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Infectious Diseases and Smallpox Politics in New Mexico's Rio Abajo, 1847–1920

OSWALD G. BACA

Nota S^{ra} Juana Venabides tiene 7 hijos hombres casados y
con este entierro ha enterrado 47 nietos

[Note Señora Juana Venabides has 7 married sons and with
this burial she has buried 47 grandchildren]

Juan B. Ralliere
Tomé, 12 March 1890

11 hijos muertos. No le quedan ni uno.

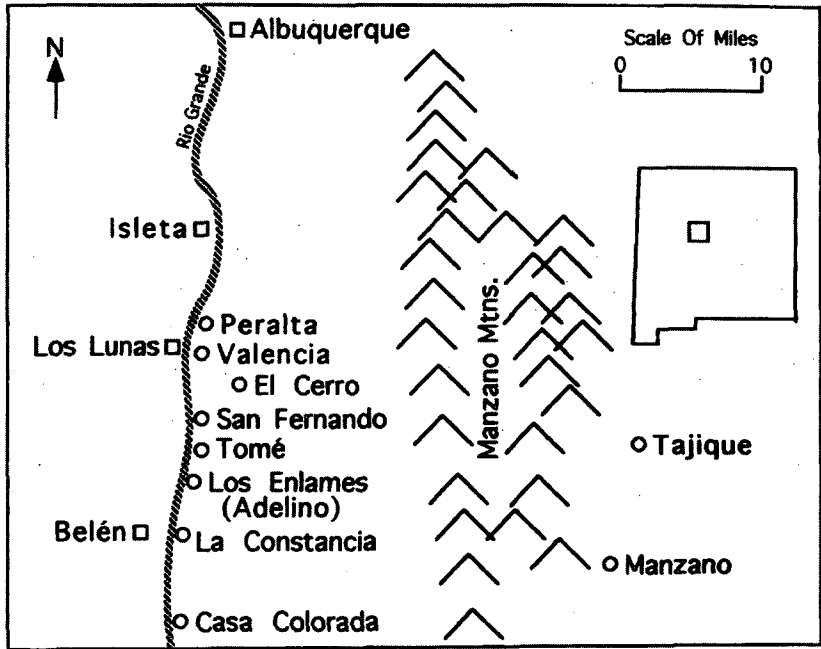
[11 dead children. She is left with not even one.]

Juan B. Ralliere
Tomé, 31 July 1892

During the second half of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, a relentless wave of epidemics of infectious diseases caused by airborne microorganisms visited the Rio Abajo of New Mexico, resulting in many deaths in the predominant Hispanic population. These epidemics were revealed upon examination of compiled burial records kept by the clerics of Tomé's Purísima Concepción Catholic Church who also ministered to parishioners from Peralta, Valencia, El Cerro, San Fernando, Los Enlames (present-day Adelino), La Constancia, and Casa Colorada (see map).¹

A recent analysis of death records of inhabitants of these same villages revealed a similar pattern of severe epidemics and high mortality

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The Rio Abajo research area.

during the late colonial period and through the entire Mexican period (see figure 1).² That analysis revealed that between 1793 and 1846, periodic epidemics of infectious diseases swept the area, accounting for 30 percent of all deaths. Based on the time of year of their occurrence—the cold months—it was concluded that airborne microorganisms (i.e., agents of smallpox, diphtheria, measles, influenza, pertussis) were the etiologic agents. The most severe of the epidemics was that of 1826, which claimed approximately 7 percent of Tomé's inhabitants and 20–37 percent of Valencia's population; it was most certainly caused by smallpox. It was also concluded that children under the age of thirteen (*párvulos*) accounted for 54 percent of all deaths during 1793–1846.

The current study is an extension of this earlier work, examining the death patterns in this area from 1847 through 1920. In addition, it

examines, in depth, a major smallpox outbreak in 1897–1898 that exacted a horrific toll on the Hispanic population of Tomé and its associated villages and the politics that surrounded it. This is the first analysis of its impact on the Hispanic population of the Rio Abajo. This smallpox epidemic extended beyond the borders of the Tomé parish, affecting many New Mexico communities, including Albuquerque. Yet, at its peak, there was no acknowledgment by the press of the epidemic's ghastly toll in the Tomé area. When one Albuquerque newspaper finally admitted to its presence in Albuquerque itself, it grossly understated the number of cases and deaths. Most of the Territory's other newspapers were also extremely circumspect or silent about the epidemic. The Territory's two leading officials, Governor Miguel A. Otero and Secretary George H. Wallace, kept an almost invisible profile during the entire course of the epidemic.

Retrospective analyses of various sources, including church burial records, are beginning to reveal the extent and prevalence of infectious disease in New Mexico during the colonial, Mexican, and territorial periods. Prior to 1919, recordings of infectious disease outbreaks in New Mexico were, for the most part, non-quantitative, anecdotal, and sporadic. Notations of epidemics of smallpox and measles among the colonists and Indians of New Mexico during the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries were occasionally inserted in church records; however, they provide only a glimpse of the actual incidence of infectious disease during those periods. An important source for discerning and gauging the prevalence of contagious diseases in pre-twentieth-century New Mexico are the burial records maintained by the Catholic priests. Although the actual cause of death was seldom noted, the clerics, for the most part, routinely recorded dates of deaths or burials, whether adult or child; names of the deceased and their spouses; and if children, the names of parents, and, depending on the recorder, the actual age. These data are extremely valuable to epidemiologists for revealing death patterns and identifying possible causes of enhanced mortality.

