

Of the many threads in the skein of people and events from which the history of Washburn is woven, none is more poignant than the frequent visitations of disease and death. Every year from 1883, winter and summer, one or more killing diseases raged through the city, sometimes assuming epidemic proportions—typhoid fever, tuberculosis, smallpox, diphtheria, measles, and scarlet fever—with the grim reaper cutting a wide swath, especially among the children. No person or family was exempt.

Conditions in the city provided perfect breeding grounds for diseases. Until water and sewer systems were installed (1884-1893), people obtained drinking water from the very ground containing the toxic seepage from privies and cesspools. Garbage and trash accumulated on the streets, alleys, and vacant lots; dogs and farm animals roamed around, depositing their waste everywhere; while the carcasses of dead animals were unburied, decomposing wherever they happened to die. The streets were unsurfaced, so dust, dried horse manure, and other filth were blown throughout the village, while hordes of mosquitoes were bred in innumerable holes

and depressions throughout the townsite. These conditions were exacerbated by the ignorance and the slovenly life style of many of the people. They resisted changes to improve public health, clung to the old miasma idea about

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how diseases were spread, and refused to be vaccinated. There were occasional campaigns to cleanup and beautify the city, but these seemed to have failed to achieve their purpose or to reduce the incidence of disease.

As if marking the end of the old century and beginning of the new, Washburn was struck by smallpox and diphtheria. In fall and winter of 1898, there were many cases of diphtheria, so the board of health closed all of the schools for the second half of December. While the disease was a "mild form" and soon died out, it claimed a few victims. But 1900 was a crisis year. In mid-summer small-

pox struck the city, spreading rapidly, and the board of health ordered everyone not immune to the disease to be vaccinated at once. Then, in November, with smallpox still raging, diphtheria erupted again, prompting the board of health to close the schools, impose a quarantine on the village, and ban all public gatherings. People with these diseases were quarantined in their homes or in the "pest house," with no direct contact with outsiders until they were well. By early 1901 the situation had improved, leading the Times to declare that Washburn was a healthy city, free of smallpox. But smallpox broke out again, in the summer, and the Times reported that the disease had been present for 10 months, with 310 cases during that time. May 1913 was another crisis month with an epidemic of measles along with several cases of typhoid fever. Among the most deadly of the killers was tuberculosis, a highly communicable disease, the obvious symptoms of which do not appear until it is well advanced in its victims.

The frequent plagues of virulent diseases, unhealthy lifestyles and living conditions, and fatal accidents at the mills and docks, resulted in a high death rate, posing

the problem of disposing of the dead. Burial of the dead was at first unregulated, and the first burial plot was apparently located on a lot on Third Avenue West. In 1885 the first cemetery was located at the top of the hill, overlooking the city, on the corner of Eighth Avenue West and Birch Lane. Citizens were warned that the dead were to be buried only in this cemetery by the sexton. This cemetery, having proved unsuitable, a new cemetery was laid out directly south of and adjacent to it, the present Woodland Cemetery. Meanwhile, in 1896, the Catholics located their first Calvary Cemetery on Washington Avenue, about two miles north of their church. In 1920 the city deeded land adjacent to the east boundary of the Woodland Cemetery to the Catholic Church for a new Calvary Cemetery. The church intended to move the bodies from the original to the new cemetery, but that does not appear to have been done.

Despite the campaigns to cleanup the city to improve sanitation and to enforce public health measures, disease and death continued to stalk the city. Unfortunately, things were to get worse in the aftermath of the Great War.