

Medical Bulletin Tells of Fight On Plague by Examiner in 1900

By JOHN F. ALLEN

Just fifty-five years ago an ominous epidemic of bubonic plague—the dreaded Black Death of Fourteenth Century Europe—struck at San Francisco, leaving at least 116 dead and a city split by political and medical antagonisms.

Of the city's four newspapers, only The Examiner backed a small group of honest and dedicated doctors who recognized the presence of the plague and insisted that proper measures be taken against its spread.

Other papers, other medical men, politicians, the chamber of commerce and other civic bodies pooh-pooed the menace, saying talk of the plague would hurt business and business was more important than "a few dead Chinese."

This story of how the Black Death first came to San Francisco and how the press and populace reacted to it is told in the current issue of the Stanford Medical Bulletin, edited by Dr. Leland J. Rather of the Stanford Medical School staff.

EX-STANFORD.

The story, a rare bit of color in the pages of a staid medical journal, is written by Dr. Silvio J. Onesti Jr. of McGill University, Montreal, formerly a resident in medicine at Stanford Hospital. He calls it "Plague, Press and Politics."

Nobody knows how bubonic plague arrived in San Francisco in 1900.

It may have been from a carrier flea riding in the fur of a rat dashing out of the hawse pipe of a dirty freighter in from Hong Kong.

Or, Doctor Onesti suggests, it perhaps could be blamed on the Chinese love of squirrel legs, the closest substitute for sometimes unobtainable frog legs.

California's wild rodent population was then—as it still is—an active reservoir of plague.

In any case, one day in early January Wing Chut King, the 41-year-old keeper of a Chinatown woodyard, fell ill.

His condition was first diagnosed by Dr. Chung Bu Bing as "inflammation of the bladder." By March 6 Wing was dead.

His death caused hardly a ripple in the Chinatown of that day, twelve square blocks of filthy and verminous tenement shacks, into which a mass of 20,000 Chinese were squeezed.

It remained to Dr. F. P. Wilson, a young assistant to the city health director with the duty of examining all dead Chinese, to make the horrifying discovery that Wing had died of bubonic plague.

His finding was verified by Dr. W. H. Kellogg, the city bacteriologist, by Dr. J. J. Kinyoun, the Federal quarantine officer, and later—just to make sure—by experts from the University of California and Cooper Medical College (which was to become Stanford medical school).

Doctor Kinyoun immediately inoculated a monkey, a rat and some guinea pigs with material from the dead Chinese and ordered anti-plague serum from Washington.

Chinatown was literally cordoned off—with a rope.

One newspaper made light of the whole matter, printing what passed for humorous cartoons and poems, and insisting that "there is no reason for any Cau-

has a strong preference for yellow meat."

Another journal cried with indignation: "Plague fake exploded . . . hardship on citizens and vast injury to business inflicted by unscrupulous treasury raiders. . ."

A third newspaper supplied a cartoon of a monkey, a rat and a guinea pig waxing fat on "bubonic plague microbes."

EXAMINER FOUGHT BACK.

The San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, Merchants Exchange, Board of Trade and other similar civic groups added their pressure, and within sixty hours Mayor James Phelan, feeling the prevailing political winds, ordered the Chinatown quarantine lifted.

But Doctor Kinyoun and other honest doctors, backed by The Examiner, fought back.

They knew that the plague in the Fourteenth Century had killed one-fourth of the population of Europe—25,000,000 persons—that millions more died yearly in Asia, that this first American case could spread across all of America like a lethal cloud.

One newspaper turned on The Examiner: "What is needed in this community is the inoculation of The Examiner with their germs of the bubonic plague. If The Examiner should be removed, this city would be healthier corporeally, morally and physically."

Then on March 11, the inoculated animals died and the mayor's hand was forced. He called for 100 doctors to inspect Chinatown.

Only ten showed up, and the suspicious Chinese, egged on by a morning paper, refused to cooperate, hiding their ill and secretly burying the dead in their basements.

Meanwhile the cry of bubonic plague had spread across the country, thanks in great part to stories in other Hearst newspapers, particularly the New York Journal.

W. R. HEARST REVILED.

An afternoon paper foamed at its journalistic mouth, on March 26 devoting its entire front page to a tirade against The Examiner and Hearst:

"Our City Blacklisted All Over America as a Plague-Ridden Spot. W. R. Hearst of The Examiner floods eastern cities with gross libel upon San Francisco . . . exquisite malice and devilish ingenuity . . . Hearst having tried and failed to rule San Francisco is now trying to ruin it . . . a foul blow. . ."

The other two morning newspapers then in existence chimed in, egged on by business interests who feared a loss of trade: "Examiner's plague lie kills trade . . . every commercial interest has suffered . . . travelers changing itineraries . . . businessmen fear loss of Arctic trade. . ."

By May 15 the plague had claimed nine known victims. This was too much even for the Chinese officials, and leaders of the tongs and the Chinese consul agreed to order their countrymen to be inoculated.

Everything was in readiness for a mass inoculation, when a group of white doctors, apparently hired by the city's business interests, circulated

they could reach that the serum was a deadly poison.

A mob attacked and badly beat one brave Chinese, the editor of a paper, who agreed to be inoculated. Tong high-binders roamed the streets, threatening death to anyone who complied with the inoculation order.

There remained only one step for the Government: at the suggestion of the United States surgeon general, President William McKinley ordered all common carriers to refuse passage to any Oriental without a certificate of inoculation.

EPIDEMIC FESTERED.

An obtuse Federal Judge immediately issued a restraining order against any form of quarantine at the request of the Chinese Six Companies.

California Governor Henry T. Gage, a tool of the head-in-sand business interests, appointed a committee, which issued the expected clean bill of health.

To a demand for information from United States Secretary of State John Hay, Governor Gage insisted that there was not a single evidence of plague in San Francisco.

By January of 1901 there were twenty-five established cases of plague in the city—with no one knowing how many deaths—yet the fight went on.

A Federal committee investigated and demanded an immediate clean-up of all Chinatown.

But a group made up of a morning newspaper's owner, doctors employed by the Chinese Six Companies and attorneys for various city industries went east and talked the surgeon general into permitting San Francisco to clean up its own mess.

These same interests then obtained the aid of the city's political boss, Abe Ruef and his hand-picked mayor, Eugene Schmitz, to kill off further efforts against the plague.

Incorruptible health officers were replaced by more "reliable" doctors, and soon the matter was nearly forgotten.

Meanwhile the epidemic festered beneath the cover of respectability (killing an official 166), but actually perhaps three or four times that many.

It was not until 1903, when George Pardee, a physician, became governor, and Mexico, fearful of the spreading plague, closed its ports and border stations to San Francisco goods, that the real job of cleaning up Chinatown began.

The 1906 fire and earthquake finished the job.