

1873: Smallpox in Lavaca County

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Amidst all the challenges that we as Lavacans and Texans face with the Covid-19 epidemic, I wondered if Lavaca County citizens of the past had faced similar obstacles and what measures citizens or their government took to protect them from widespread illness and death. Research found that Texas experienced numerous epidemics during the nineteenth century including one of the biggest killers in history: smallpox.

Smallpox is a disease caused by a virus called variola. Individuals can become infected by breathing in virus droplets from an infected person or by direct contact with contaminated objects such as bedding or clothing.

After a person has been exposed, it takes one to two weeks before they become ill. Usually smallpox begins with a high fever, body aches and vomiting. A rash follows that causes blisters that crust and scab. At this point, the individual is highly contagious and remains so for about three weeks or until all the scabs fall off.

Historically, smallpox has an overall fatality rate of about 30%. Those who do recover are often left with permanent scars and sometimes blindness.

When an individual and/or a community is faced with smallpox it is a serious, contagious, and fatal infectious disease with no known cure, only prevention by vaccination.

In 1799, Dr. Valentine Seaman introduced the smallpox vaccine to the United States. Dr. Seaman was given a sample of the vaccine by Dr. Edward Jenner who had successfully developed the smallpox vaccine in 1796. Despite the success of the vaccine, outbreaks still occurred and the public, few of whom understood the benefits of vaccination, remained unconvinced.

The first recorded response in Lavaca County to smallpox was in 1873. While virtually no local newspapers from that time still exist, it is known that a quarantine against smallpox was ordered by the Police Court (Commissioners Court) of Lavaca County in February of 1873.

At a special called session on February 28th, the following order was issued:

When it was ordered by the Court that a strict quarantine be and the same is hereby established around the Town of Hallettsville and also around the house or

houses infected or hereafter to be infected with the disease of smallpox, and the presiding Justice of Lavaca County is hereby authorized and empowered to appoint all necessary guards to carry the quarantine into effect, and that he shall see personally or by deputy that the same is strictly enforced, and all guards appointed under this order shall be subject to his orders, and he is hereby fully authorized and empowered to adopt any and all measures necessary to prevent the spread of the disease.

Each guard was to work 12 hours per day and be paid the sum of three dollars per day. Any guard found derelict of duty would forfeit his pay and be dismissed.

In March of 1873, one of the few existing copies of the Hallettsville Herald & Planter published a communication that showed that the mortality from smallpox in and about Sweet Home, Lavaca County, has been greatly exaggerated.

From March to July of 1873, the following men were paid by the county as quarantine guards: J.W. Bennett, F. Lindenberg, Morris Cohn, J.A. Youngkin, Geo. P. Hicks, W.H. Hennessey, Mr. King, L. Solomon, Theo Garbade, Thomas Griffith, Hix Green, J.H. Rice, W.H. Bennett, John McCarthy, L. Friedrich (?), J.S. Youngkin, Joseph Arnold, A. Fitch, Anton Appelt, Louis Turner, A. Maples, Leonard Schwartz, Joseph Kahn, Mr. Dowling and Charlie Elstner.

In April, S. Lee Kyle, local newspaper owner, was paid by the county for printing 1000 drafts of the quarantine regulations.

When the quarantine was lifted, it was not recorded in the minutes of the Police Court. By the end of 1873, the county court had moved on to the bigger issue of replacing their deteriorating county courthouse.

The last mention of any illness in the area in October 1873 was a local newspaper article extolling the efforts of the local doctors during the autumn of 1873.

A very great amount of illness has prevailed throughout our county during the present autumn. Scarcely a family has escaped the visitation of some species of fever, and several deaths have occurred. Our physicians, Bennett, Lay, Bristow and Walker have been laboring in the vocation with untiring industry, and to their effort, attendance, and skill, we owe the restoration to health and the preservation of the lives of many of our citizens.

Next: Hallettsville and Yoakum, and the 1890-1891 Smallpox Epidemic.

Sources:

Wikipedia: History of Smallpox

Boethel, Paul C. History of Lavaca County p. 117

Lavaca County Police Court Minutes Book C p. 517-525, 535-536, 545

Houston Telegraph March 20, 1873

Hallettsville Herald & Planter October 23, 1873

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