Records of 2,846 burials exist for deceased parishioners from Tomé and its associated villages for the years 1847 through 1920.³ Burial records are unavailable for the years 1856, 1857, 1861–1865 and are incomplete for 1852 and 1876. Because the population was predominantly Hispanic and Catholic, the recorded burials probably represent the majority of all deaths that occurred in these villages of the Rio

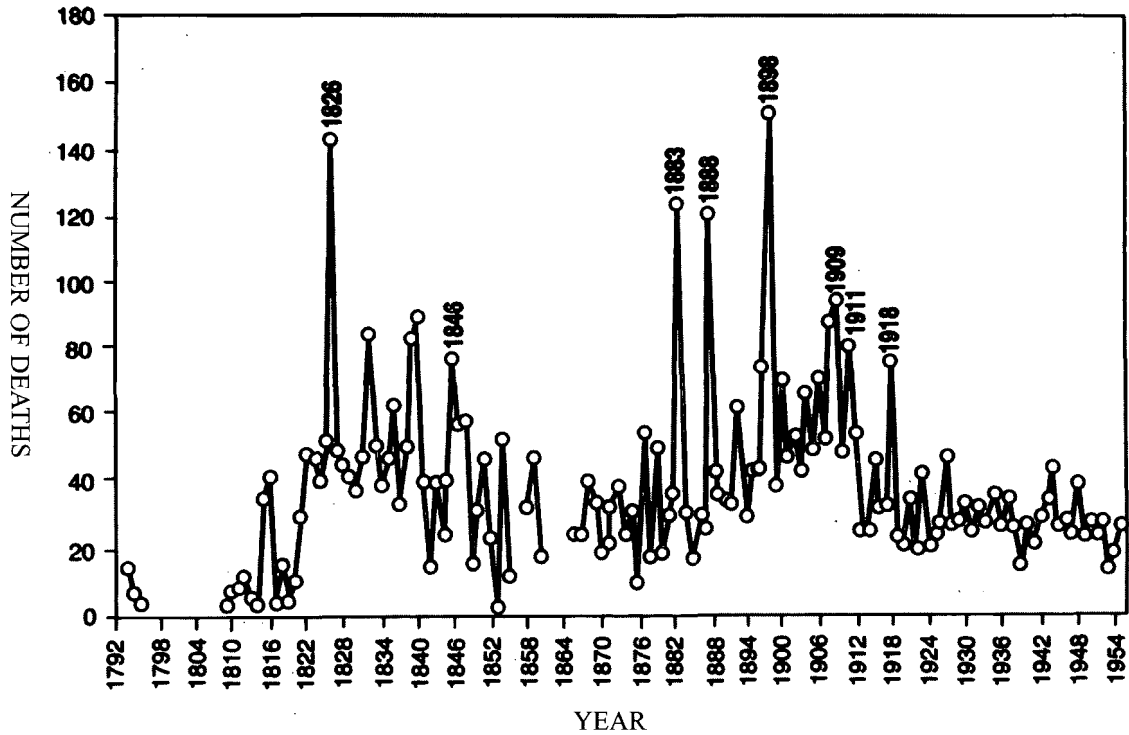


Figure 1. Total number of deaths in the villages of Tomé, Peralta, Valencia, Adelino, La Constanacia, and Casa Colorado during the years 1793–1955.

Abajo during the 1847–1920 period. This large sampling allows for an accurate analysis of death patterns and a determination of probable causes of death within the entire population.

Fifty-three percent ($n = 1,517$) of all the burials that took place during 1847–1920 were of children under the age of thirteen, a rate nearly identical to that reported (54 percent) for the previous fifty-four years: 1793–1846 (see table 1).⁴

Analysis of the 1847–1920 burial records reveals a distinct pattern of acute increases in mortality above the baseline levels of approximately twenty to thirty per year (see figure 1 and table 1). Acute increase in mortality took place during the years 1883, 1888, 1898, 1908, 1909, 1911, and 1918; the most striking were those of 1883, 1888, and 1898. Other die-offs of lesser intensity also occurred in this area of the Rio Abajo in 1847, 1848, 1877, 1893, 1897, 1900, 1904, and 1906. The additional deaths ($n=812$) above baseline ($n=30$) represent 35 percent of the total deaths ($n=2,342$) recorded during the years 1870 through 1920. Children under the age of thirteen were the primary victims during all of these periods of enhanced mortality.

That all of these sharp increases in mortality took place during the cold months, and because multiple deaths occurred in many households within a brief period, they undoubtedly were caused by epidemics of airborne contagious microorganisms of the respiratory tract. The implicated microbes include the viral agents of smallpox, influenza, parainfluenza, and measles and the bacterial agents of scarlet fever, diphtheria, and pertussis.

The identities of the etiologic agents of the seven major epidemics that visited the Tomé parish from 1883 through 1918 are, in some cases, revealed by the burial records. The severity of the 1883 die-off and notations made by the parish priest clearly implicate smallpox. Juan B. Ralliere, Tomé's pastor from 1858 to 1913, prominently penned the term "*Viruela*" (smallpox) after the heading "1883."⁵ Of the 123 burials recorded that year, ninety-eight took place during January through April and most were children.

Smallpox also struck other areas of the Territory in 1883. The *Albuquerque Evening Review* noted in early March, "About a dozen cases of small-pox . . . in Mesilla."⁶ In mid-March, it wrote that "The Indians of Santo Domingo pueblo have small pox in their midst and ought to be rigorously kept away from the railroad station at Wallace."⁷ A few days later, it published a one-liner: "A little small-pox excitement

Table 1. Number of Recorded Deaths in the Tomé Parish (1847–1920).

