

“Yes, We Have No Small Pox, We Have No Small Pox Today”

The 1900 – 1901 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.

The small pox was not a surprise. The local newspaper reported in February of 1900 that small pox was in Gonzales, Wharton and Colorado counties and put forth the question: How soon will it be before small pox breaks out in Hallettsville or some other town in our county?

That question was answered in the March 7, 1900 special session of the Lavaca County Commissioners Court meeting when it was made known to the Court that small pox now existed in Lavaca County. The Court ordered the County Health Official, Dr. A.F. Newbury, to take whatever action or precautions he deemed necessary to prevent the spread of the disease.

During the entire month of March, the small pox situation kept escalating in Yoakum. First there was one case, then two, then three. Then on the 15th, a well-developed case was discovered in Yoakum the victim being a woman who had arrived in the city about 10 days previous. What was unknown was how long she had been sick and the number of people she had exposed. A small pox guard was posted around a half block which contained about five or six houses and when the names of the people who were exposed was learned, they were also quarantined.

This is where the reports on the small pox cases get murky. Dr. Newbury reported that the woman and those others exposed with her were placed in a camp of detention in adjoining DeWitt County and that there was not a single case of small pox in Lavaca County.

However, an eyewitness account reported to an area newspaper, presented a different picture. W.P. Bennett, of Karnes County, had visited Yoakum where he had gone to see his sister-in-law, the widow of Dr. Bennett, who was extremely sick. Bennett reported that there were plenty of yellow flags hanging out in Yoakum and a considerable small pox scare was on.

Dr. Newbury insisted that all existing and new cases of small pox were in the detention camp in DeWitt County and that all was clear in Lavaca.

The small pox situation remained stable until November 19, 1900 when at the request of Lavaca County Judge, D.A. Paulus, Dr. Newbury traveled to Sublime. What Newbury found was 12 cases of small pox in one room of a house and one dead child in the same room. The child had succumbed to the disease. Newbury determined that the infection originated in Karnes County. In the days following, Newbury located other cases in four different houses in Sublime. He purchased tents and gathered all the known cases into the tents and made a house to house examination, vaccinating all who had directly or indirectly been exposed and detained at the house and in camp all who had been directly exposed.

However, Newbury was also faced with duplicity. One woman in Sublime told Newbury that she had had the disease seven years previous, so Newbury let her return home and she gave the disease to her entire family. Newbury made her husband her guard by putting him under oath and at their own expense until everything was over and their place could be cleaned.

Ten days later, the State Health Officer, Dr. W.F. Blunt, arrived from Austin on the 3:00 train and went to Sublime with Dr. Newbury. The reports were indicating a spread of the disease with a woman and her seven children being placed in the detention camp the day before.

Dr. Blunt reported to the Court that he had indeed visited, with Dr. Newbury, that detention small pox camp at Sublime and found 15 fresh cases of genuine and well-developed cases of small pox and about the same number convalescent. He reported that all in the camp were well taken care of and he congratulated the Court and Dr. Newbury on their prompt and efficient action. He also reiterated that no cases of small pox were in Hallettsville.

In December, another outbreak of small pox was confirmed when attendees at a teacher institute in Sublime were exposed to a case of small pox. Newbury engaged the assistance of another physician, at his own expense, who aided him in taking temperatures and observing the teachers so they could continue their work. He had the teachers some by his office or he visited their schools daily until all danger had passed.

1900 ended with everyone located at the camp in Sublime being send home and the camps were fumigated and disassembled. Yoakum ended the year with three cases in one family and a case in a local boarding house. The three cases were

quarantined at home and two families were detained at the boarding house until the case recovered. Newbury brought one man from the boarding house to a camp he had established south of Hallettsville on county woodland.

