# Epidemics could be Cause of Death

by Dee Gibson-Roles

At some time during their research, most family history researchers encounter several deaths in one or more families within just a few days. While sometimes several deaths occurring at the same time could have been caused by a catastrophic event such as a fire or flood, more often they were caused by a disease which had reached epidemic proportions.

Even in the very earliest years of the colonies, epidemics occurred. Smallpox was one of the most dreaded diseases. In the 1600s, the disease was brought in to the colonies on incoming ships, killing children and adults on the ships and, after arrival, many colonists. Native Americans had not encountered the disease before the European settlers arrived, and thus succumbed to it literally in droves. (This was true for other diseases as well with the Native American population.) At one point, the Cherokee were intentionally given blankets which had been used in smallpox hospitals, thus spreading the most fatal form of the disease to them, and thousands died as a result. It has been estimated that half of the Cherokee population succumbed to this disease in the 1700s.

Measles and yellow fever were two more diseases that struck in epidemic proportions in the early colonies.

Influenza was another disease which often reached epidemic status. Many deaths during “flu” epidemics were actually caused by secondary pneumonia, a common complication of influenza. During the Revolutionary War period, two worldwide epidemics occurred, one in 1775 - 1776 and one in 1781 -1782. In 1793 an outbreak of the disease in Virginia killed 500 people in a five county area in less than a month. A worldwide epidemic occurred in 1847 -1848 and a nationwide in 1850 -1851. One of the largest influenza epidemics occurred in 1857 -1859 and was worldwide. The famous “Spanish flu” epidemic of 1916 took a toll of more than 500,000 people in the US. It has been said that more soldiers were hospitalized during WW I with influenza than from wounds. Some army training camps reportedly had an 80% death rate from the disease. Most states were requiring death records by this time, so one should check the cause of death if possible, particularly when a person died at a very young age or several people in the household and/or area died at the same time. Many death certificates of that time era give the cause of death as “Spanish flu.”

During the Civil War, many different epidemics broke out in the camps, such as dysentery and measles. It is probably that disease killed more soldiers than battle wounds.
An interesting fact is that the southern states suffered two dengue fever epidemics in the larger cities in the 1800s. The first was in 1826-1828. It appears to have started in Savannah, Georgia, and then moved to other cities along the coast and to the Caribbean. The second occurred in 1850 -1851 and started in Charleston, SC, and spread to other southern cities in Georgia, Louisiana, Alabama, and Texas.

Yellow fever was another disease which often reached epidemic proportions. Nationwide epidemics occurred in 1841, 1850, 1852, and 1855, and in the southern states in 1878 when more than 13,000 people died in the lower Mississippi Valley. Other epidemics of the fever were reported in specific cities, with New Orleans often suffering an outbreak which led to a city-wide epidemic. While we seldom hear of this disease today, it was one of the most dreaded in the 1800s. One researcher questioned why a female ancestor who was widowed and owned land suddenly left the area where she lived with her children in 1878 -1879 and did not return except to sell the land several years later. He finally learned from a distant cousin that family lore said that the yellow fever epidemic was permeating the area, and the family fled back to their mountain home with only what they could move in a wagon in an effort to escape the fever.

Epidemics were one of the reasons for migration from one area to another. Families who could do so quickly fled to other areas to escape the pestilence. This should be kept in mind when researching if a family seemed to suddenly “pull up stakes” and moved for no apparent reason.

Many deaths occurred from tuberculosis in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many doctors thought that the “pure” mountain of our area here in NC would help to cure the disease. As a result, many TB sanatoriums sprang up in the Asheville area, including Black Mountain. When a researcher cannot find evidence of the place of death of an ancestor who died during that time period, it is wise to check the death records in Buncombe and surrounding areas, as the death record is kept in the county of death, regardless of the location of the normal residence of the person. (Death records have been kept in NC since 1913.)

Two other causes of multiple deaths in a short time must be considered in the mountain area. This is not to imply that these were not present elsewhere, but simply that a large toll was taken on mountain families because of them. These were typhoid fever and “milk sick.”

Typically, typhoid was spread by drinking water contaminated by the bacteria which causes the disease. Most families in the 1800s and early 1900s did not have running water but carried water to the house from the spring which could have been contaminated (unbeknownst to the family). The disease was easily spread to all family members and often killed several family members at one time. Many families raised children of a relative or relatives when both parents died in a typhoid fever epidemic.

“Milk sick” (or milk sickness) is caused by drinking the milk or ingesting the meat of a cow which has ingested the “milk sick” plant (white snakeroot.) The animal quite often does not show any symptoms or evidence of having ingested the plant. When cattle were allowed to graze in an area where the plant grew, the illness could affect the whole family or even the whole community. It has been reported that Abraham Lincoln’s mother Nancy Hanks Lincoln died of the “milk sick.” While this has not been confirmed, it is entirely possible as Nancy died at the relatively young age of 34, and her death occurred during a “milk sick” epidemic.

Researchers can find information on epidemics from many sources, including the Internet and general reference books. It is always wise to consider an epidemic as the cause of death when more than one family member dies in a short amount of time.