

## THE ASIATIC CHOLERA IN ST. PAUL<sup>1</sup>

Cholera reached Europe from India in 1831 by way of the caravan route through Persia to Russia. In June, 1832, it was carried to Canada by emigrants from Ireland and thence, by way of Detroit, it spread into the United States. About the same time it was brought to New York and in October it entered the country through New Orleans. From these centers it spread to the Ohio Valley from the East, along the Great Lakes from Detroit to Chicago, and northward up the Mississippi Valley, and by 1833 it reached as far as the Pacific coast. In that year, however, the eastern seaboard was almost free of the disease. Cholera again was imported to New York in 1834 and to New Orleans from Cuba in 1835, and it was sporadic in the West till the winter of 1837-38. For the next ten years the United States was practically free of it. In 1848 another visitation took place. The disease broke out almost simultaneously in New York and New Orleans, and in 1849 it overran the entire country east of the Rocky Mountains and was reintroduced through Canada. By 1850 it had spread throughout the entire Mississippi Valley and had appeared in San Francisco, where it was introduced by way of Panama. In 1851 the epidemic began to abate, but in 1854 cholera was again imported from Europe and the West Indies. It prevailed generally throughout North America and particularly in the basins of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. After 1855 only scattered cases occurred till 1866, when the disease was again introduced at Halifax, New York, and New Orleans. In 1873 for the last time it assumed epidemic proportions in North America.

<sup>1</sup>A more detailed account of this subject by Dr. Armstrong will form a chapter in a volume on the history of medicine in Minnesota, which will be published by the Minnesota State Medical Association. *Ed.*

Of the five cholera epidemics that have occurred in the United States, the first antedated St. Paul. Fort Snelling had been in existence since 1819, but it seems to have escaped this epidemic. According to the reports of the surgeon general of the United States army, only one case of cholera occurred at Fort Snelling. This was in 1854—a recruit who was ill when he arrived.

In 1849 Minnesota Territory was established, St. Paul was incorporated as a town, Ramsey County was organized, and a newspaper was started. According to J. Fletcher Williams, "One or two cases of cholera occurred this season. On May 3d L. B. Larpenteur, father of E. N. and grandfather of A. L. Larpenteur, arrived in the city, and on the 7th died of cholera, aged 71 years. He had, unfortunately, contracted the disease on his journey up the river."<sup>2</sup> A. L. Larpenteur, in discussing this statement about twenty years ago, said that his grandfather left Baltimore and went to St. Paul by boat, going down the Ohio and up the Mississippi rivers. He also said that a man named Lumley, in his employ, died of the disease some weeks later and that there were other deaths from the same cause. Lumley was an Odd Fellow, who had been initiated into the lodge only four days before his death. The members of the fraternity turned out for his funeral, the first they had been called upon to conduct. James M. Goodhue, the editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer*, referred to their new white regalia when he wrote that "he had not seen such a display of clean linen since the territory was formed." Larpenteur's statement that there were other deaths from cholera is confirmed by the United States census taken in 1850. The mortality figures for Ramsey County for the year ending June 1, 1850, follow:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul, and of the County of Ramsey*, 215 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4—1876).

<sup>3</sup> This manuscript schedule is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

NAME	AGE	PLACE OF BIRTH	MONTH OF DEATH	CAUSE OF DEATH	NUMBER OF DAYS ILL
Pierre Gervais	8	Min. Terry	May	Unknown	42
Magdelin Donnâ	60	Canada	April	Fever	15
Antoine Bouvais	80	Do	January	Pulmonary	30
Zoe Bivot	25	Do	April	Cholera	2
John Baptiste	2	Do	December	Pulmonary	30
Sophie Poncin	7	Min. Tery	July	Cholera	3
Alex Ramsey Jr.	4	Penny <sup>a</sup>	Do	Fever	14
W. A. Forbes	6/12	Min. Tery	March	Inflam <sup>m</sup> Brain	21
Phoebe Glass	8	Wisconsin	Feby	Burned	2
Mary Jane Barber	5	Iowa	August	Congestive	3
Albert Barber	2	Do	Do	same	3
John Lumley	23	Ohio	July	Cholera	1
James Green	40	Pennsylvania	Do	Do	1
Elijah Gladden	35	Ohio	Do	Do	5
Francis Robert	25	Missouri	Dec	Consumption	90
James Goodhue Jr.	2	Wisconsin	Do	Teething	20