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Childern (%)</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Childern (%)</u>
1847	56	38 (67.9)	1888	120	88 (73.3)
1848	57	24 (42.1)	1889	41	21 (51.2)
1849	15	5 (33.3)	1890	35	15 (42.9)
1850	31	23 (74.2)	1891	33	10 (30.3)
1851	46	25 (54.3)	1892	32	12 (37.5)
1852	22	7 (31.8)	1893	60	30 (50.0)
1853	2	0 (0.0)	1894	28	11 (39.3)
1854	52	29 (55.8)	1895	41	22 (53.7)
1855	11	9 (81.8)	1896	42	12 (28.6)
1858	32	19 (59.4)	1897	72	43 (59.7)
1859	46	33 (71.7)	1898	151	113 (74.8)
1860	17	9 (52.9)	1899	37	12 (32.4)
1866	23	15 (6.2)	1900	69	39 (56.5)
1867	23	9 (39.1)	1901	46	22 (47.8)
1868	39	23 (59.0)	1902	52	32 (61.5)
1869	32	14 (43.8)	1903	42	19 (45.2)
1870	18	5 (27.8)	1904	65	30 (46.2)
1871	20	7 (35.0)	1905	48	22 (45.8)
1872	32	15 (46.9)	1906	69	20 (29.0)
1873	37	16 (43.2)	1907	51	22 (43.1)
1874	23	11 (47.8)	1908	85	50 (58.8)
1875	29	22 (75.9)	1909	92	68 (73.9)
1876	9	3 (33.3)	1910	47	20 (42.6)
1877	53	31 (58.5)	1911	79	51 (64.6)
1878	16	5 (31.3)	1912	53	19 (35.8)
1879	49	29 (59.2)	1913	24	11 (45.8)
1880	18	5 (27.8)	1914	24	12 (50.0)
1881	27	8 (29.6)	1915	45	20 (44.4)
1882	33	14 (42.4)	1916	30	11 (36.7)
1883	123	93 (75.6)	1917	29	9 (31.0)
1884	29	17 (58.6)	1918	74	43 (58.1)
1885	16	5 (31.3)	1919	22	10 (45.5)
1886	28	10 (35.7)	1920	19	8 (42.1)
1887	25	12 (48.0)	Totals	2,846	1,517 (53.3)

in Santa Fe again, and a pest-house demanded.”⁸ These events coincided with the major die-off in the Tomé parish.

The 1888 epidemic in Tomé and surrounding villages was apparently caused by a combination of airborne agents, including those of smallpox and croup, an acute disease of the respiratory tract caused by parainfluenza viruses. Preceding the Tomé burial listings for 1888 in prominent letters is the term “Croup.” One entry contains the term “Viruela.”⁹ One hundred twenty burials were recorded that year, with the majority taking place in the cold months (January–May, n=67; September–December, n=29). Multiple deaths occurred in twenty-one households.

Scarlet fever and diphtheria are implicated in the 1908 epidemic that struck Tomé and its associated villages; the terms “Diphtheria,” “La Peste Scarletina,” and “escarlatina” are included in some of the burial log entries for that year.¹⁰ It is possible that scarlet fever also caused the epidemic of 1909 when ninety-two burials were recorded. In both years, most of the recorded deaths were of children, and again took place during the cold months. East of Tomé, scarlet fever was reported to have killed over forty children during late 1907 and early 1908 in the villages of Torreon, Manzano, and “other mountain towns” of Tarrant County.¹¹ In Santa Fe, the public schools were closed in March 1908 because of the disease’s presence in the city.¹² The following January, the *Albuquerque Morning Journal* reported that Las Vegas had seventy-five to one hundred ongoing cases of scarlet fever and that a “number of deaths” had resulted.¹³ Later that month, Albuquerque was also visited by the epidemic.¹⁴

In 1911, during January and February, measles claimed the lives of at least twenty children in the Tomé parish (median age twelve months). Ralliere identified the victims in the burial log with the term “Measles” and the letter “m.”¹⁵ Contemporaneously, up the river in Albuquerque, the *Albuquerque Morning Journal* reported that the disease struck at least “several hundred” children and, interestingly, that “no deaths [were] reported in the city.”¹⁶

Influenza virus was the likely etiologic agent of the 1918 epidemic in the Tomé parish, the virus responsible for the pandemic of 1918–1919 that claimed twenty million lives worldwide and at least five hundred thousand victims in the United States.¹⁷ As was the case throughout the United States, most of the victims in the Tomé area died during the fall of 1918. Of the seventy-four burials that year, thirty-four.

took place during the months of October through December. The other six major epidemics that visited these villages during the 1883–1918 period exacted a greater toll than the flu epidemic of 1918 (see table 1).

Across the river, Belén and the surrounding settlements of Los Chávez, Los Trujillos, Jarales, Bosque, and Pueblitos were devastated by the flu epidemic. Compared to the rest of the state, this was one of the hardest hit areas. The burial log of Our Lady of Belén Catholic Parish, which encompassed these communities with a combined population of approximately four thousand, shows that in October alone, there were an astounding 122 burials!¹⁸ The average age of the deceased was nineteen. The previous month, there were nine interments and in November, nineteen. In the entire year of 1918, 256 burials were recorded. The previous year, sixty-seven burials were recorded and in the succeeding year, fifty-eight. Normally, influenza has the highest incidence in the five- to nine-year-age group and the highest mortality in the very young and very old.¹⁹ As in Belén, young adults had the highest mortality throughout the world during the 1918 epidemic.²⁰ (A detailed account of this epidemic in the rest of the state has been written.²¹)