In January of 1901, Newbury answered a call from Dr. H. Clark in Kinkler, who had located two cases in a family in the Hackberry area. Newbury moved these two cases to camp and vaccinated the remaining family members, fourteen in all. The two Hackberry cases were joined by eight other cases located with Dr. Leitzerich, west of Sublime. Newbury did not place a guard at the Hackberry house because Dr. Clark vouched for the family and told Newbury that he felt that they would remain in quarantine voluntarily.

The Hallettsville Herald in the January 17th issued published an interview with Dr. Newbury. In the article he stated that at present he had eight fully developed cases of small pox; six from the Hackberry area. He had a tent erected in a pasture three miles from Hallettsville and there had established a pest camp to which all cases are removed when possible.

Newbury told the newspaper that in almost every instance the disease had been brought in from counties such as Wharton, Brazoria and Fort Bend and other lower counties by migrant cotton pickers who had either been exposed to the disease or carried the disease in their clothing. He also spoke of the fact that while there was a law which placed a heavy fine on anyone who would leave a detention camp without permission from the health officer this law was being entirely overlooked by officers and never enforced.

Dr. Newbury ended his interview stating that more radical action needed to be taken by the County Commissioners and the state legislature to stamp out the disease.

On January 21st Newbury reported that he had located two cases of small pox in Hallettsville and they were quarantined at the home of Henry Mathieu. The cases, the child of City Engineer Mathieu and a young female relative of Mathieu, were both mild and under quarantine, with outside guards posted at the residence. Both patients were vaccinated as well as others exposed.

It was determined that the Hallettsville cases were brought in by a young man, a cousin of those who have it, who left DeWitt County where he had been exposed without undergoing fumigation of his personal belongings. Dr. Newbury states, that though he had no authority to do so, as soon as he heard of the young man

being here with his consent, he gave him two disinfecting baths and fumigated his luggage.

Up to this point, the relationship that existed between Newbury, the Commissioners' Court and the public had been cooperative. When the cases of small pox appeared in Hallettsville, the relationship turned sour and Dr. Newbury's credibility came under fire.

First, local physician, Dr. A.A. Ledbetter who had been treating the little child of Mr. Mathieu, stated that he was positive that it was not small pox that had sickened the child.

Then an article appeared in the Hallettsville Heald on January 31, 1901 where local business owners demanded change.

In the article it stated that for the past week or ten days the business interest of Hallettsville had been suffering greatly from the report that small pox was in the city; not only has the business interest of the town been injured, but also the fear that the disease might spread. Concerning the two cases of the *alleged* small pox, both in the Mathieu household, the newspaper stated that we are told, by the best authority, that neither party had the smallpox.

Hallettsville should have its own health physician, not only to act as a protector of the town, under the present circumstances but, in order that the city council could have the proper backing in issuing order for sanitary work. That the question of quarantine inside the city limits should be in the hands of a city official and that it would be vastly cheaper for the city than the present method. The main thing that the Herald and the business men of Hallettsville want the world to know this the WE HAVE NO SMALL POX.

On February 12th, the publicly scrutinized Dr. Newbury filed the following report to the Lavaca County Commissioners Court.

"You will see by this report that there has been a continuous quarantine since November 19, 1900 and part of the time at three or four different parts of the county. I went to Sublime in answer to Mr. August Weller to Mr. Kettle at the request of the family, to Yoakum first at the request of the mayor, second time, to the request of Dr. Brown and the mayor, to Hackberry by the summons of Dr. Clark.

My diagnosis of the Sublime cases was confirmed by the State Health officer, Dr. H.C. Moore, and Dr. Letzerich. At Yoakum by Drs. Boyd and Brown, at Hackberry I confirmed the diagnosis of Dr. Clark, at Hallettsville my diagnosis was confirmed by Dr. J.E. Lay and Dr. Letzerich and Dr. Moore have confirmed

my diagnosis quite often at the detention quarters. The above cases be substantiated at any time as all these gentlemen know the disease when they see it and are always nearby your court. As to cost, I have been as economical as I possibly could, not spending a cent more than I was compelled to and I ask a thorough investigation of every step I have taken. As to labor, that was necessary I was compelled to do that myself such as burning, boiling and fumigating.”

