

[October 3, 1933]

The death of Dr. Charles O. Probst on the second of April, 1933, marked the passing of a distinguished figure in the health service of the state and the nation, and a loss to the Kit-Kat Club of a kindly genial companion whose contributions, formal and informal, through the twenty-one years of his membership are a part of its fine traditions.

Dr. Probst was born in Middleport, Ohio, on the 4th of December, 1857. Receiving his preliminary education in the schools of that city, he entered the Miami Medical College in Cincinnati, from which he graduated in 1882. In that year he began the practice of medicine in West Virginia, soon moving to Athens and thence to Columbus.

The State Board of Health was created by an act of the legislature in April 1886. Two secretaries, both from Cleveland, resigned, each after a month in office and in July of that same year that the Board was created Dr. Probst was appointed Secretary by Governor Foraker. He was then but a few months over twenty-eight years of age. He was destined to serve for twenty-five years and to attain long before he resigned both national and international recognition as an outstanding leader in the field of public health work.

When he entered upon the duties of his office Dr. Probst had had no training in Public Health or Hygiene, there being no such course in the curriculum of his Medical College; in fact but few of the medical schools of this country offered at that time any training in this most important branch of medicine, which comprehended what a few seers in the profession thought the state should do for the prevention of disease and the protection of the public health.

It has been said that "Where there is no vision, the people perish". Dr. Probst had not only the vision, as many another may have had, but he had the enthusiasm, insight, courage, patience and resourcefulness with which he was able to bring his vision down out of the clouds and translate it into effective means to save the people from perishing. He had a quick and instinctive realization that education in the problems of public health was the first and indeed the indispensable basis for any hope of progress - education not only of the governor, and the legislature but the people at large, including, all too often, the members of his own medical profession.

Bills to enlarge the power of the Board of Health to deal with vital statistics, communicable disease, purification of food and water supply, disposal of sewage and kindred matters affecting public health, no matter how wisely conceived or ably drawn, had little prospect of becoming law and being accepted as common practice, till the minds of the people were turned in that direction. Ignorance, apathy, stubbornness, penuriousness, vested

interest and often suspicion of his own motives, had to be met and changed, first into acquiescence, and then into a conviction equal to his own that what he stood for was reasonable, sound and necessary. For the performance of this large task Dr. Probst was admirably equipped. The simple eloquence of his voice and pen, sincerity and the transparent honesty that were outstanding traits of a winning personality, and what amounted to ~~be~~ a positive genius for friendship were all endowments that aided immeasurably in his constant educational campaign and made him unusually successful in his legislative programs.

Dr. Probst grew with his job and his job grew with him. When he began his work he had a small desk in a corner of the one room that was at that time the office of the Secretary of State. He constituted in his own person the entire personnel of the department, and his salary for full time service was sixteen hundred dollars a year. Years afterward - writing of his experience at a meeting of the American Public Health Association in Mexico City he said, "In many ways this was the most enjoyable trip I ever had, and was one of the compensations for health work with a meager salary that riches could not buy". Dr. Probst lived to see his department increase in size before the depression made retrenchment necessary, to a personnel of one hundred and forty with annual budget of \$600,000.00. The twenty-five annual reports, that punctuate the period of his service, the first of which he wrote in their entirety,

reading the proof himself, detail the enlarging conception of the role of the state in the prevention of disease and the protection of the public health - a steady growth for which he was almost solely responsible. It has been aptly said that the history of the Public Health work in Ohio from its beginning nearly fifty years ago down to the present is told in the career of Dr. Charles O. Probst.

To frame the bills that embodied his ideas, it was necessary for him to know a great deal about law and sanitary engineering. It is the testimony of his colleagues that Dr. Probst fitted himself to meet as an equal experts in both these fields, in either of which he might have attained conspicuous success, had he not chosen to remain with a larger task where the satisfactions and rewards were not to be measured in terms of money.

Dr. Probst served under Governors Foraker, Campbell, McKinley, Burnell, Nash, Pattison, Harris, Herrick, and Harmon, with all of them he was on friendly terms - always a welcome visitor in their offices, a privilege which he never abused, and with two or three of them he was on terms that were almost intimate. It is a tribute to the confidence these men had in the worth of Dr. Probst and the single mindedness of his devotion to the work of his department that not one of them ever asked a question about the political faith of any of his employees, or sought in any way to interfere in the workings of his department. Indeed he once said he doubted if

several of these governors knew whether he voted as a democrat or a republican. This may be noted as a tribute to these governors as well as to Dr. Probst.

