

Mary Mallon

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Mary Mallon was born in Co. Tyrone Ireland in 1869 and emigrated to the United States in 1884. She worked in various domestic positions for wealthy families prior to settling into a career as a cook. In 1906, she was employed by a wealthy New York banker, who rented a residence in Oyster Bay Long Island for the summer. Late August of that year, 6 of the 11 people present in the house were suffering from typhoid fever. Typhoid fever is a bacterial infection typically spread through food and water containing salmonella. Patients fall ill with high fever, diarrhea and before antibiotics were developed to treat it, it caused delirium and death in 10% of the cases. Without regulated sanitation practices in place, the disease was common, and New York had battled with multiple outbreaks.

George Soper, a sanitary engineer, was called in by the Long Island landlord to trace the source of the typhoid outbreak. Soper was previously hired by New York State to investigate disease outbreaks. He studied the situation and focused his attention on the cook, Mary Mallon, who arrived three weeks before the first person became ill. Never had an outbreak been traced to a single carrier and one without any symptoms themselves. He became the first person to describe a “healthy carrier” of salmonella typhi in the United States. He learned that Mary often served ice cream with fresh peaches on Sundays and concluded that there was no better way for a cook to share her microbes and infect a family, than not washing her hands and then serving ready-to-eat food.

Soper started stalking Mary Mallon in Manhattan and revealed that she was transmitting the disease by her activity. He described Mallon as “five feet six inches tall, blond with clear blue eyes, a healthy color and a somewhat determined mouth and jaw.” When he confronted Mary to obtain samples of her feces, urine and blood, she surged at him with a carving fork. New York State persuaded Dr. Josephine Baker, who along with five police officers, to escort Mallon in for testing. Mallon was uncooperative but was eventually forced to give samples. Tests revealed that she tested positive as a carrier for Salmonella typhi and was transferred to a cottage on the grounds of Riverside Hospital. This was an isolated facility on North Brother Island, a tiny speck of land across from the Bronx. Mallon never understood the meaning of being a carrier, since she exhibited no symptoms herself. Doctors told her the only cure was to remove her gallbladder which she flatly refused. In 1909, the newspaper, the *New York American*, dubbed her “Typhoid Mary” and the name stuck. Mallon complained that she was “peep show for everybody” and sued the New York City Department of Health and lost, the case eventually reaching the Supreme Court. Her lawyer argued she had been imprisoned without due process. The court of public



opinion was against her but had stirred a debate over individual autonomy and the state’s responsibility in a public health crisis. The court declined to release her stating “it must protect the community against a recurrence of spreading the disease”, but in 1910 a new health commissioner freed Mallon on the condition that she would find employment as a domestic and not as a cook. Mary, still not convinced that her condition posed a danger, drifted back to her old cooking job serving the New York region. She prepared meals for a hotel, a Broadway restaurant, a spa, and a boarding house. In 1915, a typhoid outbreak sickened 25 people at Sloane Maternity Hospital, and George Soper, found the cook called Mrs. Brown to actually be Mary Mallon.

Mallon was sent back to North Brother Island to live out the rest of her life. She spent days reading and working in the laboratory preparing medical tests. She had refused the one operation which might have cured her. In her later years, living a restricted life, she lost much of her bitterness and she found peace and consolation in her religion. She died there of a stroke in 1938, after a quarter century of quarantine. Nine people attended her funeral at Saint Luke's Catholic Church in the Bronx. The number of people that Mallon infected is most likely higher than the 47 reported; three had died. The story of Mary Mallon indicates how difficult it is to teach asymptomatic infected people to guard against infecting others. Immunization against *Salmonella typhi* was not developed until 1911, and antibiotic treatment was not available until 1948.

Mary Mallon's case may have been a perfect example of how the Health Care system provokes social attitudes towards disease carriers, often associated with prejudice. New York health officials did not isolate all the recalcitrant carriers of typhoid. Many who had disobeyed health department guidelines were out in streets during the years Mallon remained on North Brother Island. At the time of her death, more than 400 "asymptomatic" healthy carriers of typhoid had been identified by New York health officials and none were forced into confinement except for this girl from Co. Tyrone.



Mary Mallon,
pictured fourth
from the right.