Barbra Schulte
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Dr. Angela Chenault
Explains the Mysteries of Founder

The Historic 1972 Equine Flu that Brought America's Economy to a Standstill
The Year America Stopped
A Scourge Just Happened Down Under. Can It Happen Here?

In 1872, the Great Epizootic brought nearly all of North America's horses, and the United States with them, to their knees. Much of Boston burned to the ground that year without horses to pull fire engines. Perishable goods rotted, piled high on loading docks unable to be delivered. Men were harnessed to pull city trolleys. U.S. Cavalry soldiers shouldered gear and chased renegade Apaches on foot. The Indian warriors were more about as pedestrians through the desert southwest since no healthy horses remained to carry the men of either side. Even the Texas coast came to a halt as the gateway Port of Galveston ground to a crawl.

An epizootic is an outbreak of disease affecting many animals of one kind at the same time.

Photos and Illustrations Courtesy Long Riders Guild Academic Foundation

By Tom Moates

The equine influenza that occurred seven years after the end of the Civil War in a short time crippled most of the horses in the entire country. It caused the greatest disruption to the United States' transportation system in history. The massive and significant episode strongly enough induced the American memory as the nation changed into the petroleum-driven industrial age and a new century just a few decades later.

The Great Epizootic was barely rediscovered. Bob Whitmore, Curatorial Assistant of the Cody Firearms Museum (part of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming) found obscure references to the event in old textbooks about the Apache wars. He then worked in tandem with researchers from the Long Riders' Guild Academic Foundation (LRGAE.org) to uncover more. Soon, the team found a Texas native named Dr. James Lown. In an early historical twist, within weeks of this research breakthrough, the relevance of equine influenza became apparent.

Dr. James Lown had some general knowledge of the Great Epizootic. His own work helping with the containment and eradication of the Venezuelan Equine Encephalitis epidemic in Texas in 1971 was clearly documented and known to the LRGAE. Dr. Lown's research efforts to help uncover more about the Great Epizootic of 1872 soon led to the discovery of one of several veterinary medicines most extraordinary documents: the section of Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture for the Year 1872, entitled, "Equine Influenza." By Dr. James Lown:

In an early historical twist, within weeks of this research breakthrough, the relevance of reflecting on the Great Epizootic shocked the LRGAE researchers and the equestrian world when, in a strikingly parallel situation, Australia, and then New Zealand, fell victims during the past year to just such an episode of equine influenza on their continent.

Dr. Murnane spoke with Texas Horse Talk in a break from his work preparing its extensive report on the subject of the Great Epizootic of 1872 for the annual meeting of the American Veterinary Medical History Society:

TENASX HORE TALK: What was the Great Epizootic of 1872, exactly?

DR. MURNANE: The influenza epizootic of 1872 was one of the most severe in terms of morbidity and the most widespread, encompassing virtually all the states and territories of the United States. Indeed, it was the most severe on the North American continent. Canada was initially affected, and maritime and Caribbean islands experienced the disease, as well as Mexico and Central America. The last report of it came out of Nicaragua in September of 1873.

This was not a new disease as there were early historical accounts, and by the 17th century, the disease was endemic in Europe and the British Isles.

Conditions in the U. S. were growing increasingly favorable for an acute contagious respiratory disease in the large horse populations concentrated in the urban areas. Adding to this, we had no prior experience with this disease. In this case, we had no medicine, no vaccine, no horses, and we had never been introduced to the disease before, and so we were highly susceptible in the large animal populations in the urban centers. These horses had no antibodies, so they were highly susceptible to an invasive agent we now know as equine influenza virus.

And 1872 was a few years before the announcement of the germ theory. There were many myths propagated to explain the cause of the disease—such as climate conditions...
on November 27th, and Havana, Cuba December 7th, 1872 from imported horses.

By October 29th, the disease had appeared in Chicago. The epidemic continued its westward and southwestern movement reaching Galveston, Texas in November 1872, the Idaho territory in late March 1873 via the overland stage horses, and the northwest Washington territory in April, extending through June of the year.

The epidemic ultimately engulfed the entire North American continent over a period of 8 months from October 1872 to June 1873, and extended into Mexico and Central America beginning in February of 1873, continuing through adjoining countries making its last appearance in Nicaragua in September 1873, virtually a full year since its beginnings.

THT: Could such an equine influenza epidemic again break out in the U.S.?

DR. MURNANE: I seriously doubt that there would ever occur an epidemic of this magnitude again in the U.S. or Canada. There may arise localized outbreaks at sites where horses are concentrated at shows, sporting events like rodeos, and the like. Today we have reliable equine influenza vaccines containing both strains of equine influenza viruses. Most official horse functions mandate vaccination of all entries.

Strict isolation, quarantine, and other controlled movements of horses must be instituted promptly on any presumptive diagnosis, and rigidly extended with confirmatory laboratory diagnosis. Antibiotics are useless for secondary bacteriological infections, but of no value for treatment of the viral infection.

Anti-viral drugs may have a place in prophylaxis or treatment of the disease. They are very expensive at present.

THT: What similarities were there in the Great Epizootic of 1872 and the equine influenza epidemic that just wrapped up in Australia and New Zealand?

DR. MURNANE: I think the similarity was in both continents, naive (virgin) horse populations existed that were highly susceptible. Neither populations of horses were inherently immune, so the epizootics occurred.

In Australia, they were able to affect quarantine measures. Infected horses came to a relatively small number, not like the hundreds of thousands in the U.S. in 1872. These situations were immunologically similar, but the concentration was very different. Susceptibility was similar in both cases.

THT: Please explain the significance of Dr. Law's report that was recently uncovered during your research of the Great Epizootic.

DR. MURNANE: The document was 'The Sentinel' and comprehensive report of the Great Epizootic of 1872.

I felt there had to be a report somewhere. In my other texts, this report was referenced. I was able to provide a librarian at Texas A & M University some information on it and she found it.

Dr. James Law's report to the Commissioner of Agriculture was the most substantive investigative report on the 1872 equine influenza epizootic in the U.S. The 45 page report carefully dispelled popular theories about causation of a disease and focused on the contagion theory of that era.

I believe it is the first epidemiological report in veterinary medicine in the U.S. It is my belief that he is to be acknowledged as America's first veterinary epidemiologist.