

# The Yellow Fever Epidemic In Martin, Tennessee

Lonnie E. Maness

Yellow fever occurs now in only a few isolated areas throughout the world, and credit for this, in large part, is due to such medical doctors as Walter Reed, James Carroll, Jesse W. Lozear, and Carlos Finlay. Dr. Walter Reed and his associates, working in Cuba in 1900, were able to prove that the yellow fever pest was transmitted by the *stegomyia* mosquito. They performed a great service to mankind. However, yellow fever had been a scourge for centuries. For instance, newspapers abound with stories about this dread disease during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yellow fever aided in stopping the French in their efforts to put down a slave insurrection on the island of Santo Domingo in 1802 and 1803, with thousands of French soldiers dying of the disease.<sup>1</sup> It contributed to the failure of a French company under the direction of Ferdinand de Lesseps that was trying to construct a canal across the Isthmus of Panama, and it broke out periodically on the island of Cuba<sup>2</sup> and in many other places throughout the world.

This was certainly true for the United States. In New Orleans alone the yellow fever peril struck repeatedly. It reached plague proportions in 1817 (800 deaths), in 1819 (2190 deaths), in 1847 (2259 deaths), in 1858 (4030 deaths), and in 1867 (3460 deaths).<sup>3</sup> The year 1878 witnessed another outbreak of the dread disease, with New Orleans suffering greatly once again. The same was true for many towns and cities in Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky. By September 5, 1878, sixty cases and twenty deaths had been reported in Hickman, Kentucky.<sup>4</sup>

The plight of Memphis was desperate in the extreme. In one twenty-four hour period, from September 25 to September 26, 1878, forty five deaths were reported along with one hundred twenty-five new cases of the dread disease.<sup>5</sup> At times the death toll became so great that coffins had to be stacked on the street corners, and the grave diggers worked overtime. The city's population was reduced by thousands who fled in terror. Within a few days 20,000 of the white inhabitants had left Memphis, an exodus that was encouraged by the Board of Health as it advised that depopulation was the only hope of stopping the spread of the epidemic.<sup>6</sup>

Soon the situation became so desperate that Memphis was quarantined by many cities for miles around. Furthermore, many of those unfortunates who fled the city were soon being turned back by shotgun squads. By August 26, some 573 cases of the yellow fever had been reported and the death toll stood at 140.<sup>7</sup> The situation became much worse as the days and weeks went by. Soon this common horror led to the disappearance of lines of caste and creed as white and black men

labored side by side to aid each other. Women, both rich and poor, worked hand-in-hand as nurses as they labored to cool fevered brows. Protestant and Catholic clergy worked together. Even Annie Cook, the "painted madame of the city's most palatial demimonde establishment, ousted her girl inmates overnight and converted her place into a hospital, remaining there to nurse the sick until she fell ill and died."<sup>8</sup>

The plight of the people became so critical that a committee of Memphis citizens made a special plea to the people of the United States and to the world at large, informing them of their condition and needs and thanking them for the aid that had already been extended and for all the help that would be forthcoming.<sup>9</sup> September saw the epidemic at its height. Then the frosts of October killed the mosquitos and "yellow jack's" grisly hand was stayed. On October 29, the Memphis **Appeal**, in an editorial, announced that the epidemic was over.<sup>10</sup> However, Memphis had paid a high price. Out of a total population of 45,000, approximately 25,000 had left the city. Of those that remained thousands contracted the disease and over 5000 deaths resulted.<sup>11</sup>

It was believed that the yellow fever found its way from Memphis to Martin, a town which had been founded in 1873, just five years earlier. It was established on the site where the Illinois Central and the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railroads intersected. Colonel G. W. Martin established a sawmill close to the intersection and the town began to mushroom, with the mill furnishing the lumber that was needed for the building boom. Soon a hotel was constructed, then other business establishments and private dwellings appeared. A public school was erected, and this was followed by several churches. In 1873 the town had a few citizens; however, by 1878 there were 710 people living in Martin. The town, created out of the wilderness, was showing great promise. Then the dread yellow fever struck Martin in August, 1878, and the town's development suffered a severe setback.<sup>12</sup>

