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"Need for Alarm": The *San Francisco Call* and the *Chronicle* Cover the 1900-1904 Bubonic Plague

Guy Marzorati

All the Golden State's major players were on the train hurtling across the country to Washington. There were executives from the Southern Pacific Railroad (the heads of Frank Norris' famed "Octopus"), the president of the shipbuilding conglomerate Union Iron Works, and, most conspicuously, the publishers of San Francisco's leading newspapers. The group had been sent by California Governor Henry Gage to lobby the Treasury Secretary Lyman Gage, Surgeon General Walter Wyman, and President William McKinley to suppress a report by a federal commission confirming the existence of bubonic plague in San Francisco.¹ Plague was bad for business, and it was the business interests of the city which were aboard the train, not those concerned with the deaths that had resulted from the disease thus far. Ten days after the group sped to the nation's capital, however, news of this secret meeting was leaked by the *Sacramento Bee*, whose headline declared: "Infamous Compact Signed by Wyman: Makes Agreement with Gage Not to Let Facts Become Known Contrary to Federal Law."² The

¹ Guenter B. Risse, *Plague, Fear, and Politics in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 172.

² "Infamous Compact Signed by Wyman," *Sacramento Bee*, March 16, 1901.

fact that the *Bee* was the paper to publish their findings was telling, for honest reporting on the political workings of the crisis was not to be found in San Francisco's principal publications.

Exactly one year before the governor's men traveled to Washington, on the afternoon of March 6, 1900, bubonic plague was found on the corpse of Wong Chut King. King was a single lumber salesman who lived in the basement of the Globe Hotel in San Francisco's bustling Chinatown. The news of the pestilence sent tremors through San Francisco's medical community, but it was not entirely unexpected. The year before, the dreaded disease had hit Honolulu's Chinatown. Health officials tried to isolate the plague-infected houses and burn them down, but the fire accidentally spread and burned down all of Chinatown. The fire was given front-page coverage in the *Chronicle*, although most Caucasian San Franciscans doubted that a malady thought to be of tropical origin would land in their city.³ When plague did arrive in San Francisco (the first ever case in the continental United States), the city's health officials reacted quickly, placing a rope around Chinatown to create an effective quarantine. After no further cases were found in the ensuing days, the quarantine was lifted. Joseph Kinyoun, the federal quarantine officer stationed at Angel Island, was ridiculed for his premature announcement of plague, as was the San Francisco Board of Health. A week later, both officials' worst fears were confirmed.

³ Marilyn Chase, *The Barbary Plague* (New York: Random House, 2003), 12; "Honolulu Swept by a Great Fire," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Feb. 1st, 1900.

When three more plague deaths were discovered in Chinatown on March 15, 17, and 18, the city had a crisis on its hands. Chinatown was placed back under quarantine, and, in May, federal officials enacted a ban on the travel of Chinese and Japanese unless they had proof of receiving the Haffkine vaccination, a recently developed vaccine for the plague. Legal action taken by the Chinese Six Companies (a protective organization founded to assist Chinese immigrants) ended the travel restrictions, and later, the quarantine, which had weaved around white residences and stores in a clear violation of the 14th amendment assuring equal protection. By the beginning of 1901, twenty-one San Franciscans had died of bubonic plague, nineteen of whom were Chinese. In January, Surgeon General Wyman attempted to break through the medical and political intransigence by appointing three nationally-renowned medical experts to determine whether the deaths of the past nine months were indeed from bubonic plague. Like Kinyoun and the San Francisco Board of Health before him, the officials confirmed the existence of plague and prepared to report back to Wyman. When Governor Gage got word of the findings, he immediately called on his friends in industry and the press to contest the conclusions in Washington, and further enshroud the existence of plague in doubt.

San Francisco's Turn of the Century Press

The beginning of the twentieth century was a thriving period of newspaper journalism in San Francisco. Four major English-language dailies existed: the morning *Chronicle* and *Examiner*, and the

evening *Call* and *Bulletin*. In addition, the city was home to special interest and foreign language papers, including the pro-union *Organized Labor*, and the recently founded *Chung Sai Yat Po*. This study will examine the *San Francisco Call* and *San Francisco Chronicle's* coverage of the plague. These two papers represented the Republican business interests of the city. The *Chronicle* was owned by M.H. de Young, and brought a strong Republican bias. From the beginning of the outbreak, it declared that the finding of plague was nothing but a scam, on the part of Democratic mayor James Phelan and his health board, to justify more spending. The *Call* was published by sugar baron John D. Spreckles, and it represented the interests of those in Spreckle's class, though with more flash than the *Chronicle*.

