

VITAL STATISTICS.

BY JOSIAH FORREST KENNEDY, A. M., M. D.*

Vital statistics are valuable from a genealogical, historical, sociological and scientific standpoint. The data embraced in such statistics differ in various states and countries. When the Iowa State Board of Health was created by the legislature in 1880, among other duties specified under the statute, it was required to supervise a registration of marriages, births and deaths occurring within the State. In some other states such statistics also embrace divorces.

Upon the organization of the State Board of Health, in accordance with the above requirement blanks were adopted requiring the following data:

MARRIAGES.

Number of license; date of license; by whom affidavit was made; by whom consent to marriage was given; full name of groom; place of residence; occupation; age; place

*Josiah Forrest Kennedy was born in Perry county, Pa., Jan. 31, 1834. He removed with his parents to Blair county in the same State in 1840, where he attended the public schools and Williamsburg Academy, and afterwards Dickinson College, graduating in 1855. He spent some time in teaching as principal of Berrysburg Seminary and Boarding School. Later he entered Jefferson Medical College and the Medical Department of the University of New York. He graduated as M. D. in 1858, and the same year received the degree of A. M. from Dickinson. Coming to Iowa in the latter year he settled at Tipton, Cedar county, where he commenced the practice of his profession. At the outbreak of the civil war he was commissioned by Abraham Lincoln as Assistant Surgeon in the regular army, and stationed at Georgetown, D. C., where he had charge of five general hospitals. On account of disability he resigned from this position in the fall of 1862, returning to Tipton where he resumed the practice of his profession. He held the position of examining surgeon in the Pension Department for seven years, and upon the organization of the Medical Department of the State University in 1869 he was called to the chair of obstetrics. He resigned this position in 1870, removing to Des Moines, where he has since practiced his profession. He was secretary of the State Medical Society for seven years. In May, 1885, he was elected Secretary of the State Board of Health, which position he has held down to this time. The Iowa Health Bulletin has been under his editorial charge since its first issue sixteen years ago. Dr. Kennedy is a member of the American Medical Association, the American Public Health Association, the American Academy of Medicine, the National Conference of State and Provincial Boards of Health, and of the Iowa State Medical Society. He represented this State and the State Board of Health in the International Health Congress held in London in 1891. He has been a member of several civic and fraternal organizations and is the author of numerous papers upon medical and sanitary subjects.



Very Respectfully

J. F. Kennedy

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of birth; father's name; mother's maiden name; color; race and number of marriage; full name of bride; maiden name—if a widow; place of residence; age; place of birth; father's full name; mother's full maiden name; color; race and number of marriage; where and when married; by whom married—name and official position; witnesses; date of return of marriage and when registered.

The clerk of every county in the State has a copy of this blank form and is expected to enter therein the data called for, and the law requires him on or before the first day of June of each year to furnish a copy thereof to the Secretary of the State Board of Health, who as they are received, arranges them by counties alphabetically and has them substantially bound.

A moment's reflection will show the great value and importance of such a record from a domestic, social and legal, as well as historical standpoint, especially when it is considered that the original records have been destroyed in some of the counties from which they were sent to the office of the State Board of Health. It ought also to emphasize the importance of care and fidelity on the part of the respective county clerks in requiring all the data indicated to be furnished them and in making full and complete returns to the State Board of Health as the law directs. The fact is, however, that many of these items have been omitted from our reports by the county clerks and to that extent they are imperfect. The probability, however, is that the reports of marriages so far as number and names are concerned are approximately, if not absolutely, correct.

BIRTHS.

From 1880 until 1894 the physicians and midwives of the state were obliged, under a penalty of ten dollars for each neglect, to report within thirty days after their occurrence, to the clerk of the county in which they occurred, all births and deaths coming under their professional observation.

This requirement, though it may be somewhat humiliating to admit, was never very cordially approved by the medical profession, from the fact that it entailed a duty, and a labor in its performance, without any compensation. Because of this, some, and because of indifference, others, refused or neglected to comply with the law. The supreme court, however, in a case to test the constitutionality of the requirement, declared the law reasonable and constitutional—one that the physicians as members of a noble profession should cheerfully comply with.

The data required to be furnished by physicians and midwives in the case of births, embraced the following items: full name of child; sex; number of child by this mother; color; time of birth; place of birth; born in wedlock? yes or no; father's full name; age; occupation; and place of birth; mother's place of birth; age; maiden name and residence; name and address of medical or other attendant; returned by; date of return. As in the case of marriages and deaths, the county clerks are obliged to furnish to the Secretary of the State Board of Health, on or before the first day of June a report of all births occurring within their respective counties for the year ending with the thirty-first day of December immediately preceding.