* * *

Of the seven major epidemics that struck the Rio Abajo during the 1883–1918 period, the 1897–1898 smallpox epidemic exacted the highest toll. Based on available census data (see table 2), the epidemic killed 11 percent of the Casa Colorada population and 4 to 5 percent of the Tomé-El Cerro-Valencia-Adelino inhabitants. Although the recording priests seldom noted the cause of death, Ralliere wrote in the burial records for 1898 that smallpox was the cause of death of 117 decedents. In the heading for 1898, he inserted the term *viruela* in large, bold letters and the letter “v” before each of the 117 smallpox victims, of whom ninety-eight were under the age of thirteen.²²

The first recorded victim of the smallpox epidemic in the Tomé parish was an adult female from Casa Colorada buried on 12 December 1897.²³ The epidemic spread throughout the parish, claiming its victims from late January through April, with most of the deaths occurring in March and April (n=96). Ralliere was so overwhelmed by the number of burials that many of his entries in the burial book consisted only of lists of victims, their fathers’ names, and no dates except for the month

Table 2. Population of Upper Rio Abajo Villages*

Village	1850	1870	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950
Peralta	586	616	672	561	500	654	770	509	913
Valencia	249	581	494	455	463	445	453	1289	814
Tomé	183	1035	1130	985	887	331	348	419	386
Casa Colorada	553	235	214	219	312	354	281	242	226
El Cerro			230	291	292	274	300	452	421
Adelino	180					436	492	633	623
Totals	1751	2467	2740	2511	2454	2494	2644	3544	3383

*Data compiled from the *New Mexico 1850 Territorial Census*, 4 vols. (Albuquerque: New Mexico Genealogical Society, 1985; United States Census Reports for 1870–1950.)

of burial. Based on a mortality rate of 10 to 30 percent for classic smallpox (*variola major*), the extrapolated number of smallpox cases in the 1898 outbreak in the Tomé parish was probably in the 390 to 1,170 range.²⁴

Across the Rio Grande from the Tomé parish, the epidemic was not as severe as indicated by the number of deaths recorded at Our Lady of Belén Catholic Church (52 deaths in 1896, 89 and 72 burials in 1897 and 1898 respectively).²⁵

Incredibly, there was no mention of this tragic loss of life in the Tomé area in Territorial newspapers, not even those of Albuquerque, located just a few miles north. The *Las Vegas Daily Optic* on 19 February did note that:

Albuquerqueans are worrying over reliable information that an old Arabian peddler, who is on his way to the city, is now on a peddling tour to the river towns south of the city, where a number of smallpox cases are reported to be. On the arrival of this old peddler, the city authorities will probably not wait on ceremony or long talk, but ask the undesirable visitor to go hence.²⁶

Undoubtedly, the smallpox epidemic entered Casa Colorada, and later the rest of the Tomé parish, from the south where smallpox had flared the previous November (1897) in the vicinity of Socorro, affecting the communities of San Marcial, Paraje, Valverde, Mesa, La Joya, and Sabinal.²⁷ That fall, smallpox also struck the Ute Indians in southern Colorado, and a quarantine was imposed to prevent communication of the disease to the nearby Jicarilla Apaches of northern New Mexico.²⁸ In December, the editor of the Socorro newspaper, *The Chieftain*, pointed out that there was an epidemic in surrounding villages and complained that control measures were:

being done in a most haphazard and unsystematic manner, and . . . that the official authorities all the way from Acting Governor Wallace to the city mayor and council of Socorro are very negligent and lax in not taking extreme measures in the matter. Another great trouble is that there are some who try to keep the matter hushed up because a quarantine would injure business.²⁹

The editor followed with the prescient statement that “this small pox epidemic is a serious one, and if the disease is to be prevented from spreading from one end of the Rio Grande valley to another, all, including both the proper officials and every private citizen must take an active part . . . to stamp out the disease.”

The same day, the *Albuquerque Morning Democrat* quoted a Denver newspaper in a brief article that “smallpox is epidemic in San Marcial and vicinity It is said that there are over 200 cases in Socorro county and some 25 deaths have occurred within the past two weeks.”³⁰ The brief article stated that “Acting Governor Wallace regards the report as largely exaggerated” and that the health authorities had instituted vaccination of the population. This was the only mention of the epidemic by the *Democrat* until the following August, at least five months after it struck Albuquerque itself.

On Christmas Eve 1897, Socorro’s mayor, Elfego Baca, and the board of health proclaimed a quarantine and posted guards preventing travelers from the affected villages from entering the town.³¹ Socorro was untouched by the smallpox. On 1 January, Albuquerque’s *The Weekly News*, in a one-sentence untitled article, noted that “The epidemic in San Marcial has abated.”³² After that one-liner, the *News*

never again mentioned the epidemic, but, unabashedly, profited from it by publishing prominent front-page ads from a local agent peddling “Insurance against Small Pox.”³³

Burial records for San Marcial, Paraje, and Valverde for 1897–1899 are incomplete. Complete records for La Joya’s Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church are available, however, and show that the number of burials nearly tripled from 1897 (n=15) to 1898 (n=43). The following year, 1899, there were only ten burials.³⁴ Thirty-seven of the 1898 interments took place during February through May, most of them (n=27) in March and April. Undoubtedly, these additional deaths in La Joya were caused by smallpox and show that the epidemic had not abated.