In February and March , the Commissioners Court actions concerning small pox and Dr. Newbury were sending out mixed message to the public. First, at the February 21st meeting they revoked and rescinded the March 7, 1900 order regarding small pox. Then they issued a new order at their March 28th special meeting based upon a report by beleaguered County Health Officer, Dr. Newbury.

The new order, based on the report that small pox existed in county, stated that it had become necessary to establish a detention camp for the suppression of small pox about 2 miles east of Hallettsville at the county pasture. It also allowed Newbury be paid \$10.00 per week for one visit and \$2.50 per day for all other visits made by him or by any other competent physician under his direction during the week said detention camp as long as quarantine lasts. Newbury was given under directions concerning medications, provisions and transportation to detention camp. He was instructed to keep details records and report the same with his accounts to the regular term of the Commissioners Court.

In the meantime, the local Hallettsville business owners got the change that they had been demanding when the city appointed Dr. A.A. Ledbetter as the city health officer.

The battle between Dr. Newbury and Dr. Ledbetter began almost immediately when in April 1901, about one week after Ledbetter had been appointed by the city, when the County Judge received a letter from the State Health Officer instructing him to have a small pox case here isolated and all necessary precautions taken the prevent the disease from spreading. However, nothing was done owing to a disagreement between Newbury, who pronounced that it was small pox, and Ledbetter, who said it was not.

While the individual in question wanted to leave Hallettsville by train, instead decided to leave by hack and the city was now declared without even the suspicion of have small pox.

While Hallettsville was declaring it had “No Small Pox” other areas of the county were not as lucky. Hackberry was reporting that its school had finally reopened in April after a six week “vacation” caused by the small pox scare. Shiner reported six new cases of the disease and asked for Dr. Newbury to come and launch an investigation.

In May of 1901, the relationship between Lavaca County and Dr. Newbury turned combative and a war of words began. Dr. Newbury had submitted to the Court his bill for small pox services for 84 days at \$10.00 per day for a total of \$840.00 plus \$40.00 for disinfection services. The Court fired back that to avoid any further “misunderstanding” on the subject that the Court would allow no further claims for services rendered by Dr. Newbury unless his services had been previously requested by said Court.

In July, Dr. Newbury reported to the Court that there existed cases of small pox at the county jail yet they decided not to declare quarantine and if Dr. Newbury reported his findings to the state health officer and if such officer would take matters into his own hands, the court made it very clear to everyone concerned that they must look to the state for the payment of services rendered; that the Commissioners Court would not approve any account for services rendered that had not been ordered by them unless compelled to by process of law.

Dr. Newbury fired back that there indeed was a case of small pox at the jail as reported by Dr. J.E. Lay. Newbury then stated in his report that “If the County Commissioners fail to do anything I shall notify the State Health Officer at once. I will not tolerate any more slackness on the part of the Commissioners Court”.

The court responded to Newbury’s letter by notifying him that they would not tolerate the Health Officer nor anybody else to put the County to any unnecessary expenses and any action that maybe taken without the consent of the Court in the matter of small pox by which costs to the County will be incurred will be considered unwarranted and all claims resulting would be ignored.

Dr. A.F. Newbury’s final report to the Commissioners Court on the small pox was recorded in the minutes as “Report read and disposed of”.

Postscript

For the remainder of 1901, there were scattered reports by local physicians of what they called eruptive disease, a visible breaking out of a skin lesions or rash

accompanying a disease such as measles or scarlet fever in various locations in the county. Yet there was disagreement between physicians in regard to the diagnosis.

The last confirmed case of small pox in the United States was in 1949.

Stories like this would not be possible with the preservation and availability of historic newspapers and city and county records.

Sources