The population of Ramsey County in 1850 was 2,197, but the county at that time embraced nearly all of the present counties of Ramsey, Anoka, Mille Lacs, Isanti, and Kanabec. The population of St. Paul was recorded as 1,294. Almost half of this number arrived during the year. Since the record begins with June, 1849, Larpenteur's name is not included, and since it ends with May, 1850, it is likely that other cholera deaths occurred during the summer of the latter year.

Mortality statistics were not collected systematically in Minnesota till 1866, when the St. Paul board of health required birth and death certificates to be filed, though some births and deaths were recorded with the clerk of the district court after about 1860. Church records probably were kept earlier, but these have never been collected and do not give the cause of death except in rare instances. A United States census was taken in 1857 and again in 1860. That for 1857 does not contain mortality statistics, but that for 1860 contains a list of deaths and their causes

for the year ending June, 1860. No cholera deaths, however, are recorded for St. Paul.

It was maintained, of course, that all cholera came from "below," and that no cases originated in St. Paul. Though such a statement was good publicity and in the main correct, it was not entirely true. Like the rest of the United States, St. Paul probably had few cases of cholera between 1850 and 1854. It must be remembered, however, that the available records for these years are meager as compared with those for later years. Governor Alexander Ramsey notes in his diary for June 11, 1851, that a steamboat arrived at St. Paul the day before with "a few cases of cholera aboard."<sup>4</sup> On May 23, 1852, he records that "a young woman by the name of Dibble died at noon after an illness of two days, supposed to be cholera, giving great uneasiness to our people"; and in his entry for May 31, 1852, he notes "Several very sudden deaths in town within the last few days, generally believed to be Asiatic cholera." It is likely that the following statement in the *Minnesota Democrat* of St. Paul for June 26, 1852, refers to these or still later cases of cholera: "If you are anxious to commit suicide drink plentifully of swamp water, we know of several cases of sudden death that might have been traced directly to the use of that beverage."

Early in May, 1854, the citizens of St. Paul began to be worried about the increase of cholera along the river. It was reported prevalent at Keokuk and Galena. On May 23 at a special meeting of the common council, called to consider the sanitary condition of the city and appoint a board of health, an ordinance was passed establishing such a board. It was to consist of one citizen from each ward and the city physician. As there was no city physician, the

<sup>4</sup>The Ramsey Diaries are owned by the governor's daughter, Mrs. Charles E. Furness of St. Paul; the Minnesota Historical Society has copies of some of them.

council appointed Dr. James D. Goodrich to fill that position; and as members of the board it appointed John P. Owens from the first ward, Lott Moffett from the second, and George W. Farrington from the third. Previously there had been a committee of health of the common council, and it was on the recommendation of this committee on May 23 that the special meeting of the council was called.<sup>5</sup> It appears that the board was hard worked and that none of its members shirked his duty.

Immigrants were now pouring into St. Paul, which as the head of navigation on the Mississippi was a distributing point for them. Every steamboat brought in a hundred or more Irish and German emigrants, who traveled packed on the lower deck. The earlier inhabitants of St. Paul were mostly French-Canadians and native Americans. It is needless perhaps to state here that the main approach to St. Paul was the river. The railroad reached Galena in 1854, but it did not extend to St. Paul until more than a decade later. In the winter, therefore, the city was more or less isolated, though a stage line known as Burbanks Express ran to Prairie du Chien and La Crosse. Accommodations by stage were limited, and the journey was uncomfortable and expensive. How cholera spread on the river boats is easily understood. There was no law limiting the number of passengers or providing for the examination of immigrants. The immigrants were packed on the lower deck like sardines in a box. One must not get the idea that the river itself was contaminated, as the mode of transmitting cholera was more direct. All water used on board the steamboats was taken from the river and poured into barrels. From these the crew and passengers helped themselves, dipping the water out with any utensils they had at hand.

