

1868: Yellow Fever 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 the dreaded yellow fever.

Although diseases like smallpox and tuberculosis were much more deadly, yellow fever was particularly dreaded since it produced such horrible symptoms, and no one could pinpoint what caused the disease. At the time, it was widely believed that yellow fever was spread person to person.

Yellow fever was a brutal disease so named because it caused liver failure and jaundice, turning the skin yellow. When an individual contacted a mild form, it was like a flu-like disease that lasted approximately one week. In a mild case, symptoms included fever, muscle aches, and nausea.

Many, however, were not so lucky. Yellow fever symptoms could quickly progress to a high fever, liver failure and the breakdown of the body's clotting system. The breakdown caused the body to hemorrhage from the gums, nose, and stomach lining. The dark, digested blood regurgitated by yellow fever victims was named "black vomit" Kidney failure was soon followed by death. Death from yellow fever took about seven days and occurred in an estimated 10 to 60 percentage of cases.

This fever was a dreaded disease in Texas from its early days to approximately 1905. From 1836 to 1867 there were almost yearly outbreaks in Texas, including 1853, 1854, 1858, 1859, 1862 and 1867.

One of the problems in combating yellow fever involved the availability of public information. Many cities chose not to disclose epidemics because outbreaks predictable drove people away from cities who wanted to develop commerce and encourage immigration.

During the summer of 1867, the Gulf Coast of the United States was infected with yet another round of yellow fever, particularly in the states of Louisiana and Texas.

New Orleans, Galveston, San Antonio, and Houston were the among the hardest hit areas.

The disease spread into the interior of Texas through improved transportation systems such as the Gulf, Colorado, and Santa Fe railroad. While freight and passengers traveled to and from Galveston, the railroad also brought new yellow fever exposure to people in the interior of Texas. It is believed that the epidemic originated in Indianola in June and spread to Galveston and across the state to rural areas such as La Grange, Hempstead, Brenham, Alleyton, Chapel Hill, Goliad and Victoria to name a few.

For example, a historical marker was placed in the city cemetery in La Grange for the 1868 Yellow Fever Epidemic in La Grange. In her article “Yellow Fever Outbreak” by Sherie Knape, during the outbreak there were 203 recorded deaths in La Grange, which was 20% or 1/5 of the entire population of that community. It is believed that more possibly died and were not recorded in the chaos caused by the epidemic. Mass burials took place, in many cases multiple bodies per grave. Houses and businesses were abandoned, and people fled to the surrounding countryside in hopes of avoiding the fever.

Local, state, and national newspapers chronicled the plight of Texas during that summer and fall. The September 17th issue of the Baltimore Sun printed an article from Houston Texas that stated the fever was prevalent with at least 1000 cases in town with the deaths numbering from ten to fifteen daily. Also, that the fever was proving to be very fatal in Hempstead, Navasota, Millican, Bryan, Chapel Hill, Brenham, La Grange, Huntsville and Alleyton.

In the Sept 18, 1867 issue of the Tri-Weekly Telegraph, an article said that it (yellow fever) was raging in the smaller towns along the railroads and stage coach lines from Galveston and Houston, into the interior as far as La Grange and Navasota where the disease has been horrific . It appears that largely more than half of the cases of the disease has proved fatal.

The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer in an October 19, 1867 article, states that 20% of the population of Hempstead was dead and that the fever raged unabated in the communities of Chapel Hill and Brenham. It also reported that a local Houston newspaper stated that no less than eight practicing doctors have died in Houston that year.

Since no Hallettsville newspapers exist from that time, the first mention of yellow fever in Hallettsville come from area newspapers and the Lavaca County Police Court (now referred to as Commissioner's Court) Minutes.

The Texas State Gazette of September 28, 1867 states "We understand that the yellow fever has almost depopulated the town of Texana, Jackson County. In Indianola and Lavaca (in Jackson County) it may be said to have subsided. In Harrisburg it has proven very fatal. It is reported to exist in Fayetteville and Round Top, Fayette County and in **Hallettsville, Lavaca County.**"

In the September 20, 1867 Police Court Minutes the Court stated that it was necessary to establish quarantine regulations for the **town of Hallettsville**. The court then appointed Drs. B.B. Throop, James Walker, M.B. Bennett, L. Hudspeth, and P.A. Thurmond to serve on a Board of Health. This Board reported that the following regulations should be adopted by the Court and declared to be the quarantine regulations for the town of Hallettsville. The Board recommended that:

1. All the territory lying and being in a ½ mile of the Lavaca County courthouse be declared under quarantine.
2. That every householder or occupant of premises within the boundaries state above shall keep their premises in such a state of cleanliness as the board may direct.
3. That the public square and the streets shall be under the special supervision of the board of health and put in order at the expense of the county as they may direct.
4. That the County Clerk be required to prepare and post public notices upon every public road, ½ mile from town, that the town is under quarantine and that all sick persons are forbid entering the boundaries without first giving notice to the Board of Health and that persons traveling from infected localities are hereby prohibited from stopping over one hour within the said limits, and under no circumstances to unpack any goods or chattels.
5. That an officer shall be appointed by the Board of Health whose duty it shall be to examine strictly all travelers, whether by public or private conveyances suspected to be from infected districts and report immediately to the Board of Health.
6. When a case of yellow fever is reported the Board of Health shall prepare a suitable hospital for the reception of such persons, at some point at a safe

distance from any private residence and select someone of the Board of Health to give medicine, attention, and provide for the comfort at public expense if unable to pay himself.

7. That the Board of Health notify in writing the drivers of all public conveyances that they are prohibited from bringing within the bounds quarantined any sick persons, without giving notice to the Board of Health.
8. That any person or persons willfully violating any of the regulations before named shall be fined not exceeding one hundred dollars.
9. The Board of Health to meet every Saturday at four o'clock pm unless called sooner in case of emergency.

The recommendations of the Board of Health were accepted by the County Commissioners and declared to be the quarantine regulations of the County of Lavaca. The quarantine was later revoked and annulled on October 10, 1867 when the threat of yellow fever had diminished.

As was the pattern of the disease, cases dropped off dramatically and disappeared in the fall with the weather cooling and temperature falling below 32 degrees.

Finally, in 1900, Maj. Walter Reed, who was the U.S. Army's Yellow Fever Commission, conducted research that mosquitoes caused yellow fever. It was this research that determined that yellow fever was caused by an arbovirus spread from victim to victim by *Aedes aegypti* female mosquitos. While there were outbreaks in 1873 and 1878, the Texas 1867 outbreak marked the last of the major yellow fever epidemics in the state.

Next: The 1873 and 1890 Smallpox Epidemics

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