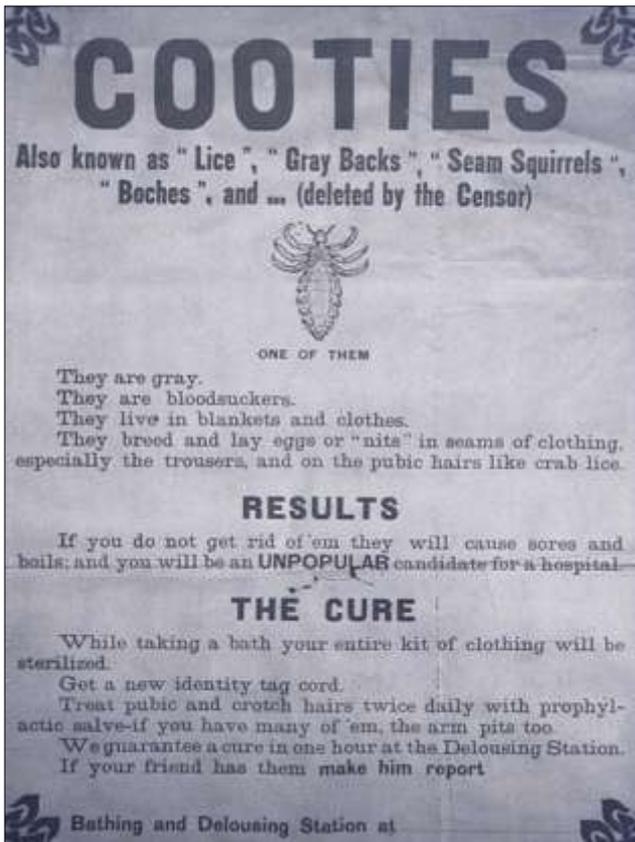


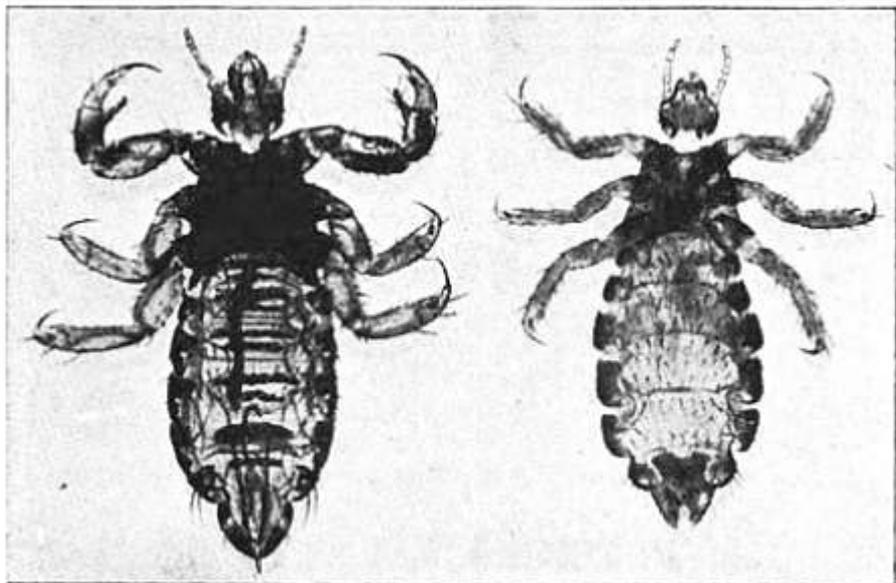
In My Backyard Cooties!!

Scourge of Soldiers and Kids



WWI Cootie poster brought back by a Sanderson Doughboy.

When I was doing my student teaching in Rufina DeLeon's fourth grade classroom at Marathon, one day we were confronted with an uncomfortable situation...cooties, or, head lice, body lice or gray backs. In World War I they were known as "arithmetic bugs" because "they added to our troubles, subtracted from our pleasures, divided our attention, and multiplied like hell." (Robert B. Asprey (1996). At Belleau Wood. University of North Texas Press. p. 26.)



MR. AND MRS. COOTIE (MUCH LARGER THAN LIFE).

I had never dealt with cooties, nor had my children ever come down with it so I had to depend on my mentor Rufina's expertise at sorting out the nasty little bugs. Years later at Sanderson Elementary School we had several outbreaks and I learned from the "old hands" how to use sharpened pencils to sift through the hair looking for the lice and their nits (eggs) without contaminating myself. Because, once they get a foothold it takes a while to get rid of them. It gives a new meaning to the word "nitpicking."



Cooties have been a problem for humans since cave-dwelling days. They really came to light during the Civil War when soldiers on both sides became infested with nasty little gray backs, their term for lice. The men would sit around camp when not in battle and search their clothing for the lice and nits. When one was found, it was plucked off and smashed. That was about the only treatment at the time.

Run ahead to the Great War in Europe, World War I. The trenches, clothing, bedding and buildings became infested with lice, and that was where the term "cootie" first came into American slang. The British soldiers had brought the term with them from the native word "kutu," a Malaysian word for a parasitic insect. The Americans picked it up quickly because the trench infestations were almost unbearable. Even the Germans were affected in their trenches. Because soldiers in the beginning were not able to wash their clothes, by the end of the war the infestations were cut by 97% using mobile laundry wagons that could go right up to the front, and by delousing stations which through treatment could cleanse the human hosts. The delousing stations were called "Mills" by our Doughboys. You went into



WW I Soldiers “reading” their clothing to find and remove cooties.



Photo: History.com

German soldiers had the same problem with cooties.

the Mill dirty, tired and infested with cooties and came out completely cleaned, both their clothing and their bodies, ready to jump back into the fray.



Cootie game, ca 1949

When the soldiers came back home the term "cootie" entered the general language of the U. S. It wasn't long until the term was used by children to hurl an insult at their playmates. Nobody wanted to have "cooties," even though they didn't really know what a cootie was, and to accuse another kid of having cooties was very embarrassing. Children were said to have been infected by contact with a child with cooties, or by contact with a child of the opposite sex. Embarrassing for the victim, but always guaranteed to get a laugh or two at the other's expense. Soon the children accused their victims of having "girl cooties" or "boy cooties," depending on the sex of the rejected child.

Eventually, many games were invented using the tag line "Cooties." I remember a game that came out by that name in the 1950s where a single dice was rolled and plastic models of cooties were assembled, each of six body parts having a corresponding number. If you rolled a "six" you got one leg, and if you rolled a 1 you got a body or rolling a 2 got you a head, making the game a contest to see who could finish their cootie first. You might end up with a pile of body parts but nothing on which to mount them. It was very popular and sold millions of units, and is still being produced today.

Today we are still plagued with cooties at school, real, live cooties. There are a variety of medicated soaps and shampoos on the market, as well as a "nit comb" for removing nits from the hair. They work, but keeping the hair clean and regular bathing are good preventative actions. Just like "Only you can prevent forest fires," it can well be said that, "Only you can prevent cootie attacks."

And what's in your backyard (or your hair?)