The St. Paul board of health made its first report to the council on June 11, 1854. It must be remembered that the

<sup>5</sup> *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), May 29, 1854.

presence of cholera in St. Paul was kept as quiet as possible, for it was feared that knowledge of an epidemic might hinder immigration. Immigrants meant business and money, and both were sorely needed. Consequently, when the council received reports about cholera from the board, it tabled them. The report is not included in the council minutes and even the newspapers did not print it and almost ignored its presentation. Modern city governments and newspapers often take the same attitude toward epidemics. The manuscript council minutes, however, are preserved in the Ramsey County Courthouse, and these include the report. It admits that the cholera had "been prevailing to a moderate extent among immigrants upon the decks of our steamboats," and gives definite information about at least three cases that occurred in St. Paul. An Irishman and a German, both of whom were dying when their cases were called to the attention of the board, had expired; a young man "to whom due aid and comfort was administered" by the board, recovered.

The board reported that it had been unable to procure a building for a hospital. Bishop Cretin suggested that as soon as St. Joseph's Hospital, which was being erected under his superintendence and which he thought would be completed by the first of July, was finished, the city could have the use of rooms there at reasonable expense. It proved impossible, however, to use the hospital for the cholera patients. Since it was imperative that a building be obtained at once, the old log Chapel of St. Paul, which was erected in 1841 and was being used in 1854 as a school by the Sisters of St. Joseph, was secured. Within a short time this was opened as a cholera hospital.

Early on the morning of June 16 the steamer "Galena" drew up to the landing in St. Paul with nine cholera patients aboard. One, a cabin passenger, Dr. A. Sargent of Meadville, Pennsylvania, was dying. He was carried to Dr. Goodrich's office, where he expired at nine o'clock.

Most of those who died of or who had the disease in St. Paul were strangers, whose very names were often unknown. St. Paul citizens did not escape entirely. Among the cholera victims in 1854 was Colonel Daniel H. Dustin, United States district attorney for Minnesota. He was the orator of the day on July 4. A few days later he was taken ill and he died on July 10 at the Winslow House. His infant daughter died of cholera a few days later at the home of Samuel Abbey.<sup>6</sup> On June 19, the fifth death occurred in an upper town family of unknown name, and another member of the same family was stricken. On July 25 two more people died of cholera—a Miss Bridgit and Dr. Charles Ludwig Vicchers, who contracted the disease from a man he was attending. He lived but five hours after he was taken ill. The daughter of the Reverend John V. Van Ingen, rector of Christs Church, was taken suddenly ill with cholera when the steamboat on which she was ascending the river was opposite Kaposia. She died a few days later.

On July 27 Charles D. Fillmore, a half brother of former President Fillmore, died of cholera. The local papers stated that his death was due to dysentery, since they expected his obituary notice to be widely circulated. He was stricken while driving from St. Paul to Stillwater, but he managed to get back to St. Paul before he died. After this whenever a livery team started from St. Paul on a trip of more than several hours the liveryman put a bottle of cholera medicine under the seat of the vehicle. The popular remedy among the people was "Perry Davis' Pain Killer," a mixture of whisky, tincture of opium, and tincture of capsicum. It was taken internally and also applied to the abdomen. Three days after Fillmore's death, his wife's niece, a child named Hoffman, died of the same disease. On August 2 Edward K. May, a prominent merchant, and

<sup>6</sup> Both Dustin and his daughter were attended by Dr. Thomas R. Potts. See the latter's manuscript Account Books, 6:89, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

an unknown woman died. On July 25 the "Galena" again brought cholera patients into the city. Several deaths had occurred on the boat on its way up the river.