It was not until mid-August—five months after smallpox entered the city—that the *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, for the first time, acknowledged the prevalence of smallpox in Albuquerque, even though the previous month, and without explanation, it had announced that the county commissioners had adopted measures “to prevent the moving of patients suffering from contagious diseases” and declared it “unlawful for any person infected with smallpox or diphtheria” or whose family was infected to enter the city or be present in public places or businesses.³⁵ Earlier, in March, it had also published without elaboration another ordinance requiring vaccination against smallpox of everybody within the corporate limits of the city.³⁶

In that 12 August editorial, the *Democrat* stated that there were “just thirteen cases of smallpox in Albuquerque and three cases in the pest house on the edge of the mesa outside the city limits” and that all but three of these patients were “practically well.” The editor claimed that “there have been up to this morning, exactly forty-seven cases . . . three of these . . . have died.” The editor continued:

[The] first case of smallpox in this vicinity this year was that of an unknown Mexican girl living with her parents on Barelás road . . . She died on March 5, when the case was first brought to public attention. Her little brother caught the disease, and as the family was ordered out of the country by the mayor and marshal, contrary to the wishes of the board of health, nothing more was ever learned of the case. . . . The other two deaths were William Sheer, a young stranger from Slater, Mo., and

Dolly Sauguinette, a prostitute, who was addicted to the use of alcoholic liquors and morphine.

The editor identified the location of the cases in the city: "Ten in the Mexican quarter . . . commonly known as "Chihuahua," ten in Plaza Martinez . . . three in Barelás . . . eight in the Highlands." The editor added that "*This is a complete and truthful statement of the exact conditions of smallpox in Albuquerque today* [author's emphasis] and is summarized from the official report of City Physician Haynes." The article concluded with the statement:

Many of the territorial papers have given credence to wildly absurd statements of the course of smallpox in Albuquerque, and as these malicious rumors hurt the whole of New Mexico almost as badly as they do Albuquerque, it is hoped that our exchanges who have given currency to exaggerated rumors will have the courtesy to give their readers the real [sic] facts of the case.

During the next nineteen days, the *Democrat* gave a daily status report of the "smallpox situation" in Albuquerque, writing that there were three more cases and no additional deaths.³⁷ In late August, in a long editorial, it claimed that "of late different parties have insinuated that the *Democrat* smallpox reports were unreliable."³⁸ The editor went on "to say that these reports are made truthfully and completely upon official information" from the city physician and that "By law every physician is required to report any case of smallpox in his care to the city physician." He added that "in a number of cases, [the paper had] spent a good deal of time and gone to a great deal of trouble to investigate rumored cases of which he [the city physician] knew nothing." Interestingly, in June, the *Democrat*, without explanation, had published an untitled one-liner that read, "A complaint charging the city physician with neglect of duty and failure to make monthly reports was referred to the grievance committee [of the city council]."³⁹ Apparently, the "majority" of the newspapers of New Mexico and El Paso reprinted the *Democrat's* "real facts" and were "thanked" by the *Democrat* for giving their readers the "true account of the smallpox situation in Albuquerque."⁴⁰

Responding on 30 August to an anonymous correspondent of its competitor, *The Albuquerque Citizen*, that the *Democrat* “should be a trifle more conservative on this delicate subject and not endanger the business interest of this city,” the *Democrat*’s editor wrote the telling comment that “by suppressing the real [sic] facts, the papers of this city [including the *Democrat*] allowed the lying stories of Albuquerque knockers and outside enemies to flourish and grow entirely beyond the limits of reason.”⁴¹ It added that local “knockers” had “written to friends outside and travelers were regaled with sensational stories . . . until every paper from St. Louis to Los Angeles and from Denver to El Paso was full of items estimating the number of cases in this city at from one to seven hundred.” It ended with: “A truthful and complete smallpox report will continue to be published . . . until the disease is entirely eradicated.” The *Democrat*’s bravado lasted until the next day, 31 August, when it published a final, terse report: “There are no new cases [of smallpox].”⁴²

It is quite clear from the burial book of Albuquerque’s San Felipe de Neri Catholic Church that the 1898 epidemic began in April and continued into October.⁴³ The records reveal that an inordinate number of deaths—the majority young children—occurred in Albuquerque’s Hispanic population. The parish also encompassed the communities of Barelás, Los Griegos, Los Duranes, Pajarito, Atrisco, San Ignacio, Alameda, Corrales, and Los Candelarias. The records show that the number of burials—99 percent with Hispanic surnames—for 1898 was 348, nearly twice the number of burials that took place in 1896 (n=168), 1897 (n=186), and 1899 (n=179). Compared to the preceding months, and to previous and subsequent years, the number of burials increased dramatically during the months of April through October 1898, peaking in June and July when 120 burials were recorded. One hundred three burials took place during August–October. For comparison, the average number of burials during each of those months in 1896, 1897, and 1899 was seventeen.

Because of the extremely high number of deaths, it can only be concluded that these additional deaths (n=170) were the result of smallpox. Based on a case-fatality rate of 10–30 percent, the actual number of smallpox cases in Albuquerque’s Hispanic population during April–October probably ranged between five hundred and seventeen hundred—ten to thirty-four times the number reported by the *Democrat*.

The press was also silent about the epidemic striking the Indian pueblo of Isleta, located just south of Albuquerque, and only after it was over did the Albuquerque *Democrat* publish an anecdote in early August that a “gentleman from Los Padillas” related to the newspaper that the smallpox epidemic at Isleta Pueblo had “spent its force” and that there was “not at the present time a single case.”⁴⁴ It wrote that there had been 387 cases of the disease in the pueblo and that eighty-five people had died.

