

Spring 2015

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The [McMillan Journal Collection](#) is an archive of the journals of Martha McMillan of Cedarville, Ohio, who maintained a daily journal from 1867 until her death in 1913.

Recommended Citation

Stephens, Taylor L., "Cancer Treatment During Martha McMillan's Time (1913)" (2015). *Research Papers*. 12.
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/mcmillan_research_papers/12

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Cancer Treatment during Martha McMillan's Time (1913)

Taylor Stephens

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After reading the last four months of Martha McMillan's life, it is clear that some sort of serious illness ended her life. This illness is described as "sickness of the bowels, liver, and stomach" in her death certificate. Her illness was accompanied by multiple symptoms such as lethargy, joint pain, and abdominal pain. Martha, being a strong, stoic woman, did not record much of her personal struggles this late in life and chose instead to focus on her family, especially her grandson Rankin. However, after conferring with Suzanne Lefever, R.N., it seems most likely to me that she suffered from a mixture of rheumatism, or rheumatoid arthritis, and abdominal cancer. During the last few weeks of her life, she traveled to Kenton, Ohio, where she received what she calls "treatments," a frustratingly vague statement which is not explained in the journal. What then was involved in these treatments?

When she traveled to Kenton, Martha did not go to a hospital. She stayed at a private residence with her nurse Miss Benline and a few other women who were also ill. Because of this situation, it can be deduced that she did not receive any form of radiation treatment during this time in her life, because the equipment could only be found at a hospital, and she never mentions going to a hospital to receive treatment (McDonnell). Dr. Lathina, her oncologist, came to administer these treatments at the residence in Kenton. Because they are not administered at a hospital, it also seems to be a more experimental treatment. A cancer treatment that was rising in popularity during this time was trypsin, which contained enzymes derived from animal pancreas, and was a liquid that would be injected directly into a tumor, or a powder to be dissolved in water and ingested orally.

During the mid-19th century, a new treatment for cancer surfaced, one that relied on injectable enzymes to target and kill a cancer. These pancreatic enzymes, called trypsin, were first discovered by French physician Lucien Corvisart, and later perfected by Dr. James Beard, a zoologist. These enzymes were derived from “animal sources” and were available in both injectable and powdered form by 1900. After these drugs were tested and experimented with, it was deduced that the powdered form, which was meant to be ingested, could not survive hydrochloric acid found in the stomach, and were therefore not effective in that form. By 1907, the injectable form showed considerable promise, and was increasingly effective. It was always administered directly to the inoperable tumors found in patients, and caused “tumor necrosis, tumor liquefaction, and finally its sloughing off with the trypsin injections” (Gonzalez 32). It would seem that these treatments were effective a large portion of the time, but because of the newness of the method, were often used when no other recourse could be taken.

Unfortunately, the method used for extracting these enzymes was often not regular enough to ensure that any active enzymes were present upon administration of the treatment. However, if the enzymes were active, they tended to kill the tumor, leaving a mass of dead tissue in the place of the tumor. Because of this, I believe that Martha either died of the cancer specifically because the treatment was ineffective, or from complications of it working, leaving a necrotizing piece of flesh in her abdomen that ultimately killed her. Near the end, her symptoms (vomiting, incoherence, and fever) seem to coincide with septic shock. Because of this, I believe that the latter option is more likely.

There is much that can be learned from this occurrence in Martha’s life. She was expecting to die soon, and would often during those last months of her life discuss those who were already dead, most often her son Paul. When she moved to Springfield, she wrote a

lengthly passage discussing leaving her home, the farm. However, when she went to Kenton, she did not bemoan leaving the farm, and instead chose to focus on the excitement of traveling to a new place, and on her family, who visited her often. It is impossible to know if she knew she was going to die, and was anticipating being reunited with her loved ones, or if she believed the treatment would cure her cancer and give her more time with her living family. Whichever scenario, it is clear that she showed considerable strength through an ordeal that weakened her considerably, even preventing her from writing near the end.

Through this we can more completely understand the difficulties she went through and empathize with her situation. Martha McMillan was a woman of strength and character and chose during the final days of her life to focus on her family and friends. Through the historical detail of these treatments a reader appreciate her situation, one in which illness and death were common. She dealt with this illness and the illnesses of many of her loved ones who did not recover. Living during the turn of the century was difficult, and it is through these journals that a deeper understanding of that hardship, and her strength of character, can be grasped.

Works Cited

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