

# Wood Alcohol Blindness Needs Study

The story of the blindness that comes from wood alcohol has not yet been completely told. A further study of this problem might well be made by the newly dedicated Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute in Baltimore, Dr. George E. DeSchweinitz of the University of Pennsylvania suggested in his address at the dedication exercises.

Physicians now generally believe that it is not the wood alcohol but some impurity in it, possibly fusel oil, which is nearly always found in commercial wood alcohol, that causes the blindness. The bad liquor prevalent in recent years often contains wood alcohol and has been the cause of much wood alcohol poisoning and blindness. However, wood alcohol may also be inhaled or it may be absorbed through the skin. This is an important hazard in certain industrial operations.

The dedication of the new Wilmer Institute, devoted to the study and treatment of eye diseases, Dr. DeSchweinitz considered an outstanding contribution to American ophthalmology, which is the branch of medicine devoted to the eye. Other landmarks mentioned by this famous eye specialist were the invention of bifocal glasses by Benjamin Franklin in 1764; and the establishment of the first eye infirmary in this country at New London, Conn., in 1870.

One of the first operations for cataract performed in this country was done by Edward Reynolds of Boston. On his return from Europe, where he had been studying the eye and its diseases, he found his father suffering from cataract. According to his own statement, he "went to his surgery, offered a prayer to the Deity, took a glass of sherry and went ahead to do his best."

Routine examination and care of the eyes of all patients entering the hospital first was established in this country at the hospital of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School by Dr. Charles Norris of that institution. This was a particularly important step in the development of ophthalmology, Dr. DeSchweinitz pointed out. He declared that further development of this medical specialty would come through further cooperation between eye specialist, regular physician and pathologist, the latter being the specialist who studies in the laboratory the changes brought about in the body's tissues by disease. Conditions at the new Wilmer Institute are particularly fortunate both for the individual patient and for the development of the science of ophthalmology.

*Science News-Letter, October 26, 1929*

## Old Chaldaean Gods Not Yet Dead—Continued

never such beards in the world before, neither have there been any since, as were worn by the men of Assyria.

In the meantime, the wisent, forgotten by the high civilizations of antiquity, or remembered only as a legend or apotheosized into the Mesopotamian pantheon, lived on in the dark parts of the map; the plains of Greater Asia and the forests of Europe. When the western world began to stir, under Greece and Rome, he was occasionally noticed by some curious traveler. Tacitus, for example, mentions him. But there is really very little about him in the literature of classical antiquity.

In the Middle Ages two or three writers took notice of him. Albertus Magnus in the thirteenth century, the greatest naturalist between Aristotle and modern times, described the wisent as though he had seen him at first hand, distinguished him from the aurochs, the now extinct gigantic wild ox of the forests, and set down his range as not extending beyond the eastern part of Germany. The wisent was apparently still abundant in Europe.

At the beginning of the present century the wisent herds had dwindled greatly, due partly to hunting and partly to the taking over of their original range for pasture and plowland by the increasing population.



*BULL AMULET, with artificial beard, from the Queen's grave, at Ur*

But there were still probably more wisent in the old world than there were bison in the new. The Czar had a private game preserve in Esthonia, where there was a comparatively large herd; and there was a still larger herd, of possibly 1,100 head, on crown lands in the Caucasus. There were also a few individual animals scattered among the zoological gardens in western European capitals.

Then came the World War. The trampling of armies, and the starva-

tion times of the war and post-war period, played havoc with the Esthonian herd. Not a single animal was left alive. A couple of years ago the Soviet government sent an expedition into the Caucasus to hunt up the 1,100 animals supposed to be there. They could not find one. That herd also is probably wiped out, the work of undisciplined local tribesmen.

The sole remaining hope of keeping the species alive now rests with the fifty or sixty surviving in public and private collections in northwestern Europe, mostly in Germany, the Baltic countries and England. An international society for their preservation has been established.

The situation of the wisent is admittedly serious, but not hopeless, unless an epidemic of some bovine ailment, such as hoof and mouth disease, cuts down the stock too drastically. The splendid herd of American bison now in Yellowstone National Park, numbering about a thousand head, was started from a bull and a few cows owned by a western rancher a generation or so ago. The much larger bison herd in Canada was similarly founded. So the friends of the wisent in Europe still hope to save alive the great beast that Nimrod knew in Elam, and whose very memory was a thing of awe in Babylon the mighty and in Nineveh.

*Science News-Letter, October 26, 1929*