Other papers provided a variety of political and cultural perspectives on the plague. The flashiest of all was William Randolph Hearst's *Examiner*. The paper set the standard for yellow journalism, and certainly approached its plague coverage with sensation in mind. However, because it was Democratic-leaning, it did not oppose the early actions of Mayor Phelan and his health board. According to Guenter Risse in his account of the crisis, Fremont Older's *Bulletin* provided more conservative, anti-Chinese coverage, while the *Sacramento Bee* was able to provide less bias in its reporting, perhaps due to its distance from San Francisco political and business interests.⁴ Finally, *Chung Sai Yat Po*, or the Chinese Western Daily, was founded in 1900 by Ng Poon Chew, who sought to establish a reliable Chinese newspaper that would

⁴ Risse, 115.

inform Chinatown residents of happenings both in China and America. During the hysteria, Chew's paper would play an important role in opposing punitive health measures against the residents of Chinatown.

Misleading Coverage

In examining reporting and editorials of the *Chronicle* and *Call*, it can be concluded that the two papers' coverage was not only misleading, but it also ignored an effective medical and political response to the plague. As Republican publications, both papers used crisis as a chance to score political points on the Democratic mayor James Phelan and his appointed health board. The science behind bubonic plague was still not completely clear to everyday journalists in 1900, and newspapers took advantage of that fact to question medical authorities at every turn. Worst of all, the papers failed to report on any actual deaths, saving their column space to deny the existence of the disease, and to make life difficult for the city's medical professionals. By forcing public health officials to prove the existence of the plague when such existence had already been established beyond reasonable doubt, and calling into question the person reputation of the health officials, local newspapers hindered the efforts to end the pestilence. While the race of the mostly-Chinese victims might have played a role in the coverage, a more likely conclusion is that these papers and their editorial boards simply wanted to continue business as usual, and believed that denying the plague was the most effective way to do so.

Historiography

The bubonic disease that ran through San Francisco in the first four years of the twentieth century has been covered by historians from many angles. This is because the crisis falls under medical, racial, and political history. Two books have been written on the subject of the plague. Marilyn Chase's dramatic account, *The Barbary Plague*, looks at the crisis through the experiences of the two federal quarantine officers who were charged with ending the outbreak. Joseph Kinyoun eventually was chased out of town by Governor Gage and the local press, while his successor, Rupert Blue, "would succeed to become the top physician in the land" after overseeing the end of the 1900 plague and its reoccurrence in 1907.⁵ In Guenter B. Risse's *Plague, Fear, and Politics in San Francisco's Chinatown*, the plague is put into the context of the Chinese immigrants who were dying from it. It is from Risse's account that this paper gets its death totals for the plague. Both sources rely heavily on the primary source newspaper accounts that this study will be analyzing.

Other sources have addressed the plague in the course of longer studies, or have written about San Francisco's turn-of-the-century journalism. Yumei Sun's graduate thesis, "From Isolation to Participation," covers the history of *Chung Sai Yat Po* and its influential publisher Ng Poon Chew, but it only

⁵Chase, 4.

briefly mentions the paper's role during the plague.⁶ Another source providing background on San Francisco's journalism is Jules Becker's study of the coverage the *Chronicle* and *Examiner* gave to Asians from 1882-1924.⁷ This study provides no mention of the plague, and instead focuses mainly on editorials relating to various exclusion acts. Discussing the media coverage of the plague can be further informed by simultaneous racial and medical storylines. Charles McClain discusses the legal activism of Chinatown residents during the plague, and Susan Chaddock frames the plague against the backdrop of advancing medicine, as well as San Francisco's own history of disease.⁸ This study will rely primarily on the archives of the *Call* and *Chronicle*, as well as the aforementioned secondary sources and others detailing the lives of the paper's publishers, M.H. de Young and John D. Spreckles.

The deYoung Brothers and the *Chronicle*

By the turn of the century, the *Chronicle* held its place as the Republican paper with more conservative tastes. The paper's early years, however, were far

⁶ Yumei Sun, "From Isolation to Participation, 'Chung Sai Yat Po' (China West Daily) and San Francisco's Chinatown, 1900-1920," (College Park: University of Maryland, 1999), 1-144.

⁷ Jules Becker, *The Course of Exclusion, 1882-1924* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1991).

⁸ Charles McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle Against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 234-276; Susan Craddock, *City of Plagues* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 124-160.

more reminiscent of the Hearst-style journalism employed by the rival *Examiner*. Owned and operated by the de Young family since 1865, at the time of the plague the paper was headed by Michael Henry de Young. M.H. de Young served as business manager under his brother Charles, and the two ran the paper in the late nineteenth century, exemplifying the rowdy nature of San Francisco in those years. The paper, originally known as the *Dramatic Chronicle*, quickly caused a stir in the city, and showed a willingness to publish inflammatory gossip and then take on the ensuing libel cases in court.⁹