An examination of the burial book of Isleta’s St. Augustine Catholic Church revealed that the number of burials in 1898 (n=82) was three times that of the previous year, 1897 (n=28), and the succeeding one, 1899 (n=24).⁴⁵ The priest at Isleta penned the term “viruela” in fifty-one of the 1898 entries; twenty-eight were from the pueblo, three from Los Padillas, a Hispanic community that borders Isleta to the north, and one from the village of Los Lentos, another Hispanic community located immediately south of the pueblo. The first clearly identified smallpox victim was buried on 10 March and the last on 1 July; all were under the age of thirteen. The victims from Los Padillas were buried in June and July and the one from Los Lentos in late March. The chronology of burials indicates that the epidemic spread north from the Tomé parish into Isleta, Los Padillas, and the rest of the Albuquerque area. Belatedly, *The Las Vegas Optic* admitted in late August that smallpox was affecting “nearly all sections of the Territory,” including Las Vegas, and went on to admonish county and city authorities to enforce vaccination and quarantine laws.⁴⁶

Not even the territorial capital of Santa Fe was spared. Shortly after one of its own newspapers claimed in early September that “reports of the prevalence of the disease [in the Territory] have been largely exaggerated,” Santa Fe and the surrounding area were visited by smallpox.⁴⁷ The burial records of Santa Fe’s Catholic cathedral show a sudden increase in the number of interments, beginning in November and continuing into the first three months of 1899.⁴⁸ This spike in the number of deaths was most likely due to smallpox. A total of 172 burials was recorded in 1898 and 209 in 1899. During the previous year, 1897, 127 burials took place and in 1900, 111.

The epidemic continued into early 1899, devastating Zuni Pueblo south of Gallup where an estimated 249 died during late 1898 through March 1899.⁴⁹ Other Indian pueblos—Acoma, Laguna, Jemez, Cochiti, Santo Domingo, San Felipe, San Ildefonso—in New Mexico were

affected, resulting in an additional combined loss of 267 lives.⁵⁰ (A recent article discussed its severe effect on the Territory's Pueblo Indians.⁵¹)

During the entire course of this Territory-wide epidemic, Governor Otero said nothing, publicly, about it, and, as his correspondence demonstrates, did very little to assist the citizenry. From the epidemic's onset in November 1897 through at least September 1898, his office received letters and telegrams from throughout the Territory pleading for help: San Marcial, Lincoln, Las Vegas, Rowe, Guadalupe County, Gallup, Cerrillos, Mora County, Deming, Hillsboro, Silver City.⁵² Some vaccine was provided to a few localities, but the stocks quickly ran out.⁵³ To most of the requests, Otero gave a stock reply that the legislature had failed to make any appropriations to deal with such matters and that according to state law it was the county commissioners' responsibility to appoint a health officer, appropriate funds for the purchase of vaccine, and impose quarantines.

Colonel J. E. Hurley, Division Superintendent of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway Company in Las Vegas, wrote to the governor in August that

almost every little town that is located along the line [AT&SF] . . . are troubled with the disease. . . . We have been trying to get the Territorial health officers interested, but it seems to be a difficult proposition. . . . We are likely to be quarantined at almost all of our stations and stop commercial business and would injure the Territory and *particularly* [author's emphasis] the Railroad.⁵⁴

Otero responded by writing to the Board of County Commissioners in Santa Fe, echoing Hurley's sentiment that "*Should smallpox become epidemic here* [author's emphasis], it would be greatly detrimental to our territory, possibly resulting in the quarantine of the railroads . . . which would be a great loss to the business interests of this territory."⁵⁵

By their inaction, the Territory's two leading officials, Governor Otero and Acting Governor Wallace, and the local authorities—with the complicity of the press (notably except for the Socorro *Chieftain*) and the business community—undoubtedly prolonged the smallpox epidemic, endangered many lives, and caused unnecessary deaths. They opted for being a "trifle more conservative on this delicate subject and

not endanger the business interest[s].” Had Otero and Wallace asserted leadership, alerted the public of the seriousness of the epidemic from its onset, and convened the legislature to allocate the needed resources to systematically vaccinate the population and institute effective quarantines, much suffering and death would have been avoided.

Economic interests took priority over the public welfare. At the time, politicians, businessmen, and newspapers were caught up in promoting statehood and attracting more business to the Territory; a bill was introduced in Congress in late 1897 seeking admission of New Mexico as a state.⁵⁶ On New Year’s Day 1898, the *Albuquerque Democrat* published a multi-page supplement advertising and promoting the economic virtues of the Territory.⁵⁷ The following month, it suggested that arrangements be made by the business communities of Albuquerque, Socorro, and Las Cruces with the Santa Fe Railway to bring “eastern” physicians attending a convention in Denver for a “day-light excursion” to see the “advantages offered by the Rio Grande Valley to those who are suffering from pulmonary trouble.”⁵⁸ (How ironic that an uninvited guest—smallpox virus—that enters hosts via the pulmonary tract was touring the valley!) Equally troubling in this episode was the transparent scapegoating by the press, the “Arabian peddler” and the only three deaths reported by the *Albuquerque Democrat*: the “unknown little Mexican girl”—“the first case”—whose family was deported, the “stranger” from Missouri, and the “prostitute.”

That the press was simply ignorant of the smallpox epidemic in the Tomé parish is implausible; it had direct communication with residents of the area. In late February, at the height of the epidemic, the *Albuquerque Democrat* interviewed “one of the substantial farmers and stockmen of Peralta,” but no mention was made of the epidemic.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, the *Democrat*’s “real facts” are still cited in contemporary historical accounts.⁶⁰

* * *

Airborne infectious agents were responsible for all the major epidemics that visited the Rio Abajo from 1883 through 1918 (see table 3). These epidemics were not restricted to the Tomé area, but also affected other areas of New Mexico.

