

THE CHOLERA EPIDEMIC IN AMERICA 1832-1833

In the History of Public Health in America, emphasis has been placed on the mortality rates by Small-pox, Measles and Yellow Fever, but the Cholera epidemic of 1832-1833, repeated twice — after a few decades, is seldom mentioned. Cholera first invaded the New World through Montreal when a ship with sick immigrants from Cork, Ireland, was allowed to dock in 1832. The epidemic of Cholera promptly affected the East Coast of the American Continent from Canada to Argentina, penetrating inland, and was the most important cause of death during that period.

A survey in standard texts of Public Health and Tropical Diseases, such as Manson's (1954) indicates that Cholera was endemic in Lower Bengal and Central China from the remotest antiquity. It was first known to Europeans when the Portuguese physician Garcia d'Orta described it in his *Coloquios dos Simples* at Goa, India in 1563. Cholera began to extend over Asia since 1817 and invaded Europe through Marseille in 1830. Afterwards there were repeated epidemics in Europe the years 1848, 1851, 1865, 1884 and 1892. Cholera appeared again in Europe during the First World War and years later.

Accounts of the European epidemics of Cholera are common and well documented, but curiously enough the study of the Cholera Epidemics in the American Continent has never been done, and even Manson (1954) failed to mention them, although Cholera ranks second to none in mortality rates among epidemic diseases in America.

Cholera invaded the New World when the ship *Voyageur* which left Cork, Ireland during the Cholera epidemic of 1831-1832, with Irish immigrants, reached Canada. It was given at Grosse Isle, at the St. Lawrence River a clean bill of health on the 7th of June 1832, despite it carried Cholera passengers, and touched Quebec on route for Montreal. During the week from the 8th to the 15th June 1832 the Quebec Immigrant Hospital admitted 259 cases of Cholera with 162 deaths; soon the cases outnumbered the beds available at the Quebec Hospitals and tents had to be erected on the Plains of Abraham to attend the sick. From June to September 1832 that lasted this first Cholera epidemic, there were in Quebec alone 3,851 deaths. At the arrival of the ship *Voyageur* at Montreal with two cases of Cholera, the epidemic suddenly invaded the city and there were 800 deaths of Cholera in Montreal alone in the first two weeks and well over 4000 during the summer of 1832.

A different port of entrance of the Cholera epidemic from Europe was New Orleans where the Cholera epidemic appeared in October 1832 after the arrival of a ship, and the disease invaded the Mississippi valley, reached the Pacific Coast and Northern Mexican territories like Texas and Coahuila. A

third invasion of Cholera appeared in La Habana in 1833 which passed by ship to Yucatan and mainland Mexico causing great mortality. Interesting literature on the Cholera epidemic has been reproduced (Guerra 1955) showing important aspects of the port of entrance, areas affected, mortality rates, treatment recommended and other features. In Mexico City, for instance, mortality in two quarters where poor people were located, Santiago and San Dieguito shows that during the week from the 26th July to the 4th August 1833 Cholera produced 1,343 deaths. Mexican reports in that period indicate that chemical analysis of water supplies were done to show the degree of contamination by Sulfur derivatives, and chemical preparations were recommended to purify the environment, beside the usual methods of isolation and quarantine.

The effect of Cholera in other areas of Spanish America during the first epidemic of 1832-1833 were important and deserve both, more local studies and a general and comprehensive analysis of this extremely interesting epidemic.