When put in the context of the de Young brothers' activities in the 1870's, the jabs taken at the daily papers in the plague crisis seem relatively tame. In 1871, a county commissioner upset with the *Chronicle's* campaign against a municipal judge's reelection, beat M.H. de Young with a cane and a pistol in a billiards hall until Charles came to the rescue. In another case, Benjamin Napthaly, an ex-*Chronicle* reporter, started his own paper and published insults of the de Young's mother and sister. The brothers responded by appearing in the upstart paper's newsroom with loaded guns. When Napthaly was later jailed for an altercation with the youngest de Young brother Gustavus, Charles and M.H. entered the City Prison and opened fire on Napthaly.¹⁰ The confrontational brand of journalism practiced by the de Young family abruptly ended when the son of San Francisco's mayor, Isaac M. Kalloch, responded to the

⁹ Irving McKee, "The Shooting of Charles de Young," *The Pacific Historical Review* 16, (1947): 275-276.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 277-278.

negative attacks the *Chronicle* had made on his father by shooting and killing Charles de Young. After the death of his brother, M.H de Young took over the operation of the *Chronicle*, and tried to avoid any kind of violent scandal, perhaps because he did not have his older brother to protect him from physical attacks. Instead, M.H. de Young relied on his business skill. He remained the publisher of the *Chronicle* for forty-five years and expanded the paper's circulation and political influence.¹¹ That is not to say he avoided politics altogether. In fact, DeYoung ran for senate in 1892, and served as both a delegate in the Republican National Conventions of 1888 and 1892, and as the vice-chairman of the Republican National Committee for four years.¹² Not only was deYoung willing to use the *Chronicle* to wage political battles, but as the plague crisis revealed, he was able to insert himself into the battle as a key player.

Spreckels and the *Call*

John D. Spreckels, publisher of the *Call*, stayed out of the San Francisco gossip circuit, but, like de Young, he was a major player in California Republican politics. The son of Hawaiian sugar magnate Claus Spreckels, John followed his father and made his riches in sugar refining. In 1887, Spreckels visited San Diego and fell in love with the city. In fact, he would spend most of the rest his life developing the deserted outpost into a commercial metropolis.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹² *Who's Who in America, Vol. 13, 1924-1925* (Chicago: A.N. Marquis & Company, 1924), 958.

Spreckels also spent time on the San Francisco political scene, colluding with local Democratic boss Chris Buckley in a possible attempt to elect Samuel M. Shortridge to the U.S. Senate.¹³ As the years went by, Spreckels' attention became increasingly divided, as he focused on financing the San Diego and Arizona Railway, building up San Diego's downtown and infrastructure, and establishing two papers in San Diego, *The Union* and *The Tribune*, eventually bringing the *Call's* managing editor down to run *The Union*.¹⁴ Spreckels would manage the *Call* during the plague crisis, much as de Young had done, by putting the business interests of the city first. When the city was put under quarantine for a second time in June of 1900, Spreckels traveled to the Republican Convention, and attempted to convince President McKinley to undo the state-ordered quarantine.¹⁵ So while de Young and Spreckels shared editorial views, their paper's coverage of events must be put into the context of the rivalry the publishers shared.

As two of the most powerful Republicans in San Francisco, M.H. de Young and John D. Spreckels doubtlessly crossed paths on numerous occasions. The most noteworthy event involved Spreckels brother Adolph, who shot M.H. de Young in 1884 in response to negative articles the *Chronicle* had ran about Claus

¹³ William A. Bullough, "The Steam Beer Handicap: Chris Buckley and the San Francisco Municipal Election of 1896," *California Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (Fall, 1975): 247.

¹⁴ Austin Adams, *The Man: John D. Spreckels* (San Diego: Frye & Smith, 1924), 206.

¹⁵ "California Up in Arms Against the Kinyoun Quarantine Outrage," *San Francisco Call*, June 18, 1900.

Spreckels' sugar empire.¹⁶ The two publishers also apparently had gotten uncomfortably close in the political arena. Franklin Hichborn writes that in 1899, both de Young and Spreckels attempted to put their hat in the ring to be California's senator, at that time chosen by state legislatures. Both had been promised selection by the Republican machine, but to their mutual surprise, the publishers watched the machine formally come out in support of Colonel Daniel M. Burns.¹⁷ The rivalry continued between the two in the streets of downtown San Francisco. After the de Young family had built the first steel-frame skyscraper in the West for the *Chronicle* headquarters, the Spreckels responded with a nineteen-story tower on Market and Third Street.¹⁸ Editorially, however, these two financial giants agreed that the plague threatened the good business name of their city. Moreover, they both agreed that the plague should be denied wholeheartedly, and that the Democratic Phelan administration should become the daily victim in the press. More alarming was the willingness by the two publisher-barons to use their influence to make sure their no-plague narrative was told.

Plague Coverage of the *Chronicle* and *Call*

While the two papers shared editorial motives, their style and presentation was somewhat different. Devoid of colorful illustrations, the *Chronicle* was marketed as

¹⁶ McKee, 283.

