



VOICES FROM HISTORY: EQUINE EPIZOOTIC

By DDMF Researcher Pat Schley

In 1872, a serious influenza struck, causing many deaths and threatening the nation's economy. No one knew where it would strike next and there was no cure. The Equine Influenza Epizootic of 1872 struck down horses and mules, first in Toronto, then, by November 1872 it had spread to Illinois. Sarah Davis and daughter Sallie were in Chicago shopping and visiting their friends, the Fishers:

“Mr. Fisher has sold his house – and it is to be moved... – as soon as horses can be procured well enough to draw it...Oxen have been used to draw goods and baggage from the Depot. The streets are very quiet and seem almost like Sunday. Many horses have died.” Chicago IL, November 9, 1872 SWD-DD

It's hard for us to realize how devastating the loss of horses was. One headline read: “Alarming Effect upon the People, Total Suspension of Travel, Disappearance of Wagons ...What the effect of even a temporary withdrawal of the horsepower from the nation, is a serious question to contemplate...” Coal cannot be mined or hauled, farmers cannot market their produce, boats cannot reach their destination on the canals.”

By mid-November when horses in Bloomington were taking sick, Sarah Davis wrote “Lyman's horses have the Epizootic- I hope it may not prevail...” “Some of the horses in town are taking the disease so prevalent in other places.”

By early December: “The sickness of the horses makes it inconvenient to get coal hauled –... to save the coal we have on hand – we burn large logs in the furnace.” “The horses are all sick ... those who cannot [walk], stay at home...I do not like to send Dick [a horse] out at night. He coughs some ...“The roads are very fine- but one can't ride with sick animals.”

By late December it was on the wane and by New Year's, 1873, it was over in Illinois: “[Rachel Fisher said that she] found it very pleasant to have horses to use.”

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