Year	Infectious disease	Infectious agent
1883	Smallpox	Smallpox virus
1888	Smallpox, Croup	Smallpox virus, Parainfluenza viruses
1897–98	Smallpox	Smallpox virus
1908	Scarlet fever, Diphtheria	<i>Streptococcus pyogenes</i> , <i>Corynebacterium diphtheriae</i> (bacteria)
1909	Scarlet fever	<i>S. pyogenes</i>
1911	Measles (rubeola)	Measles virus
1918	Influenza	Influenza virus

Table 3. Infectious Diseases Implicated in the Major Epidemics of the Rio Abajo, 1883–1918

With the establishment of the New Mexico Department of Health and the adoption of regulations in 1919 requiring the reporting of notifiable diseases, a clearer picture of the extent of disease prevalence began to emerge.⁶¹ In the ensuing years, the systematic vaccination of the population against smallpox and diphtheria led to the eradication of smallpox and the near-extinction of diphtheria in New Mexico by the 1940s. Immunization against these and other childhood infectious diseases, the securing of safe water supplies, proper sewage disposal, prenatal care, and other advances in preventive medicine significantly reduced infant and adult mortality in the Rio Abajo (see figure 1) and throughout the United States after 1918. These improvements in the general health of the population of the Rio Abajo are reflected in the disappearance of acute increases in deaths after 1918 and a concomitant decline in child mortality (see figure 1). Analysis of the burial records of the Tomé Catholic parish reveals a dramatic decrease in the number of children interred after 1918: 53 percent of all burials in the pre-1920s, 46 percent in the 1920s, 38 percent in the 1930s, 33 percent in

the 1940s, and 12 percent in the first five-and-a-half years of the 1950s.⁶²

The horrific death tolls, especially among children, exacted by airborne infectious diseases in the Rio Abajo in the post-Mexican period through the first two decades of the twentieth century are conveyed and underscored by the quotations at the beginning of this article.⁶³ These high mortality rates were a continuation of what had transpired during the pre-United States era in the first half of the nineteenth century. The emotional toll on families and the community can only be imagined. Undoubtedly, these epidemics of airborne infectious diseases played a significant role in keeping the population of the region static during the Territorial period and through the third decade of the twentieth century (see table 2).⁶⁴

Church burial records have been invaluable in revealing the importance of infectious diseases in the Rio Abajo from the late eighteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries. They will continue to be essential for further research on the historical impact of infectious diseases in New Mexico.

The author would like to thank Dr. Richard Melzer for the documents he provided. This work is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Tokio Kogoma and Dr. Lou Mallavia—scholars and friends.

NOTES

1. Oswald G. Baca and Mary Ann Baca, *Analysis of Deaths in New Mexico's Rio Abajo, Vol. II: A Compilation of Burial Records from the Villages of Tomé, Valencia, Peralta; El Cerro, San Fernando, Los Enlames (Adelino), La Constancia, and Casa Colorada, 1847–1920* (Albuquerque: Center for Regional Studies and Southwest Hispanic Research Institute, University of New Mexico, 1994); Oswald G. Baca and Mary Ann Baca, *Burial Records from New Mexico's Rio Abajo: Tomé and Associated Villages, Vol. III: 1921–1956* (Albuquerque: Center for Regional Studies and Southwest Hispanic Research Institute, University of New Mexico, 1995). Photocopies of the original burial records of Tomé's Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church were obtained from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Genealogical Library, Albuquerque (microfilm reel numbers 017028 (1810–1855); 017026 (1793–1833); 017029 (1858–1956)). According to Marina Ochoa, chief archivist of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, the burial

records for the last seven months of 1855 and for the years 1856, 1857, 1861–1865 are missing or were never made. The recording of only two deaths in 1853 is a reflection of absence and replacement of priests at Tomé; no records were kept during the last six months of 1876. Microfilm cited in notes below is also from the LDS Genealogical Library.

2. Oswald G. Baca, "Analysis of Deaths in New Mexico's Rio Abajo During the Late Spanish Colonial and Mexican Periods, 1793–1846," *New Mexico Historical Review* 70 (July 1995), 237-55.

3. Baca and Baca, *Burial Records, Vol. II*.

4. Baca, "Analysis of Deaths," 240.

5. Baca and Baca, *Burial Records, Vol. II*, 66.

6. *Albuquerque Evening Review*, 2 March 1883.

7. *Albuquerque Evening Review*, 13 March 1883.

8. *Albuquerque Evening Review*, 21 March 1883.

9. Baca and Baca, *Burial Records, Vol. II*, 80.

10. Baca and Baca, *Burial Records, Vol. II*, 152-57.

11. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, 4 and 30 January 1908; 10 February 1908.

12. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, 19 March 1908.

13. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, 9 January 1909.

14. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, 27 January 1909.

15. Baca and Baca, *Burial Records, Vol. II*, 167-69.

16. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, 19 February 1911.

17. Thomas Francis, Jr., and Hunein F. Maassab, "Influenza Viruses," in Frank L. Horsfall, Jr., and Igor Tamm, eds., *Viral and Rickettsial Infections of Man*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lipincott Co., 1965), 715.

18. Our Lady of Belén Catholic Church Burial Book, 354-84, microfilm 0016735.

19. Bernard D. Davis et al., *Microbiology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 1331.

20. Davis et al., *Microbiology*, 1331.

21. Richard Melzer, "A Dark and Terrible Moment: the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918 in New Mexico," *New Mexico Historical Review* 57 (1982), 213-36.

22. Baca and Baca, *Burial Records, Vol. II*, 111.

23. Baca and Baca, *Burial Records, Vol. II*, 111.

24. Graham S. Wilson and A. Ashley Miles, *Topley and Wilson's Principles of Bacteriology and Immunity*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: The Williams and Wilkins Company, 1964), 2:2268.