¹⁷ Franklin Hichborn, "The Party, the Machine, and the Vote: The Story of Cross-Filing in California Politics," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (Dec, 1959): 354.

¹⁸ Chase, 54.

the upstanding businessman's paper. De Young's paper covered the epidemic with biased articles and harsh editorials, but only once placed a story about bubonic plague on its front page. That space was left for coverage of the ongoing Second Boer War, and the speeches of William Jennings Bryan. Stories about the local pestilence were pushed further back in the paper, perhaps reflecting the wishes of the *Chronicle* to be a publication of national significance.

The bubonic malady was treated with much more fanfare in the *San Francisco Call*. The paper was known for its loud illustrations (and later, photographs) that accompanied stories, and thus it had no problem giving plague stories top billing. Like the *Chronicle*, the *Call* was eager for the disease to go away and for business to continue as normal in the city. But while the *Chronicle* was mostly reactive to developments in the public health saga, the *Call* did everything in its power to end the story. Anytime it seemed that there was hole in the evidence supporting the existence of the bubonic disease, the evening paper ran blaring front-page headlines such as "City Plague Scare Confessed a Sham," "San Francisco Free from Danger of Contagion," or "Plague Fake is Exposed."¹⁹ In addition to these incredibly misleading and journalistically unethical headlines, the *Call* went further during the crisis. At a time when the State Health Board and the Federal Quarantine Officials were having great difficulty convincing the public of the bacterial science behind the plague, the *Call* sent in their own hired doctor to give the city a clean bill of

¹⁹ *San Francisco Call*, March 27, 1900; June 2, 1900; December 12, 1902.

health. Later, when evidence mounted against the paper's anti-plague stance, a front page article invented a story claiming a federal health official had denied the existence of the disease.²⁰

The Trip to Washington

The report that the federally appointed health experts were prepared to release in the first months of 1901 was potentially crippling to the argument of those who had denied the plague for a year. In less than a week in Chinatown, the group of scientists had confirmed six plague cases, while in all of 1900 local authorities had discovered only twenty-two cases.²¹ It is no surprise, then, that the men sent by Governor Gage to Washington had the required clout to negotiate with Surgeon General Wyman. Beside such corporate powers as Southern Pacific's chief council William Herrin sat members of San Francisco's journalistic elite: *Bulletin* publisher Fremont Older, *Examiner* representative Thomas T. Williams, and *Chronicle* editor John P. Young.²² Their deal with Wyman was simple. As Guenter Risse writes, "the federal authorities agreed not to reveal the commission's findings concerning the presence of plague in San Francisco; in exchange, the California quintet verbally pledged to conduct a sanitary campaign in Chinatown."²³ Wyman agreed to the deal and the group headed back to California, where the

²⁰ "Plague Fake is Exposed," *San Francisco Call*, December 12, 1902.

²¹ Risse, 171.

²² *Ibid.*, 172.

²³ *Ibid.*, 172.

Bee had leaked news of the report and the secret meeting.

To readers in San Francisco, the daily papers told a different story. For the first and last time in the crisis, the *Chronicle* put a story about the plague on its front page. The March 12 headline read “No Government Action on Bubonic Plague,” and the accompanying article detailed the arrival of the “delegation of prominent citizens of San Francisco,” and mentioned that the expert report was still confidential, although the *Bee* had leaked its results six days earlier.²⁴ The *Call* completely ignored the meetings, as well as the leaked report. The paper was far too busy chasing out Federal Quarantine Officer Kinyoun and, like the *Chronicle*, giving credence to the health report produced by the governor’s traveling allies denying the plague.²⁵ Thus, like in many other cases during San Francisco’s public health calamity, it was just as important to note what the *Chronicle* and *Call* were *not* reporting, as much as what they were.

Politics and Plague

The tactics the *Call* and *Chronicle* used in their daily coverage of the plague epidemic were very similar. As already stated, their goal was to deny the plague until the story simply faded away, and the city could return to business as usual. At the onset of plague, the Republican papers aimed a political attack

²⁴ “No Government Action on Alleged Bubonic Plague,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 12, 1901.

²⁵ “The Bubonic Plague Fake,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 20, 1901.

at the Democratic mayor and his health board. The second front of the two newspaper's fight against any plague acknowledgement was directed towards the medical community and their conclusions. These attacks were based on the limited medical knowledge that existed of the plague among everyday people. Finally, and most egregiously, the two Republican publications chose to ignore the deaths that were occurring in the city.

In their efforts to deny the existence of any epidemic in San Francisco, the *Chronicle* and the *Call* both initially targeted Mayor James Phelan and his Board of Health. Phelan was a progressive-minded Democrat, who sought to use the increased powers granted to him by the city's new 1898 charter to reform city government and beautify the metropolis.²⁶ One of the powers granted was the ability to appoint the city's health board, previously done by the governor. The new Health Board that Phelan brought in faced a thankless task. Their budget had been reduced by more than half by the Board of Supervisors, and the last Health Board (nicknamed the "Burns gang" because they were recommended to the governor by political boss Daniel M. Burns) was woefully inept.²⁷ Thus, the new board entered with little money and even less public support, making them an easy target for the daily Republican papers.