Full credit at some proper time and place will be given to Dr. Probst for the pure water supply enjoyed by the people of Columbus, which has resulted in a disappearance of Typhoid Fever from this community so nearly complete that many a medical student finishes his schooling without opportunity to see or study a single case. This disease, until the intervention of the State Board of Health provided a pure safe drinking water, was with us all the time, and was responsible for a tremendous amount of sickness and an appalling loss of life, as the memory of most of us bears witness. It is mentioned as a single illustration of the countless ways in which the work of Dr. Probst has touched the happiness and lives of the people of this state - accomplishments which unlike the matter of personnel and budget do not lend themselves readily to figures.

Worthy of note also in connection with this vital accomplishment, is a long article that appeared in the Ohio State Journal over the signatures of five of the leading physicians of Columbus protesting against the filtration plant and urging the people to vote against this unnecessary expense because, as they declared, no system of water purification could remove the germs of Typhoid Fever or other disease germs. (Starling Loving, D.N. Kinsman, J.F. Baldwin, Will Hamilton, E. B. Fullerton).

There was but one course left - to educate the people. This was done through a series of addresses before public gatherings in which the process of water purification was explained with proof of what it had accomplished for other large communities. The bond issue was carried, and the most important life saving measure ever presented to the people of Columbus became a reality.

Dr. Probst resigned his position as Secretary of the State Board of Health in 1911 after twenty-five years of service. He was appointed to the Public Health Council in 1917 and gave from that time until his death, unsparingly of his wisdom and experience to the department he had built through a quarter of a century.

In addition to these offices Dr. Probst was for ten years Secretary, and later President of the American Public Health Association, a group composed of the leading health workers of the United States, Canada, Cuba and Mexico. Correspondence incident to the duties of his offices in this society, and the annual meetings of the Association in one or another of these countries gave him wide contacts and resulted in many rich friendships among eminent authorities in his field.

He founded the Ohio Society for the Prevention of Tuberculosis, since become the Ohio Public Health Association, and was one time its President. He was a founding member of the National Tuberculosis Association, a member of the American Climatological and Clinical Association, and of course a member

of the American Medical Association, the Ohio State Medical Association and the Columbus Academy of Medicine where he was held in the highest esteem. For years he was the medical director of the Columbus Tuberculosis Society, giving through many hours each week at the Dispensary his effort and specialized knowledge to the prevention and cure of a disease that had claimed his particular attention from the beginning of his career.

Probably Dr. Probst's greatest joy and pride was in the beautiful Tuberculosis Sanitorium at Mt. Vernon. The conception of this institution in his mind, the quick frank hostility of the governor when Dr. Probst first broached the project to him; the patient steps by which Dr. Probst turned opposition into enthusiastic support, the development of state wide favorable sentiment, the sifting of scores of sites and the final selection of that at Mt. Vernon, the choice of the architect, the conferences with him and the building commission, their preliminary inspection of the foremost sanitoria in this country, the final completion of the beautiful structure at Mr. Vernon and the impressive ceremony of its dedication, its honorable history since that time - all make up a fascinating story which perfectly exemplifies the statement that an institution is but the lengthening shadow of a man.

Dr. Probst had a discriminating appreciation of the better things. He enjoyed good music. He read good books. No one ever saw him amusing himself or wasting his time with what the serious minded is apt to refer to as literary trash. He liked

poetry and was especially fond of Robert Burns, many of whose poems he knew by heart, and would recite with fine feeling on occasion to a sympathetic ear. He had firm convictions in most things to which he gave thought, but he had at the same time broad toleration for the opinions of others. His great delight and relaxation were evenings spent with one or a few choice friends, not in cards or other games, but in talk always in an elevated plane on worth while subjects. In these conversations he was as well an interested and stimulating listener with a faculty of putting others on their mettle and bringing out the best that was in them. Evidence of his intellectual acquisitiveness is shown in his interest in the French language, the study of which he took up in the middle period of his life, perfecting himself so far that he could read French easily and with enjoyment. With his other reading which covered a wide range, he always had a French book under way. For all the keen pleasure he had in the society of men, there was a native dignity and reserve in his personality through which it was difficult to penetrate. He admitted few to his innermost counsels.

Dr. Probst read three papers before the Kit-Kat Club. The first was a discussion of "Some Public Health Problems", February 7, 1918. The second was an estimate and appreciation of Balzac, December 23, 1923; and the third a consideration of "The Influence of the Mind on the Body" on February 21, 1930.



A faithful servant of the common good -  
a loyal and dependable member of our group - the Kit-Kat Club  
records its sense of deep personal loss in the death of  
Dr. Charles O. Probst.

Ludie J. Bigelow

3 October 1933.