



NEWS

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Kansas Troubles: This Week in Territorial History June 6-12, 1854

On June 7th, the *St. Joseph Gazette* mentioned cholera, a subject newspapers were loathe to discuss. Nine Clay Countians had died. The same week, troops just out of Fort Leavenworth were “brought to a halt by the cholera, which raged rather fiercely for some days.” On the trail in Nebraska Territory near the Platte, Anna Goodell recorded the number of graves she passed each day, four on the 6th.

Cholera, a cyclical plague, had been epidemic in the United States since 1848. Often called Asiatic cholera, the bacterial disease of the small intestine creates toxins that cause an overwhelming imbalance between natural functions of absorption and secretion. Proteins stimulating secretion cause cells to draw fluid from the blood, which thickens. Symptoms include acute abdominal and muscle pain, blood pressure drop, blue extremities, skin that loses its elasticity, vomiting, excruciating diarrhea and sudden death. Victims who appear well at breakfast are dead by dinnertime.

Cholera has a high mortality rate, killing up to 70 percent of those infected. Fortunately, cholera has a low morbidity rate. Many who are exposed are resistant, possibly due to high gastric acid levels. Cholera is generally spread through contaminated water, although the bacteria can live in food. The disease thrived among travelers living close together with their improvised latrines. Riverboats, wagon trains and boomtowns were as dangerous as city slums. Cholera still claims many lives around the world. Today’s mortality rate is about 11%, with rehydration using glucose and saline solutions effective treatment.

In the 1850s, cholera’s cause and cure were unknown. Kansan Sara Robinson, opined on the source. “Drinking stagnant water in the river’s bed” and a “sad want of personal cleanliness” were close to the truth. But she also believed spicy foods and general overindulgence stimulated the system, decrying the Missouri diet ---“meats with rich gravies, pastries, cakes, jellies, ices....Can any stomach bear a mingling together of all these?...One man went on to one of the boats with a large bunch of radishes in his hand. The captain warned him, it being the cholera season.” We can imagine his sad end. The radishes may have killed him, but rather than the spicy taste, the bacteria in their bath water did the deed.

At cholera's first appearance in Europe, people abandoned cities in panic, a reason governments often denied an outbreak. By 1854, however, Americans calmly accepted its annual reappearance. Anna Goodell's June trail diary is full of descriptions of death. "We have come up to the Ebey camp. They are stopping on account of a sick man. He was taken this morning cramping....That man is dead, he died about 5 o'clock....There is another man just taken cramping but I guess he will get over it."

A correspondent to the *New York Times*, writing on the 10th from Salt Creek Trading House, a few miles west of Leavenworth, reported that Mormon emigrants camped nearby had a few cases. The same day, settlers meeting at the trading post formed a self-regulatory organization, a people's court to register land claims. Immigration was proceeding faster than the federal bureaucracy in Salt Creek Valley where Isaac Cody squatted during the spring. Cody was one of a "Vigilance Committee" of 13 men appointed to decide inevitable land disputes. Over the next few weeks, 50 settlers a day registered claims in the organization's ledger. Among their resolutions was one stating "slavery already exist[s] in the territory." The organization recommended slaveholders "introduce their property as fast as possible." Free-soilers who might want to settle in the area were warned abolitionists would be afforded no protection. (600)

Louise Barry, "Kansas Before 1854: A Revised Annals," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* VXXX, 1964, Pg. 207.

Anna Maria Goodell, "Vermillion Wagon Train Diaries, 1854." Kenneth L. Holmes, editor. *Covered Wagon Women*, Volume 7, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987) June 20th, 1854. Pg. 105.

Sara T.D. Robinson, *Kansas; Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston: 1856) Pp. 118-119.