The *Call*'s first published article on the reported bubonic plague was published on March 8, 1900, two days after Wong Chut King's death. The third-page headline declared "Plague Fake Part of Plot to

²⁶ Risse, 87.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

Plunder,” as the report blamed the city Health Board for creating the malady in an attempt to gain more appropriations.²⁸ It was a claim that put the Board in an untenable situation: publicly ask for more money, and the papers’ reports would be confirmed, or try and fight the lethal disease on a tiny budget and almost certainly fail. The *Chronicle* followed suit in their first piece of plague coverage. Along with an article detailing the quarantine of Chinatown, the paper’s editorial page claimed that: “What the Board of Health wants is that its political gang may make money out of cleaning Chinatown, and to effect this it is willing to ruin the business of the city and terrify innocent families.”²⁹

It is clear from the editorials of the two papers in the first few months of the crisis that they were far more concerned with the “business of the city” than with the “innocent families” caught up in the crisis. Reflecting the views of their corporate clientele, another *Chronicle* editorial suggested that the mayor replace his current health board with medical businessmen, who could save “their profession from the disgrace with which it has been overwhelmed.”³⁰ If Mayor Phelan was going to stand behind his Board of Health (as he did in a letter written to the *Chronicle* as a response to their attacks) then he too would face the wrath of the Republican media. As members of the Board of Health joined with local doctors and federal

²⁸ “Plague Fake Part of a Plot to Plunder,” *San Francisco Call*, March 8, 1900.

²⁹ “An Assault on San Francisco,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 8, 1900.

³⁰ “Remove the Board of Health,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 10, 1900.

quarantine officials to search Chinatown for signs of the pestilence, the *Call* published a large cartoon with the caption, "Beware The 'Phelonic' Plague That Has Infested The City."³¹ In the cartoon a giant Phelan, reduced to skin and bones because of his illness, raps his bony limbs around City Hall, as if holding onto it for dear life. Below him, the people of the city scream and flee. When political attacks such as this were not enough to sway their readership, the *Chronicle* and *Call* questioned the scientific validity of the plague.

Bubonic Science in its Infancy

The bubonic plague broke out in San Francisco just as scientific knowledge of the illness was coming into clarity. In the 1870's, Robert Koch developed methods to recognize diseases by examining a person's bacteria. A decade later, French doctor Louis Pasteur, and a group of scientists, discovered how to produce vaccines and serums for cholera, typhoid, and yellow fever.³² These findings led to the race between Swiss bacteriologist Alexander Yersin, and Japanese bacteriologist Shibasurburo Kitasato, to locate the plague bacterium. The United States Public Health Service was a little late entering the race for bacterial knowledge, but it caught up quickly under the leadership of Walter Wyman, who led the department from 1891 to 1911 as surgeon general. The budget of the service more than doubled in those 20 years, and

³¹ "Beware the 'Phelonic' Plague That Has Infested The City," *San Francisco Call*, March 16, 1900.

³² Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 126.

with the help of Joseph Kinyoun, the first bacteriological lab in U.S. history was built on Staten Island.³³ This growth in knowledge, however, occurred among the elite scientists of the world, not among local San Francisco clinicians. There was still room for debate concerning the disease, and both the *Chronicle* and the *Call* took advantage of that medical doubt in their coverage.

Throughout the epidemic, the editorials of the *Chronicle* and the *Call* questioned the scientific conclusions and methods of respected local and federal officials who diagnosed plague. At the root of the misleading coverage was a gap in the medical knowledge of the disease between health experts and journalists. To determine what caused the death of Wong Chut King, Kinyoun ran a standard viral test, inoculating a number of animals with the isolated plague bacteria. When those animals eventually died, Kinyoun again isolated the germ and declared that Chinatown was infected. The editors of the *Chronicle* could not (or would not) wrap their heads around this concept, they wrote that the result “proves absolutely nothing unless the bacillus which caused the death can be identified with the bacillus of the plague, which has not been done.”³⁴ Of course, it *had* been done, by Yersin less than a decade earlier, a finding Kinyoun was surely aware of due to his studies in Europe and connections to top bacteriologists like Pasteur and Koch.³⁵ But the writers at these papers had not spent

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ “The Plague Bacillus,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 29, 1900.