The writer's mother, who was then Miss Jane C. Coleman, arrived in St. Paul the last day of July. She relates that a short time later a man died of cholera at the Winslow House. He and his wife had just arrived from the South on their wedding trip. Dr. Thomas R. Potts was the man's physician. Miss Coleman's aunt, later Mrs. Willis A. Gorman, volunteered to care for the man, while her niece endeavored to console the young wife. A servant in the home of Judge Moses Sherburne was found ill one morning with cholera. Dr. A. G. Brisbine was called. He secured a sister of St. Joseph to care for her, but she died the same evening. There were nine in the Sherburne family and they employed two other servants, but none of them contracted the disease. An Indian who died of cholera in St. Paul in 1854 was cared for and buried at the expense of the government.

Much more, no doubt, could have been added to this account had an investigation been undertaken forty years ago instead of recently. Possibly Mrs. Armstrong is the only person now living who remembers the cholera epidemic of 1854. The present record is doubtless incomplete, but the evidence is sufficient to show that there was more cholera in St. Paul than most people would believe existed. There was also some cholera at St. Anthony, for records of two bills for ten dollars each for attending cases there are to be found in the minutes of the Ramsey County board for July 24, 1854. During the year the common council paid bills incurred by the board of health amounting to \$1,046.42, including the city physician's salary of \$300.

There is reason to believe that the disease was more prevalent in St. Paul in 1855 than in 1854, although but two references to it in the newspapers of that year and none in the minutes of the city council have been found. Ap-



THE UNITED STATES,

J. Henri Pelland, Dr.

P.T. Exp.	For attendance &c. on Indian victim, once died of Cholera. For Drugs per order Dr. McBride " Making Coffin " Lumber for do " His time & attendance	DOLL.   CTS.  30 2.50 1.00 2.00 <hr/> 5.80
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Received at St. Paul, Minn. June 9, 1855 of J. J. Collins A.  
Gorman, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Five & 80/100.  
J. J. Collins in full of this account.  
J. J. Collins  
J. Henri Pelland  
J. J. Collins, on honor, that the above account is correct and just, and is

VOUCHER FOR EXPENSES INCURRED IN THE CARE AND  
BURIAL OF A CHOLERA VICTIM

[From the Gorman Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota  
Historical Society.]

parently the epidemic of 1854 caused the editor of the *Minnesota Democrat* to write for the issue of April 25, 1855, an editorial on "Health of St. Paul—Crowded Boats." The last paragraph follows: "We do not wish to be misunderstood at a distance, in making these remarks. There is no sickness in St. Paul now; there has been very little on the river. We desire simply to secure the enforcement of proper sanitary regulations in the city, and upon steam-

boats, for the protection of present and future residents, and of visitors either upon pleasure or business." The warning evidently had its effect for on May 1 the new city council appointed a board of health of six members, and they nominated Dr. Samuel Willey for city physician. This nomination was approved by the council, which passed a resolution thanking Dr. Goodrich for his services.<sup>7</sup>

That the board at once found work to do is evident, for the following item appears in the *Democrat* of May 2: "A young printer named Daniel E. Berry, from Harrisburg, Pa., died this morning, at the hospital, from cholera. Mr. B. came to St. Paul yesterday, on the Ben Bolt from Dubuque. . . . When he was attacked by the cholera, he was turned out of the hotel. . . . The sick man laid down on the pavement, until his companion secured aid, when he was carried to Dr. Lambert's office, and from thence to the hospital." The editor's indignation over the inhumanity of the hotel-keeper was no doubt intensified because Berry came to St. Paul to work for the *Democrat*. In the same paper for May 9 is an announcement of the death of Henry P. Pratt, one of the editors and proprietors of the *Minnesotian*, who expired "of Cholera-Morbus, after an illness of thirty-eight hours." Other sources of information leave no doubt that Pratt's death was caused by Asiatic cholera.

