

## “Keep the back door locked.” The 1890-1891 Smallpox Scare

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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.

\*Note: While this smallpox outbreak began in 1890, only one Hallettsville newspaper (November 27, 1890) still exists.

While the November 27, 1890 Hallettsville Herald reported that the smallpox scare in Yoakum had subsided, the Hallettsville City Council was hearing a quite different version of the situation in a report from Dr. A.A. Ledbetter at their December 2, 1890 meeting.

Dr. Ledbetter reported that he personally had visited Yoakum and had been informed, from what he consider reliable sources, that there existed five well developed smallpox cases in Yoakum with four currently residing at the pest house. He told the councilmen that other cases of fever existed, but had not yet been diagnosed as smallpox.

\*Note: a pest house, plague house, or fever shed was a type of building used for persons afflicted with communicable diseases such as smallpox. Often used for forcible quarantine, many towns and cities also had cemetery for disposal of the dead.

The Hallettsville City Council passed a resolution, based on Dr. Ledbetter’s findings, to establish a quarantine against the City of Yoakum until the Council decided to discontinue the same and that the quarantine was being established for the purpose of preventing the spread of smallpox. It was also resolved that Ledbetter would be in charge of enforcing the quarantine giving him the power to place guards to prevent persons from entering the city (Hallettsville) who were residents of Yoakum or anyone having entered the city via the train. All passengers were to reboard the train. The City of Shiner immediately followed suit.

When the City Council took this action, public opinion was divided and there were strong feelings on both sides. After the city action, Dr. Robert Rutherford, the first Texas State Medical Officer, arrived in Hallettsville on December 4<sup>th</sup> and after

conferring with local officials, went to Yoakum. Before leaving Hallettsville he told the local news media that he doubted the legality of the city council's quarantine. "It is for me to quarantine and not you. You have no right to stop people here," remarked Rutherford. "I shall go to Yoakum, and if I find it necessary I shall close the town, but until you hear from me don't stop any more people."

Later that same evening City Marshall Ballard received a dispatch, dated Yoakum and signed by Rutherford: "I will see that no one leaves Yoakum for Hallettsville on the trains. Would respectfully suggest that you keep the back door locked."

The next day, December 5<sup>th</sup>, it was reported in the Fort Worth Daily Gazette that Dr. Rutherford, state health official, had quarantined the town of Yoakum and had ordered the San Antonio and Aransas Pass railway to deliver no freight and depart no passengers at that point. Rutherford stated that he had ordered the quarantine, not on the number of smallpox cases in Yoakum, which were few, but due to the negligent manner in which the authorities had handled it. No precautions against the spread of the disease had been taken.

Immediately, Yoakum officials publically replied that the charge against them of neglect of duty in the smallpox cases was unjust and caused no little indignation.

Back in Hallettsville, the City Council appointed C.F. Lehmann, Mr. Dickey, and E.H. Mitchel to locate a suitable location for the erection of a pest house if it was found necessary to build one.

The situation was escalating as the mayor of Cuero said that they too were establishing a quarantine against Yoakum.

On December 6<sup>th</sup>, Yoakum authorities reported the first death from smallpox at the pest house. The victim was Mrs. Cora Ellington, the wife of John Ellington of Hempstead. When she was diagnosed with smallpox she was moved to the pest house about a mile from town and the boarding house where she had been residing, was placed under strict quarantine. Three new cases have since appeared, all who were exposed to the first case which was an individual arriving in Yoakum from San Antonio.

It was reported that Dr. Si Youngkin, the attending physician, had been placed under quarantine, but as yet, he has not been diagnosed with smallpox. Youngkin's case proved to be a case of fever only.

A disagreement between the city officials of Yoakum and Dr. Rutherford was beginning to be played out in the Galveston Daily News.

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, T.W. Simmons, Mayor of Yoakum, issued the following statement: “There is not a known case of smallpox within the city limits of Yoakum. There are only three cases of smallpox in the pest house, which is one mile from town and strictly quarantined. Dr. Rutherford expressed himself as satisfied with the way his order had been carried out when in the city last Thursday. Should any more suspicious cases occur they will be immediately quarantined and every precaution taken to prevent the spread of the disease, which we now think under perfect control.”

