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Yellow fever plagued area during 1860s

By W. T. Block

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In 1863 the cry that "the yellow jack is coming" was as fearful to hear as "the Yankees are coming." In 1853 the bodies of yellow fever victims at Galveston and New Orleans multiplied faster than they could be buried. In 1867, 1,100 persons died of yellow fever in Galveston County, and 1,900 more in Harris County.

In July, 1862, the British steam blockade runner Victrola docked at Sabine Pass, and was soon reputed to have a plague disease aboard. A local youth named Hart visited aboard the ship, and within a week, he and 4 other members of his family were dead of fever.

Mrs. Sarah Vosburg, who had survived a case of yellow fever at New Orleans, told Dr. J. G. Murray that they had died of yellow fever. However, the young physician, who had only recently arrived from Scotland, laughed at her suggestion and diagnosed it as something else.

Nevertheless, the town's residents began fleeing in droves by any means possible, horseback, wagon, buggy or steamboat. News of the plague disease preceded them, and Beaumonters posted armed guards at the river docks, dirt roads into town, and at 2 train depots to prevent strangers from entering Beaumont.

Nevertheless the virulent illness did arrive there, and Beaumonters were fortunate to endure only 8 fatalities, as opposed to the 150 persons who died at Sabine Pass. Otto Ruff, Dr. George Hawley, Mrs. Sylvester Mansfield, Alzinetta Hillebrandt, and Mr. and Mrs. Robert Hillebrandt were 6 of the 8 Beaumonters who died during the epidemic.

It is believed that about 250 Sabine Pass residents contracted the disease, of whom more than half died. Very quickly scores of soldiers from Cos. A and B, Spaight's 11th Battalion also caught the plague, of whom about 50 died. Capt. K. D. Keith wrote in his memoirs: "...The few able-bodied soldiers had to nurse civilians, and there were not enough soldiers

left to bury the dead..."

Galveston, Beaumont and Houston quickly quarantined Sabine Pass or any boats that had sailed from there. The Confederate Army sent Dr. George Holland and a team of nurses to Sabine Pass to study the disease and make recommendations. In one letter, Dr. Holland reported that only 3 days supply of food was left in town for both soldiers and civilians, and if help did not arrive soon, starvation could be added to the epidemic.

Mrs. Kate Dorman ran the Catfish Hotel, which she quickly turned into a hospital. She, Sarah Vosburg, and Sarah Ann King nursed the victims, but with no medical knowledge or medicines with which to help the sick, the nursing staff could do little else except try to cool the fever until the patient either died or recovered.

To add insult to injury, the Union Navy came ashore and destroyed old Fort Sabine, but they avoided the city because of the virulent illness. Union sailors did burn down all industries and some houses, but warned they would burn the entire city if they were fired upon again. The Union occupation lasted only 3 months.

Yellow fever was certainly a factor in destruction of the old city of Sabine Pass, because most of those who fled the epidemic did not return. However, the war, which destroyed the town's industry, and a long series of hurricanes also helped deliver the deathblow. All but 5 houses were destroyed in the hurricane of Oct. 12, 1886, which drowned 86 persons.

Today, Sabine Pass' 1,200 residents derive their livelihoods principally from the fishing, tourist, and offshore drilling industries.



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