



Plagues of the Gold Rush



By Irma West, MD

Scurvy was the first and worst epidemic among the '49ers, but those who survived were then threatened by malaria and cholera.

BEFORE THE IMMIGRANTS ARRIVED in the Sacramento Valley, the native population of about 60,000 enjoyed good health and an ample supply of food.

Their way of life changed abruptly in 1833 when Canadians from the Hudson's Bay Company introduced malaria while trapping beaver to extinction along the rivers of Oregon and northern California.

The *Anopheles* mosquito prospered in the wetlands and marshes near which the infected trappers camped and the indigenous people lived. With no ancestral experience with malaria, thousands of native people died and entire villages were wiped out.

Other new diseases depleted the native population of the Sacramento Valley. Syphilis was introduced by natives escaping from the San Jose Mission and smallpox spread from Fort Ross in 1838.

By the time John Sutter established his Fort on the American River in 1839, the indigenous population had been reduced by about 75 percent. In 1847, arrivals at the Fort brought measles, further reducing the population.

John Sutter's dream of an agricultural empire was shattered in 1848 when his employee, John Marshall, discovered gold at the sawmill at Coloma. The news spread worldwide and soon more than 100,000 were on the way by land and sea. The travelers had one thing in common: malnutrition. The first and worst epidemic of the gold-seekers was scurvy, not malaria or cholera. About 10,000 perished on their way, mostly from scurvy.

One account of how cholera reached Sacramento tells of the ship *California* arriving in San Francisco from Panama on October 7, 1850. It brought the news that California was now a state and, with that, 22 cases of cholera on board. Fourteen proved fatal.

Passengers from that ship boarded the *New World* bound for Sacramento, arriving October 15, 1850. One passenger collapsed on the levee and died of cholera. Within four weeks about 1,000 were dead and an equal number was sick but recovered.

When people learned of the growing calamity, about 80 percent of the population of almost 7,000 fled, spreading the disease. In Hangtown (Placerville) about 700 died; even more died in Marysville. San Francisco lost 5 percent of its population; San Jose, 10 percent. As many as 5,000 cholera deaths may have occurred in northern California.

Dr. John Frederick Morse in his *First History of Sacramento City* said of the epidemic: "In this pestilential reign of terror and dismay, the most dreadful abandonments of relatives and friends took place. Those who were willing to forget self and become the

visitants of mercy constituted but a small and meagre proportion of the many who, following the instincts of nature, sought only to preserve themselves"...

"The rapid spreading of the epidemic gave to the physicians no rest day or night....They were falling like the foremost soldiers of a desperate charge and ere this cholera season had subsided seventeen of their number were deposited in Sandhill Cemetery of our city, an inroad of death from which a fraction more than two in three escaped with life and not one in three from the disease. And yet not one educated physician turned his back upon the city in its distress and threatened destruction."

The names of the 17 physicians who died of cholera appear on a plaque in Sacramento's Historic Old (Sandhill) City Cemetery. The average age of this heroic group was 33.

A Sacramento correspondent of *Alta*, wrote in November 4, 1850, "This city presents an aspect which is truly terrible. Three of the largest gambling halls are closed. The streets are deserted, and frequented only by the hearse... Many deaths are concealed, and many others are not reported."

Dr. Morse reported in his *First History of Sacramento City* that, "By the time the disease almost disappeared the City was almost depopulated and there were not a few who thought the Levee City was beyond the possibility of resurrection." The Sacramento epidemic was unique: most who died were young men, and only about 20 were women.

In Northern California, malaria was responsible for many more deaths than cholera. Most were among the native Americans during the 1830s. Many who became wealthy in Sacramento moved to San Francisco because of malaria.

By far the most common ailment among railroad workers coming for treatment to the Central Pacific Railroad Hospital in Sacramento around 1880 was intermittent fever (malaria). In a misguided effort to control malaria the Railroad planted over 2000 eucalyptus trees around its shops.

However, Sacramento was not rid of malaria until the 1940s when DDT became available and the Mosquito Abatement District was established. DDT now gets substantial credit for eradicating malaria from all but the tropics.

Malaria was already a widespread ancient disease called by some the greatest destroyer of human life and the most costly disease known to man. Malaria is mentioned in Chinese medical literature about 2700 BC. Hippocrates described it and ascribed it to drinking swamp water; it is also documented in Europe in the middle ages.

Cholera was a familiar disease in India. It first emerged as a disease for the rest of the world in three waves: in 1817, 1826, and 1847. The last two spread around the globe. It probably first came to the Americas with the Spanish explorers and their slaves.

Accounts of the Gold Rush give little space to the massive sickness and dying or why and how they were a part of the immigration. When an epidemic of communicable disease, such as malaria or cholera, comes to a population for the first time it is likely to cause death in half or more of the victims.

Most of the immigrants had ancestors with centuries of experience with malaria and it had been converted to a chronic disease; cholera on the other hand was new and lethal.

For the indigenous people of northern California, there was no experience with either disease. Fortunately, the native people had no indigenous communicable diseases they could pass on that were new to the Argonauts.

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