It is not known with any degree of certainty how yellow fever came to Martin. What is known is that William H. Martin ordered a boxcar from Memphis to ship corn to St. Louis, and the people of Martin believed that the car was contaminated. At the time no one realized that the disease was carried by the deadly *stigomyia* mosquito. One may assume that the car brought the mosquitos to Martin.<sup>13</sup> By the time the epidemic had run its course 400 of Martin's citizens had contracted the disease and 42 had died.<sup>14</sup>

After the car was in the town, William Martin had Jim Fields, Pleas Clements, John Hawks, and Tom Harvey clean out the car. Then the corn was loaded and made ready for shipment. Of the four men, John Hawks was the only one that did not come down with yellow fever. After a hard struggle Clements got well, but Harvey and Fields both died. They were the first victims of the disease, but both of these men lived outside of Martin. The first Martin resident to die from the disease was William H. Martin, who died on September 2. So the people of Mar-

tin had good reason to believe that the dread disease was brought into their community by the boxcar from Memphis. They called it an infected car.<sup>15</sup>

Although William Martin was the first resident of Martin to die of the fever, Abner Atkinson, the second resident to die, was the first man to be buried. There was no graveyard in Martin when the fever struck, and at first those in charge of the burial detail were inclined to bury Mr. Atkinson where the Methodist church now stands. However, it was finally decided that he should be buried on the west side of the town in a cotton field, and thus Martin's first cemetery — now known as "the yellow fever cemetery" — was laid off.<sup>16</sup> One may see the headstones of many of those who died of the plague by visiting the graveyard at the corner of Highway 45 and Lee Street. This graveyard is a constant reminder of the suffering that Martin and its people had to endure in 1878.

When the crisis was over the death toll was great. Those who died were Mr. Lewis, W. H. Martin, Jimmie Fields, Thomas Harvey, T. P. Estep, Mrs. Johnson, Walter Green, Mrs. Marshal Martin, Mr. and Mrs. Abner Atkinson, W. Z. Looney, Miss Forest Dibrell, T. J. Murphy, Tom Acres, Ben Murphy, Miss Minnie Holland, Miss Mollie Holland, Mrs. Henry Draughan, Harrison Nowell, Mr. and Mrs. James Carter, William Carter, Mr. and Mrs. L. A. Blake, Walter Johnson, E. Holland, Charles Gardner, Captain Powell, Mr. and Mrs. Jones, Captain Dean, William Boyd, the little child of Joe Felphs, two unnamed negroes, a child of Mr. and Mrs. Jones, Robert J. McComb, W. V. Brawley, Mrs. Drake, Mrs. Acres, James Kimbro, and Mrs. Fuqua.<sup>17</sup>

During this time of trouble Martin was fortunate in being served by at least four physicians, Benjamin Franklin Hall, C. M. Sebastian, G. W. Dibrell, and W. T. Lawler. Little is known about the services that Hall and Lawler performed, but it is presumed that they did treat some of the yellow fever patients.<sup>18</sup> Dr. Dibrell, a kind, generous Christian gentleman, gave liberally of his time and services to all who called upon him. He lost a daughter to the fever and almost lost his wife. Being old and not very well he soon left town.<sup>19</sup>

According to Ronald C. Thomas, this left the twenty-eight-year-old Dr. Sebastian as the only physician in Martin and the surrounding area. To combat the plague, he immediately erected signs warning the people to leave the city. Why? It was because he had developed a theory about how the yellow fever was transmitted. He did not know that the mosquito was the carrier. However, he observed that when one person became sick of the fever no one else close by would come down with the disease immediately. Someone at a distance would become its next victim. Hence, he concluded that the disease was not contagious and that it was probably carried from individual to individual by some insect. "He called it a gnat — and that this gnat was chained to a given location by the laws of nature per se, and was blown by the wind or

carried in some way to another location."<sup>20</sup> He was to be derided for years to come because of his theory and, any swarm of flying insects were to be laughingly called "Dr. Sebastian's damned gnats."<sup>21</sup>

