

Cholera Epidemics on the Frontier

By John Hallwas

The rising public concern over the coronavirus pandemic has been conveyed by the remarks of many health officials as well as by the anxiety and stress felt by so many of our fellow Americans. Hopefully, our careful action, nationally and locally, as well as our social concern will mitigate its impact.

Of course, life-threatening epidemics were common in Illinois and all of America during the 19th century. When reading through our state's newspapers from long ago, I've often run across articles on outbreaks of scarlet fever, typhoid fever, malaria, diphtheria, smallpox, consumption (i.e., tuberculosis), and other diseases. But none of those created more fear than cholera, which reached epidemic proportions in the United States several times, starting in the 1830s.

It wasn't simply a matter of numbers. Both malaria and tuberculosis killed more people—and the latter was, in fact, the chief cause of death from disease in many towns. But no survivor ever forgot a cholera epidemic.

There was nothing slow or subtle about the disease. It was an acute disorder of the gastrointestinal tract, and the symptoms were spectacular. The victim developed massive diarrhea, sudden bouts of vomiting, and severe muscular cramps. Dehydration soon followed, characterized by sunken eyes, hollow cheeks, hoarseness, and drawn, withered-looking skin on the hands, feet, and face. The individual began to look like a corpse, and death followed in the majority of cases.

Also, cholera worked with shocking swiftness—usually in one to three days. In fact, it was not uncommon for a person to seem well when they arose in the morning and to die during the coming night. And the victims included members of all age groups and social classes.

The disease was caused by ingestion of vibrio cholera bacteria, carried

in food and water. Unwashed hands and sewage contamination of a water supply were the common means of transmission. Better sanitation measures could have prevented the epidemics.

Cholera first came to the U. S. in 1832. Thousands died in New York, and tens of thousands left the city in a frantic exodus to save themselves. Other cities were also hard hit.

In the early Midwest, the disease was first spread during 1832. General Winfield Scott brought some afflicted soldiers from the East to reinforce the Black Hawk War troops of Fort Armstrong (at Rock Island), and after the cholera had killed dozens of soldiers at the fort, it began spreading nearby. Also, the busy port city of New Orleans lost over 5,000 residents during that same year, and the cholera was soon traveling north by riverboat. Before 1832 was over, the disease was reported in Illinois communities such as Carlinville, Jacksonville, and Vandalia.

The pestilence returned in the summer of 1833. Ninian Edwards, the former territorial governor of Illinois, was a victim that year, at his home near Belleville. In Quincy, the first victims died on July 4, and within five days, more than 30 others had died there as well.

In 1834, a very serious outbreak was at Rushville, and many years later, Rev. John Locke Scripps, of that town, wrote an account of the epidemic's impact:

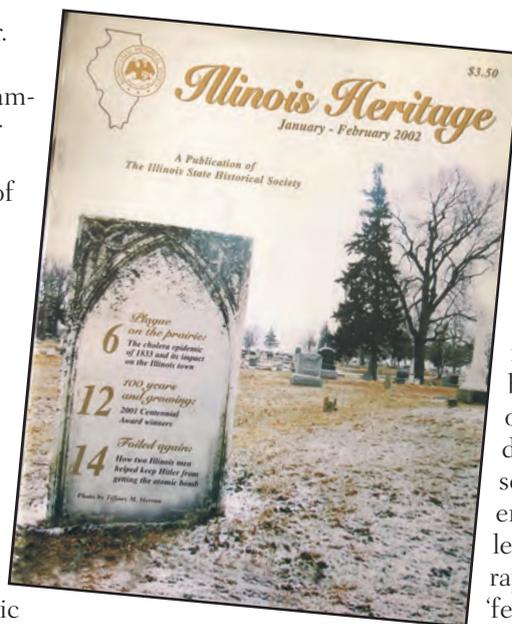
"On the first breaking out of cholera, our town began rapidly to depopulate, not only by death but by

flight. A panic seized the inhabitants, and some sought refuge from its ravages among their more distant county friends, others in encampments in the far off woods—by which many houses became vacated and our streets literally deserted. There seemed scarcely enough of human life left ... to feed the rapacious maw of the 'fell monster' stalking wildly among us."

According to his memoir, deaths occurred almost every day in Rushville through the month of July, and for those not yet afflicted, it was a time of "astounding terror." As he said, "The heart-rending wailings of survivors for their departed loved ones, the dark presages of what yet might lay before us, portending greater evils, and the agonizing groans and moans of yet other victims writhing in excruciating pangs, all combined to incite the most intense terror."

The next great epidemic of cholera started in 1849. In St. Louis alone, victims died at the rate of sixty per day. According to one report, 3,262 people eventually died there. Western Illinois River towns were hard hit as well. Cholera outbreaks were reported in Quincy, Warsaw, Oquawka, and other communities. On August 3, President Zachary Taylor issued a proclamation calling for prayer throughout the nation, but the deaths continued.

In Liverpool, on the Illinois River, after the first two or three deaths, very few men were brave enough to care for the sick or bury the dead. The last victims there were Mr. and Mrs. Fritz. He died first, and when the "burial



men” came to the house, they found “the dying woman crawling over the body of her husband, begging for their aid,” according to a newspaper report. They hurriedly buried the husband nearby and then took Mrs. Fritz four miles away, to some relatives—who then refused to take her in. As the report says, “She was put under a tree and left to die, in terrible agony.”

At the town of Peru, only four men would even go near the cholera victims. One was Rev. Milton Haney, who later said he suspected that because the physical collapse of afflicted people was extreme, and victims were not closely examined, and burials were swift, some individuals who might have recovered were probably buried alive. In his memoir, he also recalls one narrow escape from that fate: “They took one man to the cemetery, and were about to let him down into his grave late in the evening, when one of them said that they had better not inter him until the morning ... and when they came back in the morning, he was alive in his coffin.”

The last severe outbreak of cholera before the Civil War was in 1851. Apparently, it was brought into western Illinois by the Icarians, French settlers who had passed through New Orleans. At their new home, Nauvoo, the colony’s only physician fled during the epidemic, and people died so fast “it



Cholera mass grave marker in Coles County cemetery.

was impossible to make coffins in which to bury them, or even rude boxes, so they dug a large grave, wrapped the bodies in sheets, and buried several in one grave.”

Because newspaper reports about such frontier epidemics were often scarce, or very brief, we have little or no information about how things were in many frontier towns. But as the writings quoted here suggest, for many of the early Illinois settlers, cholera

provided a supreme test—not only of pioneer fortitude but of commitment to helping others who were in dire need.

As epidemics like the current one arise in our time, we are fortunate to have not just renowned medical expertise but a helpful sense of commitment to the common good, rooted in awareness of our historical experience and our ultimate interdependence.

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