Notwithstanding, however, the decision of the supreme court above referred to, and the professional obligations resting upon the physicians of the State to make these reports to the county clerks, from which only his returns could be copied, there were many who still neglected or refused to do so; and hence their patrons did not have the pleasure and the State and science lost the benefits to be derived from such records when faithfully reported, compiled and deposited in the archives of the respective counties and State. This neglect, however, does not lessen the value of those that are reported and are thus incorporated into the history of the State.

Because of the failure on the part of the physicians of

the State to faithfully report births and deaths, the legislature in 1894 relieved the physicians and midwives of this obligation, and so changed the law as to have these casualties collected by the assessors appointed by the county auditors, upon blanks furnished by the State Board of Health.

In order to render this task as easy as possible for the assessor the State Board of Health only required information as to the name of the child; sex; date of birth; place of birth; mother's full maiden name; and father's full name. It is to be regretted that the change in the method of collecting these statistics was not an improvement upon the former one. The assessors, though furnished with proper blanks, by the county auditors and paid and sworn to do their duty, neglected to do so in so many cases that the county clerks in a State Convention held in the city of Des Moines in the fall of 1901 unanimously declared the present law ineffective and recommended a return to the former one. The former law with a reasonable compensation for each complete return of a birth or death, and a sufficient penalty including the right and duty of the State Board of Medical Examiners to revoke the certificates of physicians convicted of neglecting or refusing to comply with the law, would secure, as they have in most of the eastern states, vital statistics so complete and reliable as to be valuable for historical, legal and sanitary purposes.

DEATHS.

The law relating to the reporting of deaths, prior to 1894 was the same as in the case of births. The data sought to be obtained were as follows: Name of deceased; nationality; sex; color; age and occupation; date, cause and place of death; social condition—single, married, widow or widower; place and date of burial and name of physician making the report.

After the law was changed so as to place the collection of these data in the hands of the assessors as above stated in the case of births, the data required were as follows: Full

name, sex, age, occupation, date when born; single, married, widow or widower; place of death; cause of death and place of burial. The same incompleteness obtained in regard to these data as in the case of births, and for the same reason.

Yet with all these defects, not in the facts reported, but because of the data not reported, the vital statistics thus collected, arranged and conveniently and substantially bound are invaluable to the State as exploiting important events in the personal history of persons who were born, married and who died in Iowa.

Births, marriages and deaths are important, if not the most important epochs in the life of any individual. There is a natural and commendable pride in the place of one's birth and surely to be born in Iowa is to be born well.

Reliable vital statistics, furnishing the data above suggested are of great value as a basis for sanitary operations. Such returns would not only show the relative proportion of deaths to births and of births to marriages and the ratio of increase of population by births and by immigration, respectively, but giving the causes of death in different localities would enable the State and local Boards of Health, where there is an apparent or real excess of deaths from any disease to ascertain the cause and to more intelligently adapt and apply remedies for its removal.

Every State should have a reliable bureau of information, especially relating to the personnel of its citizens and the vital statistics above detailed is the nearest and only approach to it in Iowa. Some interesting incidents might be given illustrating the advantages of such records. A gentleman came to this State from England some years ago, leaving his wife and family behind him. His wife heard from him for two or three years and then there came a lapse in the correspondence. The wife sought to get information in various ways and finally wrote to the secretary of the State Board of Health. She gave the name of the county from which he had last written. An examination of the

records in the office of the State Board of Health showed that in the county named a party corresponding to the name given had died, that he was a native of England, married, etc.; the date and cause of death; place of burial; and name of the attending physician. The facts were reported to the wife and a letter received from her later expressed her gratitude and appreciation at the information furnished, sad as it was.

There have been innumerable instances where parents have sought official information respecting the birth or death of their children and where parents have looked for a record of their marriage. In counties where the original records have been destroyed by fire or otherwise, the copies of these records deposited safely with the State are of inestimable advantage.

The foregoing is suggestive of what the State has aimed to do in the way of collecting vital statistics; what it has done; what it has failed to do and the cause of such failure as well as some of the benefits of such statistics. It also suggests the duty of the legislature to so amend our present law as to cure its defects and assure such a registration in the future as will reflect the intelligence of our people, and place our State on an equality with the most progressive States in the Union.

DES MOINES, IOWA, NOVEMBER 19, 1903.

THE PRESENT has been one of the severest winters experienced since the first settlement of the west. *The Dubuque Express* of the 17th inst. says that, in the morning of that day, the mercury stood at 40 degrees below zero. At Galena on the 7th, it was 32 below zero. We have had colder weather, and a great deal more of it than in any of the thirteen winters we have spent in the west.—*Bloomington (Muscatine) Herald, Feb. 24, 1843.*

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