Sebastian so strongly believed in this theory that he put his wife and daughters on a train for Middle Tennessee so they could stay with his wife's father. The number of fever cases continued to rise, and finally Sebastian had to call on Dr. Pierce of Union City for help. He came and proved to be a great help to Dr. Sebastian.<sup>22</sup>

Another person who rendered valuable service during the epidemic was a crossing watchman for the Mississippi Central Railroad, Andrew Shepherd. The Negro gentleman was put in charge of the company's property. He refused to leave Martin when Dr. Sebastian ordered the evacuation of the city. Instead of leaving, he remained at the section house awaiting developments. When the next train arrived, he told the roadmaster, who was on the train, of the latest developments in Martin—that everyone had been ordered to leave. As he was the only remaining employee of the road in Martin, he was instructed to remain so that the tracks could be checked to make sure they were always clear. This could prevent accidents. His work kept the trains rolling through Martin at top speed before they had to stop at the section house on the edge of town. This helped to keep passengers from being stricken with the disease and to confine it to Martin. Shepherd continued this work for five weeks. Finally, in November the first frost lessened the danger; soon the fever was gone, and residents began to return to Martin.<sup>23</sup>

An interesting incident occurred during this time of trouble that involved Robert McComb. It seems that he was one of the few able-bodied men in Frost, as Martin was then known. William H. Martin occupied the Bowden House, a large frame hotel, and it was there that he died. Within a few days after his passing tramps and lawless persons came to the hotel and proceeded to take everything of value that they could lay their hands on. Bob McComb responded to the call for help and was able to capture these men without the aid of anyone. He then delivered them to the penitentiary in Nashville. After returning to Martin, and some seven days later, he contracted the fever and soon died. Because of his friendship for Mr. McComb, Marshall P. Martin honored him by having a street, McComb Street, dedicated to the memory of this early pioneer.<sup>24</sup>

The year following the disaster in Martin, yellow fever was again reported in New Orleans and other points in Louisiana and Mississippi. When the refugees fled those areas they were moved north primarily by trains, but they were not allowed to stop within the corporate limits of any towns in the south. However, the people of Martin, though they had suffered grievously the year before, had compassion in their hearts for these people. They placed water and food outside the city limits for these unfortunates, and for this the refugees were most thankful, and so were the officials of the Illinois Central Railroad.<sup>25</sup>

To commemorate the suffering of the people of Martin, W. P. Caldwell wrote the following lines:<sup>26</sup>

THE PLAGUE STRICKEN VILLAGE  
MARTIN IN 1878

In the deep placid shade of its whispering trees  
Reposed the young city that hot summer moon,  
When the Angel of Death spread his wings on the breeze  
'Twas the darkness of night on the brightness of noon.  
For days that were fair and skies that were blue  
Grew black as a pall in the shade of that wing;  
He call'd and there answered the loved and the true—  
The doom'ed for the courts of the merciless king.  
Bright hopes were blighted that can't be relighted.  
Tender ties perished — no more to be nourished;  
Fond hearts were parted to be reunited  
At the throne of the Father, whose love they had cherished.  
Then courage and manhood, and kindness and love  
And heroic faith gleaming bright in the van;  
Stood forth in that hour of trial to prove  
"That life is best spent that is given for man."  
We've seen the Dark One by the battle's red glare.  
He call'd for the strong and his strength fell away  
'Till anguished and writhing beneath their hot chain  
Did reason, unseated and writhing beneath their hot chain  
To the demons of madness that tortured his brain.  
He breath'd on the youth, 'till he bent a high head,  
Tamed a proud spirit and dim'd a bright eye;  
With his elders he rests in the halls of the dead  
'Till the good angels summon him home to the sky.  
To the matron he turned and at his hot breath  
'The springs of her blood and her life dried away,  
Resigned her wan form to the keeping of earth,  
And freed her brave soul from its union of clay.  
He sign'd the maid and her step lost its Spring,  
Her lip its red hue — her red cheek its rose;  
The voice that gladden'd and cheer'd with its ring  
Was stifl'd and hush'd in eternal repose.  
While here from the parents the children were born  
And they left alone to their grief and their weeping—  
There from the parents the children were torn  
And 'neath the same mold are tranquilly sleeping  
There neighbor and friend and husband and wife  
Were smitten and fell by that poisonous breath;  
All ties that are nearest and dearest in life  
Were loos'd in the grasp of that terrible death:  
Not goodness nor strength, nor beauty, nor love,  
Could shield or exempt from the horrors he wrought;  
May God in His mercy look down from above  
And pity the sorrows the Plague Angel brought.