³⁵ Chase, 24.

years studying bacterial cultures under microscopes like Kinyoun, and their theories reflected that disparity in knowledge. One theory floated by the *Chronicle* editorial writers was that the bubonic illness was caused by a protein-deficient diet and a tropical climate, which explained its prevalence in India and China. Chinese in San Francisco, on the other hand, had protein-rich diets and lived in a cool climate, and thus could not catch the disease.³⁶ As Nayan Shah describes, the opposing theories about plague "exposed the stark cleavages in scientific knowledge about epidemics and unease with government strategies for its suppression."³⁷ As the saga went on, the *Chronicle* and the *Call* would rely on a variety of other theories to claim scientific superiority.

Three days after Wong Chut King's body was found in the Globe Hotel, the *Chronicle* reported on the progress of the Chinatown quarantine and criticized the Board of Health. It also introduced an argument against the plague's existence that would continue to appear for the next three years. Why, the paper asked, would there not be many more people dead in Chinatown if the plague was real? Wouldn't the "black death" of medieval times leave dead bodies scattered down Dupont Street?³⁸ The *Call* followed suit many times over the next couple of years, opining in February of 1901 "where its germs lodge, speedy notice of its presence is served, and the fact of its existence is not left to be determined by a microscope in a secret

³⁶ "Experience vs. Experiment," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 1, 1900.

³⁷ Shah, 123.

³⁸ "Plague Fake is Exploded," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 9, 1900.

laboratory.”³⁹

We know today that the answer most certainly lies in the species of flea that housed the disease in the dark crevices of Chinatown. According to a Center for Disease Control expert interviewed in the epilogue of Marilyn Chase’s book on the plague, the 1894 plague which left millions dead in Asia was the product of the Oriental rat flea. This flea, known as the *Pulex cheopis*, grows a basket of spines in its stomach that temporarily blocks the exit of the plague blood, and the entrance of any new blood the flea searches for. Eventually, the starving flea dislodges this deadly cocoon of germ that has been breeding in its stomach. The flea present in San Francisco (*Ceratophyllus fasciatus*) had no mechanism that blocked digestion, leading to a less lethal transmission.⁴⁰ This small difference probably saved scores of lives in San Francisco, and accounts for the controlled, though still serious, breakout that occurred there.

In attempting to scientifically disprove the existence of the plague, the *Call*, the less traditional of the two Republican papers, went to lengths the *Chronicle* would find too far for its readers’ tastes. On May 29, a day after Judge William W. Morrow overturned Kinyoun’s travel ban on Asians, and the state had enacted its own quarantine, Dr. George F. Shradly arrived in San Francisco to determine once and for all if the pestilence existed in the city. Disproving the disease “once and for all” would become a repeated phrase on the part of the plague disbelievers, but the claim rang hollow as dead bodies with swollen glands

³⁹ “Another Plague,” *San Francisco Call*, February 3, 1901.

⁴⁰ Chase, 191.

continued to be found for another three years. Shrady had been hired by the *New York Journal* and the *Call*, which announced his arrival with an illustrated front-page spread. The pictures conveyed a sense of drama regarding the health proceedings; on one side of the page Judge Morrow thoughtfully reads his decision, on the other side worried city merchants confer with the State health officials. And in the middle, triumphantly posed with his right fist clenched, his left arm extended as if emphasizing an important point, is Dr. Shrady, the city's medical savior. Unfortunately, the doctor's visit led to nothing but more confusion. The article contained a statement from Dr. Shrady declaring, "As far as I can learn from a conversation held this morning with the President of the Health Board there is at present no case of bubonic plague in San Francisco."⁴¹ The announcement left many questions unanswered (had there even been bubonic cases?), and it did not shut the door on the possibility of deaths in the future.

The next day, authorities took Dr. Shrady to examine the corpse of Dang Hong, a forty-year-old worker, who had lived in Chinatown for ten years.⁴² Shrady confirmed that Hong had indeed died of plague, and, in doing so, forced the hand of the *Call*. The newspaper had no choice but to take to the front page with the following headline: "Sporadic Case of Bubonic Plague Discovered, But There is Absolutely No Need for Alarm."⁴³ While the front page admonished

⁴¹ "Board of Health Confesses to a Famous Expert," *San Francisco Call*, May 29, 1900.

⁴² Risse, 279.

⁴³ "Sporadic Case of Bubonic Plague Discovered," *San Francisco Call*, May 31, 1900.

citizens to remain calm and simply take sanitary care, the editorial of the same day turned nasty, declaring that if the disease really did exist, then Chinatown should be burned to the ground.⁴⁴ The paper had paid the price for its attempt to control the scientific narrative of the epidemic.

Silent Journalism

In the bubonic plague crisis that lasted from 1900 to 1904, 119 San Franciscans lost their lives. This number can be disputed due to the difficulty of actually locating dead bodies in Chinatown. In the first place, poor lines of communication existed between the San Francisco medical establishment and Chinese doctors. The residents of Chinatown also began hiding dead bodies with plague, understandably trying to avoid another quarantine.⁴⁵ Only the first, Wong Chut King, received any type of press from the *Chronicle* or the *Call*. The vast majority of the plague victims were Chinese, and this could have been a contributing factor to the lack of coverage. An illness afflicting the wealthy residents of Pacific Heights would have certainly received a different reaction from the media. But the refusal of the two editorial boards to see the calamity as anything other than a political ruse was the single biggest factor suppressing honest coverage.