25. Our Lady of Belén Catholic Church Burial Book, 137-68, microfilm 0016735.

26. *The Las Vegas Daily Optic*, 19 February 1898.

27. P. L. Luján to Governor Miguel A. Otero (hereafter M.A.O.), San Marcial, 23 November 1897, Miguel Otero Papers, Territorial Archives of New Mexico, State Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe, New Mexico; *The [Socorro] Chieftain*, 10 and 17 December 1897.
28. *El Nuevo Mexicano* [Santa Fe], 6 November 1897.
29. *The [Socorro] Chieftain*, 10 December 1897.
30. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 10 December 1897.
31. *The [Socorro] Chieftain*, 24 December 1897.
32. *The [Albuquerque] Weekly News*, 1 January 1898.
33. *The [Albuquerque] Weekly News*, 26 March 1898; 7 May 1898.
34. Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church Burial Book, La Joya, 93-106, microfilm 0016825.
35. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 12 August 1898; 8, 15, 30 July 1898.
36. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 17 March 1898.
37. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 13-31 August 1898.
38. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 28 August 1898.
39. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 7 June 1898.
40. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 20, 28 August 1898.
41. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 30 August 1898.
42. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 31 August 1898.
43. San Felipe de Neri Catholic Church Burial Book, Albuquerque, 29-67, microfilm 0016646.
44. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 5 August 1898.
45. St. Augustine Catholic Church Burial Book, Isleta, 102-20, microfilm 0016784.
46. *The Las Vegas Daily Optic*, 24 and 25 August 1898; *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 27 August 1898.
47. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 1 and 21 September 1898; 6 and 14 October 1898.
48. Cathedral of St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church Burial Book, Santa Fe, 75-202, microfilm 0016901.
49. *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, Document No. 5, 56th Cong., 1st sess., 30 June 1899; *The [Socorro] Chieftain*, 27 January 1899.
50. Richard H. Frost, "The Pueblo Indian Smallpox Epidemic in New Mexico, 1898-1899," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 64 (Fall 1990), 429.
51. Frost, "The Pueblo Indian Smallpox Epidemic," 417-45.
52. P. L. Luján to Governor Miguel A. Otero, San Marcial, 23 November 1897; Health Officer of Hillsboro to M.A.O., Hillsboro, 6 July 1898; H. E. Strathy to M.A.O., Silver City, 15 July 1898; M.A.O. to Dr. [illegible] of Lincoln, 8 August 1898; M.A.O.'s Private Secretary to Gen. R. L. Bartlett regarding smallpox in Rowe, 16 July 1898 and 8 August 1898; M.A.O. to Hon. Henry Coors of East Las Vegas, 26 July 1898; M.A.O.'s Private Secretary to Dr. F. Palmer of Cerrillos, 12 August 1898; Office of the Clerk of the Town of

Gallup to M.A.O., Gallup, 15 August 1898; M.A.O. to Hon. Richard Hudson of Deming, 25 November 1898; M.A.O. to W. H. Wallcox of Wagon Mound, 18 September 1898; M.A.O. to Mrs. R. B. Howes of Guadalupe County, 26 September 1898; M.A.O. to Hon. Emilio Ortiz, Clerk of Mora County, 27 September 1898, Miguel Otero Papers.

53. H. E. Strathy to M.A.O., Silver City, 18 July 1898, Miguel Otero Papers.

54. Col. J. E. Hurley to M.A.O., Las Vegas, 29 August 1898, Miguel Otero Papers.

55. M.A.O. to Board of County Commissioners, 7 September 1898, Miguel Otero Papers.

56. *The* [Socorro] *Chieftain*, 10 December 1897; *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 26 August 1898.

57. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 1 January 1898.

58. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 10 February 1898.

59. *Albuquerque Morning Democrat*, 25 February 1898.

60. Frost, "The Pueblo Indian Smallpox Epidemic," 423.

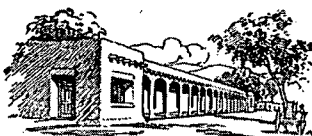
61. Myrtle Greenfield, *A History of Public Health in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1962), 13.

62. Baca and Baca, *Burial Records, Vol. III*.

63. Baca and Baca, *Burial Records, Vol. II*, 91, 96.

64. Also noted during the years 1847–1920 were deaths due to drowning (four), lightning strikes (four), being dragged by a horse (one), freezing (one), hostile Indians (one, male adult from Tomé, October 1866, the fifty-eighth recorded burial in the Tomé parish [all male adults] of individuals killed by Indians since 1793). The deaths of three sets of twins—children—were noted. Included in the records is the burial of Felipe Santiago on 26 May 1852. His burial entry states that he was "muerto sentenciado," i.e., executed. According to New Mexico State Historian Robert J. Torrez, his real name was Felipe García, convicted in Tomé of murder in April 1852 and sentenced to hang on 25 May 1852, the first execution in territorial New Mexico. Also recorded was the death of Sheriff Francisco Vigil, killed in the line of duty on 30 May 1903 in Valencia. Sixteen of the 2,846 decedents were identified in the records as Indian; fourteen were female. Eight of ten Indians designated as slaves were female; the last person identified as a slave was in the year 1879. Six female centenarians are noted in the records for this period. Most notable in this select group was Cruz Bernal, buried on 28 May 1909; she was 106 years old. The first appearance of a non-Spanish surname in the burial records was in 1859 (Howard); only a few others were noted, including Dubois (1877) and Connelly (1913).

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