



THE IMPERATIVE DEMANDS OF COMMERCE - Merchants complained that “the river landings and railroad depots are becoming blocked up” by stacks of products usually moved by mules. This photo, courtesy of the Library of Congress, illustrates a slow day at the wharves, ca. 1880.

The Great Epizootic of 1872: A Forgotten Pestilence in New Orleans

by Charlotte Jones

By the fall of 1872, New Orleans finally looked like a Southern city recovering from the chaos of the Civil War: steamers moved steadily in and out from the port, new businesses emerged on the shuttered streets of Tchoupitoulas Street, and a dozen new streetcar routes opened since General Lee’s surrender at the Appomattox Court House. Mules, the conveyors of cotton, retail products, and bobtail streetcars, continued just like their ancestral cousins: stopping, going, pulling, and idling. After five or so hours bumbling up and down the city’s suburbs, circling the statue of Henry Clay, and transferring lines on Canal, the mule pulled into the barn--done for the day. Their human counterpart, the streetcar operator, had another 11 hours on shift. The next mule--hardly bright-eyed or bushy-tailed, but fresh for work--was hitched to the bobtail car and sent on its way.

Mules were never the center of attention in New Orleans. They were merely there to pull, haul, tow, and every other variation of the same essential task--transport an apparatus from one point to another. Though not necessarily unappreciated, the long-eared biological hybrid machines were certainly underappreciated.

But in the fall of 1872, the lazy and stubborn cyborgs of New Orleans

would finally garner some appreciation thanks to--of all things--a horse in Toronto. Stablemen clocked-in one morning in September to find a horse acting sluggish. Mucus dripped from its nose, common in chilly environs. Soon the discharge turned green and yellow, indicating a severe ailment. The beast ate little, idly panted, sweat, and shook. The infection--most likely equine influenza--spread quickly within the cramped working barns. While more equines trembled and heaved in their stalls, hostlers comforted the ghastly beasts by rubbing their necks with homemade liniment concoctions of tea, turpentine, and oil.

Minimal or symptom-free animals continued their duties at the wharves and markets. Dealers and auctioneers shipped out the animals via rail as usual to meet the demand for urban street railway draft labor and would--through these means--spread this virus throughout Canada and the northeastern United States. The virus spread radially in dense urban centers like New York and Boston, but regionally and nationally in linear movements to the south and west along transportation lines.

This Great Epizootic of 1872 would ultimately shed light on the complicated urban ecology of man and beast, and how the disruption of the latter

meant exponential disruption for the former. When the pandemic reached New York City, it put 38% of the city’s 18,000 streetcar horses out of work within the first 24 hours. Afflicted fire horses acted as one of several factors in Boston’s calamitous Great Fire of 1872 that ravaged over 12 hours and decimated 776 buildings in the city proper.

New Orleans braced for the “Horse Plague” and inevitable economical impact. Mayor Flanders and General P.G.T Beauregard, then President of the Board of City Railroads, suggested a city-wide equine quarantine to curb the pandemic. If it went into effect, it proved too little too late. Still, in the meantime, the mayor, city council, and the local Board of Health sought the “enforcement of cleanliness and precautionary disinfectant measures in all the large car and livery stables of the city.”

Hostlers and stablemen scrubbed down barn and livery areas with a newfound care for cleanliness. Local companies urged residents to stock up on coal and other goods while some gouged prices in anticipation of shortages. By November 26, 1872, reports surfaced that “The long looked for, but not looked longingly for, epizootic has arrived.”

The city hoped mules--not being quite horses--would be spared from the malady, but five hybrids displayed symptoms at the Dryades Railroad Company and ten at Fisher’s sale stables in the city’s horse and mule markets, a section of massive barns that once stood in today’s Central Business District. The next day, most of the residing animals in the district showed symptoms of the epizootic, that one stableman likened their symptoms to human influenza.

Some equines, displaying early

symptoms of the sickness, bumbled onto the wharves and streets in heavy blankets--the local newspaper Daily Picayune postulated that "the imperative demands of commerce" would not allow, "the poor equines a moment's rest while they are able to service."

The next day, Postmaster Lowell suspended all mail operations in New Orleans. Soon clouds of cotton bales piled high onto the levee, stevedores unloaded sugar casks at unusual landing spots along the river, and steamships disembarked with little freight. Besides industries that depended directly on draft power like the port, rails, and dray businesses, the Horse Plague affected the livelihoods of vendors and merchants. Butchers at the stockyards complained that they would not be able to send animal products to market. At the same time, truck farmers optimistically fretted that they could at least eat the produce they wouldn't sell. Volunteer firefighters coordinated drills to run steam engines by hand. Garbage piled into ditches with the disappearance of mule-toting offal carts.

Eight days into the outbreak, the Daily-Picayune posed a serious question, "How long will it last?"

The answer seemed precarious;

"From the data furnished by the press of Northern cities that have been infected, it appears that it takes about three weeks for the epizootic to run its course. Should New Orleans prove no exception to the general rule, the amount of damage that it may do to our commerce is incalculable. Steamboats are arriving with large cargos; railroad trains come in heavily freighted, and for lack of transportation facilities, the river landings and railroad depots are becoming blocked up, seriously to the inconvenience of trade."