As the deaths continued (three more Chinese laborers followed Wong Chut King to the grave in March), the editorials of the *Chronicle* and *Call* became

⁴⁴ "Clean Out Chinatown," *San Francisco Call*, May 31, 1900.

⁴⁵ Risse, 184. 277.

more transparent. More than anything, the two papers simply wanted the plague story to go away and for business to continue as usual by the Bay. On March 25, a *Call* editorial exposed these desires in shocking fashion. After a routine criticism of Phelan and the rival *Examiner*, the editorial declared "It will be remembered that the *Call* and *Chronicle* agreed to omit publication of the sensational doings of the Board of Health and the Chief of Police."⁴⁶ This collusion, which evidenced an abandonment of journalistic standards, was meant as a rebuttal to a "plague special" published by the *Examiner* and its Hearst-owned affiliates. A month later, it was the *Chronicle* applauding the *Call* for its efforts in "defending the city against the hurtful story that bubonic plague existed here."⁴⁷

Throughout the summer and fall, the shots continued at the *Examiner* and at Kinyoun, specials ran detailing horror stories of whites trapped in the Chinatown quarantine, and plague cases in England and India were reported. But of the fourteen deaths that occurred between May and October, not one was written about. Even the death of the first white victim, teamster William Murphy, drew no coverage from either paper. A reason could simply be that the editorial boards of the *Chronicle* and the *Call* had gone too far to turn back. Despite mounting death totals and scientific evidence, jettisoning their original no-plague position would have resulted in a loss of face. It was a game of "Chicken," and with neither side

⁴⁶ "Yellow Plague," *San Francisco Call*, March 25, 1900.

⁴⁷ "Deprecate Plague Fake," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 17, 1900.

willing to risk embarrassment, their journalistic standing was left to slip off the cliff.

The Racial Motives of the *Call* and *Chronicle*

Another theory is that the deaths were not covered because those affected by the plague were mostly Chinese immigrants living in San Francisco's Chinatown. Of the 119 plague deaths, only twelve were not Asian.⁴⁸ Many were single men with few connections in this country, the kind of people who easily escaped the public's attention. Furthermore, both papers had a history of not providing Chinese-Americans with favorable coverage. The *Chronicle* had long been an important local player in promoting Chinese and Japanese exclusion.⁴⁹ The *Call*, meanwhile, constantly portrayed Asians in their cartoons as monkeys, and stereotyped their behavior as animals inside the quarantine. It made sense that these conservative, business-friendly papers would seek to demean the Chinese. Chinatown itself sat on a valuable area of land not far from downtown, and editorials from the time show that much thought already went into ways to relocate Chinese to another part of the city.⁵⁰ This being said, remaining silent on the plague issue does not seem like the best way to have promoted Chinese removal. The *Examiner*, for example, with its strong Democrat and union ties, sought to expose the plague, and, in the process,

⁴⁸ Risse, 277.

⁴⁹ Becker, 1.

⁵⁰ "The Chinatown Nuisance," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 29, 1900. Explains how Chinese could possibly be priced out of current location through a city charter loophole.

expose the Chinese as a filthy, sick population that was bad. The silence of the *Chronicle* and *Call*, then, was less of a purposeful turning of a blind eye to the plight of the Chinese, and more likely an attempt to completely ignore any plague story. After all, with Chinatown's proximity to San Francisco's commercial center, plague would be bad for business. And the business interests of the city were above all what interested the two Republican papers.

The End of the Plague

The efforts of the business community in San Francisco to suppress the knowledge of the plague had allowed the illness to drag on through 1902. The city's death total rose to ninety-three on December 11 with the passing of Deong Yuen Yum.⁵¹ The plague would only come to an end when the city's commercial interests decided that there was no use in further denying what had become known nationally, and that business stood to lose if Chinatown was not cleaned up. Rupert Blue, the federal quarantine officer who took over in the spring of 1901, had been pursuing a plan of rat catching and construction to eradicate the plague. This process called for knocking down hastily built porches and wooden additions, and filling in basements with concrete.⁵² The plan seemed to be the answer to the plague, but to carry it out Blue needed the support of the powerful business leaders and the newspapers that represented the business interests.

The commercial powers of San Francisco had their

⁵¹ Risse, 293.

