

## Death and Immunity on the Missouri River, 1851

When it killed, cholera did so with astonishing quickness. From the moment symptoms appeared --excessive diarrhea and vomiting, sunken eyes in a blueish face--till the moment those eyes closed forever was often a matter of hours.

Once the contagion was recognized, a steamer named *St. Ange* pulled over just south of here at the mouth of the Little Sioux River.

Two Roman Catholic priests, Black Robes, were aboard, holy men, Belgian born but dedicated to missions here. Both had notable records of selflessness, but only one would do good any longer.

Father Pierre-Jean De Smet left footprints throughout the West. Aboard the *St. Ange* that night, suddenly, DeSmet went down so fiercely he thought himself in the throes of death. His face grew sunken and gray, even blue. His body emptied its fluids, his strength departed. With what he had left, he asked his friend and colleague, Father Christian Hoecken, to hear his confession and, if need be, administer last rites. He was confident he was about to die.

Father Christian Hoecken was called, "the Kickapoo Father" because of his dedicated ministry to the Kickapoos, who'd been shoved west from their homelands in Indiana, first to Missouri, and then on to Kansas. The word *kickapoo* may mean "he who moves from here to there," but make no mistake: the Kickapoos in Kansas were not simply nomadic. They were refugees.

Hoecken learned languages so quickly the church determined to use those skills again with the Nez Perce, a people without a mission farther up the northern Missouri. That's where he was going on June 19, 1851, when

suddenly he was called to the bedside of his friend Father De Smet to hear his confession and administer last rites, which he did, tears coursing down his cheeks. De Smet wasn't the only one dying aboard the *St. Ange*, however. Father Hoecken consoled many who'd contracted cholera on board.

On June 20, the *St. Ange* had stopped somewhere near Blackbird Bend to try to rid themselves of the contagion, "to take better care of the sick and to bury the dead," or so wrote the German artist Rudolf Kurz in his diary, who was himself a passenger.

And then, in just a couple of hours, the death story reversed itself. Father De Smet appeared to recover, at least enough to get to Father Hoecken's bedside and hear his good friend's confession and administer last rites. In two hours Father Hoecken was dead.

The story of cholera up and down the Missouri is far bigger. It took thousands of victims, whole bands of first nations in horrifying outbreaks.

But this story is unique, full of memorable images. One, to me, doesn't leave-- a crowd of mourners, some of them very ill, standing with bowed heads in prayer, only their outlines visible in the jumpy torchlight, all of them standing on the banks of the Missouri River, dropping a casket rough-hewn from the woods behind them into freshly dug river sand, burying a man some of them surely considered a saint.

It happened not all that far away aboard a steamer coming up the river, a steamer named the "Holy Angel."

Without a doubt, Father DeSmet walked away in tears when he left his friend's body on the banks of our river. But he also walked away with immunity; and when, farther up the Missouri, cholera broke out once again among the tribes, DeSmet ministered to their sickness and grief, bringing

care to hundreds who never forgot his concern and remembered always the seeming miracle of his selfless love.

The next day, June 22, 1851, Kurz's diary reads this way: "Stopped a moment at Sergeants's Bluff (Floyd's grave). . .This is Iowa territory. They say a city is to be founded here later on."