

## **Hancock County, Account Books of Dr. James Madison Ely, 1851–1866**

*Lori Osting and Christina R. Bunting*

Dr. James Madison Ely practiced medicine in New Palestine, Indiana, from 1847 to 1895. He was born September 18, 1821, in Tennessee and came to Indiana in 1828 with a relative after the deaths of both of his parents. He lived in Arlington, Rush County, where he worked as a store clerk before becoming a teacher. While teaching, he studied medicine under Dr. Erastus Bussell of Arlington. In 1847 Ely attended medical school in Chicago. On June 17, 1847, he married Mary Adams, and later that year he started his medical practice in New Palestine. When Ely retired in 1895, his son Lucian took over the practice. Ely died December 13, 1905, after a “lingering illness,” at the age of eighty-four. His funeral was held at his home in New Palestine, and he was buried next to his wife at the New Palestine Cemetery.<sup>1</sup>

Two of Ely’s account books for the years 1851–1866 are held in the Indiana Historical Society’s William Henry Smith Memorial Library.<sup>2</sup> The account book for 1853–1855 was examined for this article. Ely recorded the names of his patients, the dates on which he visited them, the services he provided, and how much he charged. He also recorded how the patient paid for the services. During this period, Ely charged \$3 to \$5 for an “obstetrical case” and \$2 to “reduce a hernia.” He was often called upon to “draw a tooth.” Most frequently, he charged patients for a visit and “medi.” Sometimes he specified which medicine he prescribed. Common prescriptions were for quinine, arsenic, eye water, “coff” syrup, silver nitrate, red precipitate, tincture, bitters, paregoric, ipecac, pink root, blue mass, and camphor. He also gave vaccinations.

Customers sometimes paid the doctor by cash or “note,” but often goods or services were traded to pay a debt. Ely credited \$20 for chopping ten cords of wood, \$3 for hauling, and 75 cents for one day’s work. He also applied credits for payments in corn, whiskey, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, pork, hay, apples, honey, and beef. Occasionally, when Ely was unable to collect on a debt, he wrote in his account book that the customer paid “by being a shit ass,” “by being middle aged shit ass,” “by being old shit ass” or “by being poore not able to pay.”

A wealth of information can be gleaned from Ely’s records. In addition to family health history, these account books provide clues about birth dates and how a family lived—such as whether they were able to pay by cash or traded goods or labor. These records can also help tie a person to New Palestine during this time period and identify names of family members.

Ely listed debts on one page and credits on a second page, both pages bearing the same number. The following pages are missing: credits page 184, debts page 185, credits page 186, debts page 187, credits page 188, and both credits and debts for pages 189–92. Names are indexed in the front of the book. Occasionally a name was spelled differently in the book’s index than in the book. In these cases, entries for both spellings with cross-references have been included in the index below.

In some cases information has been added to the index in brackets after a name or page number. “[Pages missing]” indicates that both debt and credit pages are missing, so while the name appears in the index, there is no additional information about the person in the book. “[Debts missing]” indicates that the “debts” page is missing for the person, so there is no information about what services that patient received. “[Credits missing]” means that the “credits” page is missing for the person, so there is no information about how this patient paid Ely. “[No page]” means that Ely wrote a name but not a page number in the index. Other items in parentheses are notes made by Ely and were transcribed as written.

## **Notes**

1. “Death of James M. Ely,” *Hancock Democrat* (Greenfield, IN), December 14, 1905. Dr. Ely and his wife’s shared headstone can be found at the New Palestine Cemetery.
2. James M. Ely, “Account Books, 1851–1866,” BV 0061–0062, William Henry Smith Memorial Library, Indiana Historical Society.

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