⁵² Chase, 126.

own reasons to begin support of plague eradication. The city's standing as the home of the Pacific Fleet, and the West's greatest shipping hub, was being challenged by Seattle and the Northern Pacific Railway. As Guenter Risse writes in his account of the plague, the image of the city as host to such a contagion gave great credence to those who advocated the transferring of maritime business to Seattle.⁵³ In January of 1903, Surgeon General Wyman organized a meeting of the nation's state health boards. It declared once and for all that plague existed in San Francisco. What came of this was a meeting of the top business interests of the city, including M.H. de Young, who decided to form the Joint Mercantile Committee. While the *Call* and *Chronicle* both reported the purpose of the meeting was to suppress Wyman's declaration, the Joint Mercantile Committee would prove to be a valuable ally to Blue in eradicating the plague.⁵⁴

Whether de Young truly believed that plague was present in San Francisco, or whether the risks in not taking action simply became too great for the city's business, the publisher and his influential associates teamed with Blue to end the epidemic. Blue, unlike quarantine officer Joseph Kinyoun, understood the importance of playing to the influential newspapers, and, according to Marilyn Chase's account of the crisis, he asked for their backing of the rat eradication campaign and the cleaning of Chinatown, missions that could be pursued without admitting the existence

⁵³ Risse, 219-220.

⁵⁴ "Business Men Take Action," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 27, 1903, and "Lies are Still Hurting State," *San Francisco Call*, January 27, 1903.

of plague.⁵⁵ Whether a direct response to Blue's pleas or simply a case of journalistic exhaustion, stories about the plague in the *Call* and *Chronicle* became scarce in 1903 and 1904, and all but disappeared from the paper's editorials. As Joint Mercantile Committee increased their efforts throughout 1903, Blue began meeting regularly with the Committee's president, and other state and local health officials, to discuss the joint efforts.⁵⁶ Blue's plan for plague eradication was ultimately successful, and the last death of the plague occurred in February of 1904. The meetings Blue held ultimately laid the groundwork for future public-private collaboration, and when the bubonic plague resurfaced following the 1906 earthquake, the blueprint for eradication was in place. Only when the media hysteria had died down, and the city's rich and powerful had accepted the truth about the plague, was meaningful prevention able to prevail.

Conclusion and Lasting Impact

The bubonic plague that killed nearly 120 San Franciscans from 1900 to 1904 was wiped out fairly quickly once the plague's presence was undisputed, and a clear agenda for Chinatown's cleanup was carried out. For the first two years of the crisis, however, the lack of any substantial action was delayed by the debate over whether the plague actually existed. Opposition to the plague's existence, though scientifically baseless, was led by the city's two Republican newspapers, the *Call* and the *Chronicle*.

⁵⁵ Chase, 130.

⁵⁶ Risse, 250.

The two newspapers acted as beacons of misinformation at a perilous time when the public deserved to know why San Franciscans were dying. The leaders of these two journals were Republican barons who wanted to see business as usual continue in San Francisco.

The paper's strong Republican positions led to criticism of the Democratic mayor and his health board for inventing the plague to gain more funds. Though great advances had been made in scientific circles that correctly identified the bubonic plague strain, the *Call* and *Chronicle* played to the medical ignorance of the common man in their attempt to repudiate pronouncements from local and federal health officials. Finally, the papers abdicated their journalistic integrity in not reporting on the sick and dying in their own city. In pretending to be a voice for the citizens of San Francisco against higher political and medical interests, the papers instead left the public unaware of the harmful disease around them.

The lasting impact of the 1900 bubonic plague and its media coverage, can be related to a medical calamity that occurred some eighty years later when another virus emerged among a minority population in San Francisco. The AIDS crisis of the 1980s first emerged in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, particularly in the gay hub of Castro Street, which quickly became "ground zero" for the epidemic in that city. Like the bubonic plague of 1900, AIDS was initially limited to an isolated minority population, and its presence was downplayed by business interests (in the case of AIDS, these interests were the bathhouse and sex club owners who were positioned to lose business if an outbreak was acknowledged.) But as

Randy Shilts writes in his seminal account of the crisis, *And the Band Played On*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* acted quite differently than its turn of the century predecessor, and was far ahead of the national media in both reporting the tragic deaths, and pushing the local government for more action. Subsequently, San Francisco's AIDS prevention and treatment programs were far ahead of other cities such as New York.⁵⁷

Perhaps then, if the *Call* and *Chronicle* in 1900-1904 had been out in front of the local health inspectors, reporting in detail the early gruesome deaths in Chinatown, local and federal officials would have responded with a unified effort, unburdened with having to prove that a disease actually existed. Ironically, the scientific knowledge of the bubonic plague in the early twentieth century was actually more advanced than the knowledge of AIDS when its outbreak took place in San Francisco. But so much effort on the part of Joseph Kinyoun and the early health officials involved with the plague was spent on fighting a daily press war with the Republican news conglomerates, that two years went by with little substantive progress. The plague of 1900 will forever illustrate the coercive power of the press to muddle scientific knowledge and delay impactful action.

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⁵⁷ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1987).