faced the wall of indifference to the project. Right then the idea which has persisted all these years was epitomized in Delaware, for it was the "little people" who helped Emily Bissell. The printer, to whom she took the design agreed to print the stamps and wait for his pay. The postmaster and the postal clerks said she might sell her stamps to be put on letters, only of course she must tell folks the stamps would not carry mail. It was the printers, the postal clerks and the people who could only buy a few pennies worth of Seals who gave impetus to the first Christmas Seal Sale in America.

The printer turned out 50,000 of the stamps and Emily Bissell and her friends began making the rounds to encourage the sale. People in Delaware began to hear about tuberculosis. They learned that little was being done about it and among those first few who bought the Seals it did not seem like a futile effort. They were sure it would lead to something being done about all those sick people.

A Christmas Seal table was set up in the Wilmington post office and the first Christmas Seal Sale in America was under way December 16, 1907. After a few days the progress report, however, was not encouraging. Too many people passed by without buying. The sale was going badly and Christmas was two weeks away!





1907  
EMILY P. BISSELL



Type No. 1

Type No. 2



1908  
HOWARD PYLE



1909  
CARL WINGATE



1910  
MRS. GUION THOMPSON



1911  
ANTON RUDERT



1912  
JOHN H. ZEH



1913  
CHARLES JAY BUDD



1914  
BENJAMIN S. NASH



1915  
BENJAMIN S. NASH



1916  
THOMAS M. CLELAND



1917  
THOMAS M. CLELAND



1918  
CHARLES A. WINTER



1919  
ERNEST HAMLIN BAKER



1920  
ERNEST HAMLIN BAKER



1921  
GEORGE V. CURTIS



1922  
THOMAS M. CLELAND

The National Tuberculosis Association, with affiliated associations in all states and most cities, carries on a campaign. Collectors and others interested may receive further information by addressing



1923  
RUDOLPH RUZICKA



1924  
GEORGE V. CURTIS



1925  
ROBERT G. EBERHARD



1926  
GEORGE V. CURTIS



1927  
JOHN W. EVANS



1928  
JOHN W. EVANS



1929  
GEORGE V. CURTIS



1930  
JOHN W. EVANS



1931  
JOHN W. EVANS



1932  
EDWARD F. VOLKMAN



1933  
HANS AXEL WALLEEN



1934  
HERMAN D. GIESEN



1935  
ERNEST HAMLIN BAKER



1936  
WALTER I. SASSE



1937  
A. ROBERT NELSON



1938  
LLOYD COE



1939  
ROCKWELL KENT



1940  
FELIX MARTINI



1941  
STEVAN DOHOANOS



1942  
DALE NICHOLS



1943  
ANDRE DUGO



1944  
SPENCE WILDEY



1945  
PARK PHIPPS



1946  
MARY LOUISE ESTES  
& LLOYD COE



1947



Then the tireless Miss Bissell went to Philadelphia to see the editors of the *North American*, the city's leading newspaper. For some time this paper had been trying to stir up people to "do something" about tuberculosis, so Miss Bissell thought the Sunday editor would be a good listener.

However, Sunday editors are busy people; he listened with half of his mind while the other half was busy with the details of getting his paper ready. When she stopped talking he looked a bit startled, but the answer was "no." He couldn't see coupling Merry Christmas with tuberculosis. In later years Dr. S. A. Knopf, one of the founders of the National Tuberculosis Association, said: "If one were to recite the various influences and factors that have contributed most to the success of the campaign against tuberculosis in the United States, he could not help but place at the head of the list the Tuberculosis Christmas Seal." And a recent writer has said: "When some future historian tells how this plague was laid on the shelf alongside smallpox, typhoid and yellow fever, he will have to say it was killed by Merry Christmas!" Those little Christmas stamps have been the ammunition with which the "people's war against tuberculosis" has been fought.

By the time Emily Bissell finished her conference in the editorial room she was taking that disappointment in her stride. On the way out she decided to stop by a columnist's desk, "just to see what an optimist looks like," she explained to the writer of "The Optimist"\* column. Could he do anything for her? No, she had come to ask a favor of the Sunday editor. The "Optimist" inquired about the favor and she showed him the Christmas Seal. Snatching it . . . he'd be back in a minute . . . he took the stairs two at a time and arrived out of breath at the office of Editor E. A. VanValkenburg to shout: "Here's a way to wipe out tuberculosis!"