The mayor issued this statement due to the fact that Rutherford had ordered this point (Yoakum) quarantined, but did not quarantine San Antonio, from which the first case originated.

Dr. Rutherford fired back that he was, in fact, fully satisfied with the prompt management in Yoakum, and for proof Yoakum should ask the people of Cuero, who withheld an embargo against you on my statement. However, the News, received a dispatch from Cuero that stated while Rutherford had said there was no danger from Yoakum, the embargo was not raised in Cuero or elsewhere. Even the mail from Yoakum to Cuero was being returned by Cuero.

On December 8<sup>th</sup>, a Mrs. Lyons died at the pest house outside Yoakum, which reduced the cases to two, and one recovered. Despite the death, a citizens meeting was held to try and have the quarantine raised by Rutherford based on the disease was under control and no danger exists from Yoakum cases, all located one mile from town.

The Galveston Daily News article ended with the statement: “Many attribute the quarantine by neighboring towns to their jealousy at Yoakum’s remarkable growth and prosperity.”

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, the Galveston Daily News reported that the quarantine against Yoakum was raised at all points by order of Dr. Rutherford on December 9, 1890.

Now that this wave of smallpox had slowed, the local talk turned to how to prevent future outbreaks.

At a January 2<sup>nd</sup> called meeting of the Hallettsville City Council, the meeting had been called by the mayor, M.S. Townsend, in response to solicitations of citizens for the city to take some action in regard to quarantining the City of Hallettsville

against any points infected with smallpox. The subject was discussed and against the expressed wishes of the mayor, a motion was made and seconded that the council adjourn without taking any definite action in regard to the quarantine. The motion carried. The above vote was ordered recorded on the minutes of the meeting to relieve the mayor in a partial manner from the blame incident to any direful consequences of not taking immediate action. This was done by the request of the mayor.

At the regular meeting on January 5<sup>th</sup>, the city council voted to pay the following quarantine guards for services rendered in 1890: J.D. Houchins, Tom Barrett, James Dowling, Rus. Jones, J.B. Stone, Emmett Smothers, Jos. Pustjofsky and S.L. Bennett. They also received the report from the pest house committee. No definite location had been located, so the committee was granted more time to act.

In the January 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the Hallettsville Herald, a letter to the editor was published written by J.E. Lay M.D. While the letter did cover information on the spread and symptoms of smallpox, the author of the letter noted that he did not write the letter on how to treat the disease, but rather how to prevent it. What will prevent it: vaccination?

At the January 10<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Hallettsville City Council, Dr. Ledbetter called attention to the necessity of compulsory vaccination as a safeguard against smallpox. Since it was recommended by the health physician that vaccination be made compulsory, it was ordered by the City Council of Hallettsville that it being necessary to protect the citizens of our town, that all parties be vaccinated and that vaccination is hereby made compulsory.

Parties could be vaccinated free of charge by visiting one of the following physicians: Drs. A.A. Ledbetter, J.E. Lay, T.R. Knox, E.M. Rabb, and Dr. Johnson. The resolution was adopted it being understood that the first three physicians named would vaccinate for free if the city would furnish the vaccine. The City Secretary was requested to contact Drs. Rabb and Johnson if they were willing to do likewise.

Later in January, the local newspaper published an article stating that while many newspapers had a great deal to say about the compulsory vaccination ordinance, that the City of Houston had followed suit and ordained likewise. In Houston, a house to house canvass was to be made and any person who resists would be fined \$50.00. The local newspaper also published that it believed that it was a wise step for our city to follow the example set by Columbus and Weimar in passing an

ordinance making vaccination compulsory. It is much better to appropriate a few dollars for that purpose than to spend it establishing ineffective quarantines.

### **Postscript**

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

Next: Smallpox: 1900 – 1901

### Sources:

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