

The Black Plague of 1887
By Ryan Kelly

The Mullin Family moved to a farmstead west of the P. H. Madison place and then to a house in Chickasaw County. They settled next at farm that is north of Britt, Iowa. Only months before the move they suffered the loss of their infant son, Peter. In 1883 they also lost their five-month-old daughter.

In 1887 a tragedy in the form of Black Diphtheria struck the family and killed five of the Mullin children. Black Diphtheria is an infectious bacterial disease. Two of the Mullin boys, Hugh and Frank, were infected, but they survived. At first they thought they had lost Frank and laid him in their front yard. They weren't positive if he was dead or not, so they dipped a feather in kerosene and stuck the feather down his throat. He proceeded to cough up phlegm and lived. Their property went under quarantine. Britt law enforcement had to come to their house every day and give them items of importance because they couldn't leave due to the quarantine.

In the blackness of the night, the Mullins took their dead children to the graveyard to bury them. They had to do this secretly at night because orders of the quarantine would not allow them to leave their homestead, for fear of the disease spreading. Imagine the terror and heartbreak of the family, having to take their own sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, to bury them in secret.

During the worst part of the Mullin children's sickness, three doctors came and attended to them. Unfortunately, since the disease was so deadly and unknown to the doctors, they were only able to save Frank and Hugh. It is believed the plague infected

the family because they always opened their home as a resting place for travelers who could have brought in the disease.

The Mullin's suffered more of a loss than any other in town, according to *Recollections of Britt, Iowa* published by Graphic Publishing Co., Inc., Lake Mills, Iowa. The extraordinary part of this story is how they overcame this loss.

My ancestors had to overcome the hardship of the plague, and they did. The Mullins eventually adopted a little girl named Josephine off the Orphan Train and later had a little girl named Ella. Ella married Frank Kelly. They are my great-grandparents. This story is passed on to remind us how you can always overcome difficult times. These are special events for my family because my sister is adopted, like Josephine, and her name is Ella. I think ²that that shows that they did overcome and they started over. What else could they do? They were a good Christian family that invited travelers into their home. They had five of their seven children die, possibly because of their hospitality. They were good people and I will carry their name proudly.

When I visited my ancestor's graves, that were killed by Black Diphtheria, I was taken aback, because the youngest child who was buried in the dead of night was only five years old. I couldn't believe what the Mullins must have felt when they were standing where I was in the graveyard. At first I felt angry that they had brought people into their home and in return had five of their seven children die. Then I realized that without that happening in my family, we might not have adopted my little sister.

Today my mom honors the family legacy of adoption by helping others with their adoption processes. She does this by serving as the assistant executive director of the

Kansas branch of Bethany Christian Services, the biggest adoption agency in the United States.

The one thing I have learned from this story is that you can overcome any hardship if you only keep your options open and look for others in need. That's what the Mullins did. They saw Josephine on the Orphan Train and knew that they could help her and did. I have also learned is that things won't always go your way, but it'll be okay in the end. I am proud of my family because they were able to overcome all of these horrendous tragedies.