

A leader with promise had life cut short by illness

by [Luther Granquist](#) // August 10th, 2012

Anna Johnson, her husband, and her six-month-old child left Norway in April 1868 bound for Fillmore County in Minnesota. The 22-year-old woman was fatigued and ill most of the time on the voyage. On the final leg of her trip, the train trip from Milwaukee to LaCrosse, she became incoherent and confused.

After she arrived in Fillmore County she was maniacal, violent and destructive. Someone, perhaps her husband, sought her commitment to the Hospital for the Insane in St. Peter. When she was admitted there on June 28, 1868, she was diagnosed with mania caused by exhaustion from travel, a diagnosis that may have been given by the physician who examined her in the commitment process.

When Dr. Samuel Shantz, the hospital superintendent, first recorded her history in the hospital casebook, he made no reference to typhoid fever, which often was accompanied by delirium, confusion and fatigue. The 1857 edition of *The History, Diagnosis and Treatment of the Fevers of the United States*, a leading treatise of that time, stated that there was no uniform and satisfactory method of treatment for the disease. Some doctors emphasized bloodletting; others said that purging of the bowel was key. When it became evident that Anna Johnson was not insane, but had typhoid fever, Shantz ordered tonics to be given her, one of the treatment options.

Basically, however, he followed a course of treatment consistent with the conservative conclusion reached in the treatise: "The proper regulation of the diet alone, and time, perform a great part of the cure." But Anna Johnson's condition deteriorated steadily, and on the morning of July 22 she became comatose. She died that afternoon. What happened to her husband is unknown, but his hopes for a new life for his family in a new country were shattered for their baby died as well.

Early that May, Shantz had gone back to Utica, N.Y., where he had worked as an assistant physician at the state hospital before being named superintendent of the new asylum in St. Peter. On May 21 he married Louise Graham, the daughter of one of the leading citizens of that community. The newlyweds returned home shortly before Shantz admitted Anna Johnson to the hospital. About the time that Johnson died, Shantz contracted typhoid fever. No record remains of what treatment he received.

On August 12 the St. Peter Tribune reported that while he had been dangerously ill with the disease, he had rallied and would soon be back to work. He did not recover, however, and died on August 22. His widow returned to Utica, where their daughter, Cornelia, was born the following March.

Shantz's death dashed the hopes of a young couple for a life together, but it also had an impact on the institution that he headed. He did follow practices that would be considered inhumane today. For example, Shantz used the Utica crib to confine patients. But he expressed in patient records a degree of compassion not found in comments made by his successors in the decade that

followed. Especially for children sent there because they were considered “idiots,” or “imbeciles” or “feeble-minded,” life would likely have been different and better had he lived.

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