

Epidemics in Alta California 1828—1839

Excerpted from:

Archaeology of the Napa Region

Edited by Robert F. Heizer

Anthropological Records, Vol.I2, No.6

University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1953

p. 231

In the year 1828 California's long regional immunity to devastating epidemics seems to have come to an end. This year and the next, 1829, were marked, not only by the first serious incursion of smallpox, but also by the first attempt at vaccination of the population. Smallpox struck again in the years 1838 and 1839, when the serious "Miramontes epidemic" resulted in the deaths of many Indians and whites.

Late in 1837, Mariano G. Vallejo sent a cavalry corporal named Ignacio Miramontes to Fort Ross to bring back a cargo of cloth and leather goods for the troops stationed at Sonoma. Miramontes and his men seem to have brought the smallpox back with them. How the disease got to Fort Ross or how much damage it did there is entirely unknown.

Upon its introduction into Sonoma it began to spread at a rapid rate. Fernandez states that Miramontes returned from Fort Ross already stricken with the disease and that the Indians who accompanied him were likewise infected. Miramontes, it appears, had been vaccinated "in his youth" and recovered from this attack in two months.

From Miramontes and his Indians the disease spread with "incredible velocity," first attacking the inhabitants of Sonoma. Among these victims were Gil Ibarra and Ignacio Palomares, who were being held as political prisoners. The latter was only slightly affected but the former barely survived.

The Indians, of course, suffered most of all. There were a large number of native laborers in Sonoma, both in the mission and on Vallejo's ranch. Vallejo moved the mission population to a place one and a half miles distant, where they "died daily like bugs" (Botello), but such measures were without avail. The disease moved in a wide circle, affecting the natives over most of north-central California. Cerruti is most specific regarding its extent. He says that it nearly exterminated the inhabitants in the valleys of Sonoma, Petaluma, Santa Rosa, Russian River, Clear Lake, and the Tulares—that is, the Sacramento region—and extended to the slopes of Mount Shasta. It also attacked the Indians in the northern missions. The epidemic lasted several years. Starting in late 1837, it continued through 1838 and was still raging in 1839. The peak year, however, was 1838.