The scene in that editorial office was one of those which seldom happen but when they do occur the result makes history. Editor VanValkenburg caught the enthusiasm of the Optimist. "It's the human interest story of 1907," he told his men. "Play it up. Use it on the front pages. Buy 50,000 Seals. Give Emily Bissell the newspaper for the holidays."

A few weeks later Miss Bissell telephoned the *North American* to say: "It seems impossible but we have just counted up and find that we have raised \$3000." Americans had given ten times the quota set for the Christmas Seal Sale.

Orders for Seals kept coming to the Wilmington office. After Christmas another line "Happy New Year" was added and the Seals were sold well into the year 1908. Since that time, the sale has been scheduled for the period between Thanksgiving and Christmas and the same selling methods employed by Miss Bissell have been used. Letters of greeting are mailed to people in every state in the United States. Newspapers, radio, motion pictures, endorsements from leading citizens, labor leaders, government officials, churches, schools, all join in selling Christmas Seals. Preparations for the Seal Sale are made by many thousands of people who volunteer for this task. It is one of the great cooperative community enterprises of America.

The first nation-wide Christmas Seal Sale was in 1908 and netted \$135,000. Howard Pyle designed the Seal that year. Each year the Seal has been designed by some well-known artist and the sale conducted by the tuberculosis associations of the United States. Receipts from the sale have gone up year by year. In 1944 close to \$15,000,000 was raised.

In 1904, the year after Holboell proposed his novel idea, the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis (now the National Tuberculosis Association) was organized in Atlantic City, by a group of doctors and laymen. The

stated objectives of the organization were: To study tuberculosis in all its forms; to spread knowledge as to its causes, treatment and prevention.

During the first years the National Tuberculosis Association cooperated with the American Red Cross in carrying on the Seal Sale and until 1919 the Seal carried the symbol of the Red Cross. In 1919, there first appeared the double-barred cross, an adaptation of the Lorraine Cross, which is the official emblem of the tuberculosis associations. Since that time it has appeared on all Christmas Seals. Tuberculosis associations are carrying on work in all the States and in the Territories of Alaska and Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Of contributions made, 95 per cent remains in the State where it is collected to aid in tuberculosis control work; 5 per cent goes to the National Tuberculosis Association, which carries on a medical research program and aids in many ways with the work in the various states.

The "miracle" which people of 1907 thought was the only way to conquer tuberculosis has not yet been discovered. But the national death rate from the disease has been beaten down from 174 per 100,000 population in 1907 to 43 per 100,000 in 1943. "Knowledge is power," and as the people of America have come to know that tuberculosis is curable, preventable and can be conquered, so nearer and nearer is the time when it will be conquered.

The annals of tuberculosis control are studded with names of famous men and women: Robert Koch, who discovered the cause of tuberculosis—the tubercle bacillus; William Konrad Roentgen, who discovered the X-ray which has become a mighty factor in the diagnosis of tuberculosis; Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau, who established one of the early tuberculosis sanatoria in America; Dr. Hermann M. Biggs, whose early contributions to public health work were outstanding; Dr. William H. Welch, Sir William Osler, Dr. Lawrence F. Flick, who with Dr. Knopf, Dr. Biggs, and others helped to organize the tuberculosis movement; Dr. Florence Seibert, cited by the American Association of University Women for her research on the tuberculin test . . . all these and many others, but none more deserving of honor than the small unknown newsboy who, in 1907, reached up to place his penny on the Christmas Seal counter with the demand, "Gimme one, me sister's got it."

As Christmas approaches, postal clerks in every city and town in America note the Christmas Seals on letters and packages and say to each other: It was a Danish postal clerk who first thought up this idea.

Typesetters, editors, reporters and feature writers on large and small newspapers throughout America begin preparing stories of the Christmas Seal for their papers and in composing and editorial rooms they say: It was the "fellows" on the newspapers who put over the first Christmas Seal Sale in America.

Public health workers add Seals to their Christmas packages and remind each other: It was a public health worker who sold the first American Christmas Seals.

Labor leaders ask workmen to buy Christmas Seals because: It's a poor man's idea and it has accomplished more than many of the ideas of bigger and richer men.

Newsboys shout on the streets and add a call: Buy your Christmas Seals, mister, us kids started this penny avalanche back in 1907.

The President of the United States buys his sheets of Christmas Seals as he muses: A ruler of a great little country endorsed the first Christmas Seal Sale.

Who started it? The chorus sweeps across the land:

We did . . . We, The People.

Revised by permission from a booklet of the same title, published by the Oregon Tuberculosis Association, Portland, Oregon.

\* Leigh Mitchell Hodges, author of "The People Against Tuberculosis"