So it can be seen that there was much suffering not only in Martin in 1878, but in many places throughout the Mississippi valley area. A great deal of business activity was disrupted in the region south of Memphis due to the epidemic. Some fifty steamboats were tied up and their crews discharged; many dock workers were idled; four great railroads were paralyzed; and many business establishments were closed in the towns and cities where the fever prevailed. Not only were people suffering and dying from the direct effect of the disease but many were suffering from its indirect effects. It is estimated that there were fifteen thousand people unemployed in New Orleans, two thousand in Vicksburg, two thousand in the smaller towns, and eight thousand in Memphis, all because of the yellow fever. When one considers that most of these workers were heads of households, this means that approximately one hundred thousand people were affected.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, yellow fever caused a great deal of suffering during the plague year of 1878. Today we can be most thankful that medical science has almost completely eradicated this dread disease — this scourge of mankind — from the face of the earth.

1. Robert H. Ferrell, **American Diplomacy: A History** (N.Y.: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1969), pp. 108, 118; Samuel Eliot Morison, **The Oxford History of the American People** (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 808.
2. F. L. Owsley, O. P. Chitwood, and H. C. Nixon, **A Short History of the American People** (N.Y.: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1948), Vol. I, pp. 362, 376.
3. **New York Times**, September 6, 1878, p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*, September 6, p. 2.
5. *Ibid.*, September 6, p. 5, September 26, p. 5.
6. Robert Tolley, **One Hundred Years of the Commercial Appeal: 1840-1940** (Memphis: The Memphis Publishing Co., 1940) pp. 50-52.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
9. **New York Times**, September 6, p. 5, September 26, p. 5.
10. **The Memphis Appeal**, October 29, 1878; Tolley, *op cit.*, p. 58.
11. Tolley, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
12. **The Weakley County Press and Martin Mail**, September 14, 1923, Section 8.
13. **The Martin Mail**, August 27, 1915.
14. *Ibid.*, August 27, 1915; Ronald C. Thomas, "The Founding of a Happy Town," **Martin Centennial: 1878-1973** (Martin: Tennessee Centennial Commission, 1973), p. 20.
15. **The Martin Mail**, August 27, 1915.
16. *Ibid.*, August 27, 1915.
17. *Ibid.*, August 27, 1915.
18. *Ibid.*, May 28, 1915, June 4, 1915, August 27, 1915, September 14, 1923.
19. *Ibid.*; Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 20; interview with Mrs. Irene Sebastian Green, the seventh daughter of Dr. Sebastian.
20. Thomas, *op cit.*, pp. 20-21; interview with Mrs. Irene Sebastian Green.
21. Thomas, *op cit.*, pp. 20-21.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 21
24. **The Martin Mail**, August 27, 1915, September 24, 1915.
25. *Ibid.*, August 27, 1915.
26. *Ibid.*, August 27, 1915.
27. **New York Times**, September 9, 1878, p. 2.