Much of the material used in this paper was obtained in interviews with early settlers. For example, in August, 1915, the writer learned about the epidemics of 1854 and 1855 from James Cody, who arrived in St. Paul on May 1, 1854. Cody recalled that a blackboard was set up in a cemetery located near the present site of St. Joseph's Academy, and that there the names of those who died of cholera were written. In two weeks he counted thirty-four names. Among those who died of cholera in 1855 was Cody's sister Margaret. She was cared for at St. Joseph's Hospital, and at the time of her death Cody was

<sup>7</sup> *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul), May 2, 9, 1855.

helping the nuns to nurse the many cholera patients there. Five people took sick at a dance that Cody was attending, and of them three died. In all, Cody recalled about thirty cases of cholera.

The only death from cholera remembered by Jacob Mathes, who came to St. Paul in 1852 and was interviewed on July 31, 1915, was that of a German immigrant named John G. Hullsiek. Mrs. W. D. Richardson recalled the death in 1855 of a neighbor who was employed on a Mississippi River boat as an engineer. She said that the St. Paul board of health, local clergymen, and members of the Masonic Order cared for many cholera patients. Her husband was a member of a Masonic cholera relief committee. Mrs. Mary A. Fuller, a member of the Irvine family which settled in St. Paul in 1843, related that eleven cholera patients arrived on a single boat in 1855. They were put into wagons to go to St. Joseph's Hospital, but on the way one of the wagons was mired and two patients died before it could be extricated.

In 1866 St. Paul was again afflicted by the disease. On April 10 the mayor suggested that the city be cleaned up in order to "be prepared for a visitation of the disease." Dr. A. G. Brisbane was designated city physician and his salary fixed at \$150 a year. Later the board of health was reorganized with a clerk and a representative from each ward. It met on April 19 and set about taking steps to clean up the city in accordance with the mayor's suggestion. A sanitary police system was perfected and orders were issued, with the approval of the council, against dumping on the streets, against leaving undrained pools of stagnant water on streets and vacant lots, and against maintaining hog pens and soap factories within the city limits. It was further directed that green hides must not be stored in the city, and that refuse and garbage should be dumped in the river below the city limits.

When health ordinances conflict with business interests,

however, policies often change. Those who took water from the river for sprinkling the streets protested because they were afraid it might be contaminated. The hog owners objected, claiming that pig pasturing within the city did no harm and that pigs were efficient scavengers. At a special meeting of the council on May 31 H. Rogers, who was in the hide business, recalled that in Philadelphia, where he was engaged in the leather trade during the epidemic of 1832, those working with leather or even living in the vicinity of the warehouses where hides and leather were stored "were almost exempt from cholera." Another dealer in hides, Joseph Ullmann, who had been brought into court and fined because he violated the hide ordinance, asserted that the "hide business was too valuable to the city, and was becoming too important to be driven away." As a result of such protests Mayor John S. Prince refused to sign an ordinance forbidding the keeping of hogs within the city and the council repealed the hide ordinance. The writer of a letter to the editor of the *Pioneer* thanked the council for its action, stating that "Having so long enjoyed the soul-refreshing and body-invigorating odors arising from these places, the bare idea of losing them made me actually sick at my stomach. I could not sleep nights."<sup>8</sup> Dr. Brisbine and some members of the board of health tendered their resignations, and early in July Dr. Potts, after some competition with Dr. C. D. Williams, was appointed city physician and health officer.