Who could replace the jobs of bedridden equines that man could not? The beasts that mules previously replaced in the south: oxen. Some rural Southerners brought their oxen

to town, hoping to make a buck with their "outdated" draft technology--and what a sight they created upon their return! Spectators gawked at the ruminating oxen, poised at the Poydras Market in the middle of the mule market district. It seems their presence brought some much-needed levity to the Epizootic of 1872--Daily Picayune reporters joked that it took 15 men to rig up a team, and that the teamsters, "approach Mr. Ox as though they expected on the slightest provocation he will toss them into the Kentucky or Missouri [rivers]..."

Young men jumped at the chance to tow steam engines and dray carts in mulish efforts to strut their Herculean strength. Allegedly, from Maine: "A large and powerful but skittish young man, attached to a handcart, ran away on Main street, Bangor, yesterday forenoon, to the great terror of a number of ladies on the sidewalk. He was caught, however, before doing any damage."

The Horse Plague--Sketches About Town During the Epidemic - Harper's Weekly, November 1872.

Tugboats ferried people along the river from Canal Street to Napoleon Avenue and back to fight the terrestrial strain placed on the city and outlying suburbs transportation nodes. Meanwhile, local foundries used the Epizootic to hawk steam traction engines. Companies expanded steam cars, and reporters suggested that the NO & C RR Co. reintroduce ammonia propulsion that experientially failed just a few months prior.

A veterinarian known as Dr. Elliott emerged from the mule markets as the city's own Saint Francis of Assisi. Retail stables secured his services as soon as their equines displayed symptoms of influenza while he treated the volunteer company's fire horses service gratis. Dr. Elliott and his team of hostlers and laborers managed 375 sick equines. He lost at least one equine to the pandemic, a firefighting horse named Frank that he sold to the American Hook and

Ladder Company 2 in 1855. Though the human firefighters mourned the loss of Frank, they accepted his age (at least 17, but probably much older) likely affected his recovery from the malady. Dr. Elliott offered his veterinary services in the Daily Picayune during the pandemic, despite his heavy workload. The owner of Quinn's Stables, a small private stable, offered a myriad of home remedies that may have been more harmful than helpful. Livery owners in New Orleans noticed the failed recovery efforts in New York and Boston, who returned their animals to work too soon, causing a second wave of the pandemic. New Orleans equine-dealer Jacques Levy warned that "even a moderate use of a horse will almost immediately develop the malady." Given the lack of more robust veterinary science and epidemiology, longtime horsemen still understood that comfort and rest provided the best and quickest cure for the ailed animals.

The Board of Health inspected the conditions and progress of the animals and their stables throughout New Orleans's six districts throughout the ordeal. As of December 21, 1872, 69 horses and 22 mules died from the influenza. The majority of the mule deaths occurred from private stables in the Fourth District, where 1,015 horses and mules were reported sick, but the synopsis of that report does not differentiate the animals. Even with missing numbers, it is clear that mules resisted the disease better than their counterparts and distinctly outnumbered them in New Orleans. Firefighters arranged funerals for cherished horses like Frank that perished during the pandemic, but it is unlikely that the lowly work beasts who met a similar fate received the same honor.

But this does not mean horses and mules were simply disposable machines left to die. Livery owners and men like Dr. Elliott took painstaking efforts to provide maximum care and comfort for hundreds of ailing beasts of burden. Even if agents and livery

owners only wanted to ensure the animals' survival to make good on their investments, animal caretakers likely developed some kind of attachment during treatment--if not beforehand. Every time stable hands and hostlers groomed and rubbed homemade concoctions on the horses and mules necks to comfort them, they encouraged social bonding between man and beast.

Stories of the Epizootic of 1872 in New Orleans tend to dissipate after the Board of Health's report, suggesting that the equines were on the mend when the inspections came about. Reports from other cities, like Cincinnati, New York, and Memphis, stated that the pandemic lasted approximately three weeks--in New Orleans, the pandemic lasted about 25 days. Though the fatality rate from the Epizootic was approximately 2%, it exemplified

the equine's prominent role as infrastructure when so many services--from streetcars to truck farming--came to a halt. The Great Epizootic of 1872 also highlighted the importance of animals as transportation, population density, and new veterinary practices. Above all else, it gave the beasts of burden some well-deserved care, and even love.

Author's Note: I began working on this piece shortly after Fat Tuesday 2020 when I came down with the "Mardi Gras crud." Since the massive outbreak of COVID-19, it has felt important (and frankly, therapeutic) to explore the impact of the equine influenza, known as the Great Epizootic of 1872, in New Orleans. Though this pandemic afflicted equines rather than humans, it's spread and impact on the city was uncanny to the initial COVID-19 outbreak and following

restrictions.

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THE EPIZOOTIC.

Important Arrangements for the
Moving of Cotton, Etc.

THE HORSE PLAGUE.

The Disease Spreading with Great
Rapidly.

The Carrollton Line of Cars to be
Stopped.

mules. But, in the majority of instances they (the mules) are not affected as much as the horses, and they seem to recover more rapidly. The symptoms are the same in both. The first cases occurred on

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