

COMMUNITY

White men's germs ravaged Catawbas

Europeans brought smallpox, called by Native Americans the 'fire disease'

The first recorded case of smallpox was in the Roman Empire in 189 A.D. Numerous epidemics raged all over the world for many years before the last case of contagion was recorded in 1977. (An English woman contracted smallpox in 1980, but that was an accident in a lab experiment.)

Europeans brought the disease to the New World. The result was that the Native Americans, who had no immunity whatsoever, died by the millions.

An especially vicious epidemic hit southeastern Indians in 1738. Records show that the Cherokees lost half their population. The Catawbas seem to have lost an even higher percentage, perhaps two of every three persons.

In 1759, 21 years later, another epidemic hit. The number of Catawba warriors dropped from around 300 men to somewhere between 50 and 100. The six Catawba villages, all on the east side

of the Catawba River, were abandoned and a new one built on the banks of Twelve Mile Creek in Lancaster County. Many Catawbas left the area in an effort to escape the plague.

Called the "fire disease" with good reason, it caused many of the Catawbas to throw themselves into the river in an effort to counter the burning. At one point, it has been written, bodies of the dead floated from bank to bank.

While the Indians were worse hit, the whites also contracted smallpox. The difference was that whites were less likely to die but would become terribly scarred. There was no known cure, and people knew little about prevention.

During the Revolutionary War the Catawbas believed that because they fought on the side of their Scots-Irish neighbors, the British under Lord Rawdon deliberately introduced smallpox into their villages. It has never been proved, but many historians think that the Catawbas were probably correct. In any case, the surviving women and children of the Catawba tribe were removed to Virginia until the war ended.

Smallpox caused the first public hospital in upper South Carolina to be erected. It was built in western York County by a Presbyterian minister, Dr. Joseph Alexander. In 1775, Alexander built a log cabin near his church, Bullock's Creek Presbyterian.

Alexander, who was a school teacher as well as a minister, inoculated his patients and kept them in the cabin until they recovered from the inoculation. All of the patients survived, but the inoculation made them very sick.

In 1796 Edward Jenner produced the first really effective vaccine. Epidemics became fewer, but smallpox was not uncommon. The town of Rock Hill, for example, as late as 1900 had a "pest house" which was used to isolate cases of smallpox and other contagious diseases.

In late 1901 a terrible siege of smallpox broke out in Rock Hill. Health Officer Caveny thought it began when a local man appeared at a grocery store asking for rice and cabbage. Caveny said the man looked like "the top side of Mount Vesuvius." The grocery clerk ordered him out and set his groceries outside.

Soon, smallpox hit the workers of Manchester Mill. The president of the mill, John R. Barron, ordered all workers to get vaccinated and told the workers if they refused he would fire them. Still, there was resistance on the part of a number of workers.

Barron then hit upon an interesting solution to the problem. He hired a girl struck by the pox to sit in a front window and then sent all the resisting workers to have a look at her. Most of the workers signed up for vaccinations, but of the total 649 Manchester mill workers, about 100 still refused and were fired.

It took four months for the epidemic to run its course and for health officers to report that only three houses in Rock Hill were under quarantine.

In the meantime, the pox crossed the river into Fort Mill. In late February of 1902 the Fort Mill town fathers voted to make vaccination compulsory for every person in town.

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