In the meantime a committee of the council and the county commissioners were trying to agree on a site for a hospital. A proposal to locate it in the third ward caused a panic in that part of town. At the regular meeting of the board of health on April 27, addresses were made by various citizens. Dr. Willey "thought St. Joseph's Hospital the best place" and remarked that the "city had its cholera patients cared for there when the cholera was here

<sup>8</sup> *Pioneer*, June 1, 2, 6, 1866.

before." Dr. Jacob H. Stewart also advocated this plan as "we could not buy or build a hospital for want of time." He gave warning that "The cholera may break out any day. It has already appeared at Cincinnati, and boats may bring it here any moment." Alderman William Markoe "offered to see what arrangements could be made for the reception of cholera patients" at the hospital and report at a subsequent meeting. Dr. Willey suggested making compulsory a daily report of cholera patients and the keeping of records of the disease and mortalities resulting from it. As a result of this suggestion the council passed an ordinance which provided that the health officer must "collect and report to the Council at every meeting the number, age and nativity of all persons who die, and the disease causing death."<sup>9</sup> This was the first ordinance of its kind in the state.

A meeting at Timme's Store of citizens who resided near St. Joseph's Hospital, which was located at Tenth and St. Peter streets, followed the removal of four cholera patients from steamboats to the hospital. The people threatened to destroy the hospital if cholera patients were allowed there. In August, I. P. Wright, chief health inspector, made arrangements to rent the Dakota House on the west side of the river, with the intention of removing cholera patients from boats to the hotel, but people living in the neighborhood protested against its use as a cholera hospital. Edward Langevin, the owner, then notified Wright that he could not use the hotel as a hospital. Then a site was obtained at Kaposia. This was given up for similar reasons.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the board of health built a quarantine station at Pigs Eye, about a mile below Dayton's Bluff. "Two buildings, one 24x30, the other 30x30, are almost completed. . . . Bedding, medicines, stores, furniture, &c.

<sup>9</sup> *Pioneer*, April 28, May 2, 1866.

<sup>10</sup> *Pioneer*, August 17, 20, 1866.

will be sent down to-day," reads an account in the *Pioneer* of August 21. The buildings cost fourteen hundred dollars. Boats coming up the river were required to stop at Pigs Eye for inspection. On August 24 Dr. Charles E. Smith, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania who had just returned to St. Paul after serving as an interne, was made assistant to Dr. Potts and placed in charge of the quarantine station.

Most of the few cases of cholera that occurred in St. Paul in 1866 developed before the station was ready for use and are unrecorded. On August 13 the "Canada" arrived from down river with cholera aboard. Although five deck hands had died a few days earlier, the clerk reported that they were merely suffering from cholera morbus. He said that they were ill from eating a large quantity of green apples and drinking buttermilk. Three deck hands from the "Canada" and a steward from another boat were removed to St. Joseph's Hospital, where two of them died. The other men recovered. On August 24, the day the quarantine station was opened, a Norwegian immigrant named Paul Andreas Anderson, aged sixty years, was taken from a steamboat at the station. Dr. Smith related that he found this man in a moribund condition lying on the lower deck in a pile of filth. He had lost about half his weight. No one would go near him, so Dr. Smith carried him to the hospital. Within six hours the man was dead and he was hastily buried on the river bank near the station. A short time later two men were taken from a raft on the river to the station. One of them was named Williams. They recovered. These were apparently the last patients treated at the station. Only one other case of cholera seems to have occurred in St. Paul during this epidemic—a man named Callihan, who died September 9 in town. He is the last recorded cholera patient in St. Paul. The late Dr. Samuel D. Flag, however, said that he saw a cholera patient in 1873, and Dr. Stewart agreed

with him about the diagnosis. The quarantine station was closed on September 19. It cost the city about \$3,770. Sometime later when the city sent someone to remove the furniture, it had disappeared. A few small articles were recovered from two Frenchmen who lived down the river, but the remainder were not found and apparently the search for them was not pushed. It was evident that someone knew where they had gone. The last known instance of cholera in Minnesota occurred in 1873, when there were eleven cases and eight deaths in a Norwegian immigrant family near Willmar.

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ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA



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