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Article Summary: During the "Gilded Age," health problems existing in cities centered upon administrative, supervisory, and regulating bureaucracies. With the boom of flight to cities and large-scale European immigration, Omaha's problems were representative of that of virtually all American cities of the time: wild dogs, unpenned swine, street garbage, privy problems, grasshoppers, open prostitution, body snatchers, and much more.

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Photographs / Images: Omaha in 1870 looking south from 9<sup>th</sup> Street...note outhouses; 1888 drawing of the Omaha water plant which moved six miles up the river to Florence; cover of Hostetter's United States Almanac for the year 1906

## **PUBLIC HEALTH NUISANCES IN OMAHA, 1870-1900**

By MICHAEL J. HARKINS

On August 20, 1874, a hog weighing approximately three hundred pounds fell dead at 19th and Cass Streets in Omaha. On August 22 citizens reported the condition to city officials. After debate among the members of the board of health, the group finally ordered the city marshal to alleviate the complaint.<sup>1</sup> As he turned down California Street, healthy brown and black rats, the former the more destructive,<sup>2</sup> scampered from place to place. At 19th and California, the marshal turned south and moved toward Cass. The hovels where people lived loomed dark and depressing; many were filthy. Arriving upon the scene the marshal reviewed the carcass, then returned to the board to request assistance in its removal.<sup>3</sup> This was Omaha in the 1870's, but it might have been any urban community in America in the late 19th century. The problem was public health and especially public health nuisances.

One of the major public health problems then existing in cities centered upon administrative, supervisory, and regulating bureaucracies.<sup>4</sup> These bureaus failed to provide much relief without considerable prodding. Yet health was not the only problem during this so-called "gilded age." Urban population boomed with large-scale European immigration<sup>5</sup> and the movement of segments of the rural population to the city. Nebraska's population increased from 452,402 in 1880 to 740,645 in 1885. Furthermore, the number of foreign-born in the state increased from 98,000 in 1880 to 167,000 in 1885. Omaha felt the impact

of immigration and the rural-to-urban movement. In 1870 the Gate City registered over 16,000; in 1874, 31,000; in 1890, 141,000 – an increase of 360 percent over the 1880 mark.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Campbell Sexton, an ex-Confederate physician from Virginia, visiting in Omaha in the early 1870's, recorded the story of the city's massive immigrant growth. He concluded that of the thousands of immigrants encamped on the banks of the Missouri, some – especially children – were dying of exposure, and yet nothing was done. Sexton, disillusioned by Omaha's dimly lit streets, numerous vagrants and thieves, and hazardous sidewalks, moved on to Fremont, Nebraska, where he established a successful medical practice.<sup>7</sup>

In 1880 James W. Savage, district court judge from 1879 to 1885, commenting upon Omaha's growth and lack of sanitary control, felt confident "all these things will be speedily changed. Thus far the city has grown too fast for public improvements to keep up."<sup>8</sup> Savage was partially correct, for minor improvements did evolve from 1880 to 1900, but Omaha continued to outgrow them. Not until well into the 20th century did an *effective* board of health come into existence.<sup>9</sup> Besides this lack of sanitary control, immigrant living conditions at times caused problems for the urban community.

Urban institutions reeled under the strain of expanding population. Unsanitary tenement slums sprang up in major cities, and in some instances communicable disease developed.<sup>10</sup> With no effective sewage system and a shortage of sanitary privies, human waste and garbage found its way into wells and water courses. Besides this, fecal-smearred hands, flies, fleas, lice, rats, and mosquitoes helped to spread disease in these cramped and dirty slums.<sup>11</sup>

These problems were not new or unique to any one group or major urban community. New York City, a pioneer in public health reform, had experienced them throughout its history. As population burgeoned with attendant industrial and technological changes, New York's institutions could not readily adjust. The life styles of the farmers who moved to town also affected New York's sanitary program; they tossed garbage and trash onto the streets and "defecated and urinated at large." These

practices led to typhoid fever and other communicable diseases. New York, like Omaha, suffered from roaming wild dogs, messy privies, and tainted foods.<sup>12</sup>

Omaha's acknowledgement of its problems – wild dogs, unpenned swine, street garbage, privy problems, poisonous nostrums, grasshoppers, disorderly houses, and body snatching activities – hinted at the emergence of public health campaigns and eventually legislation.

Major nuisances harassing Omahans between 1870 and 1900 were packs of wild dogs running at large. During the 1870's two major wars on these animals occurred – one in 1873-1874 and the other in 1877.<sup>13</sup> With scores of dogs coming into the city with their owners in the 1870's, a shortage of food for them developed. The animals attacked sheep, cattle, and in rare instances humans for sustenance. Citizens in turn armed themselves. In September, 1873, significant skirmishes took place in city streets. Vicious dogs attacked and severely injured mail carriers in downtown Omaha. The mailmen with citizen aid managed to drive away the beasts and capture at least one. The dog was tied to a tree and shot. Still alive, it was beaten by frustrated bystanders with a fence rail. Finally, additional shots were pumped into the mongrel before it expired.<sup>14</sup>

In 1877 dog packs again plagued Omaha. Newspapers urged that unlicensed curs be collected by police and then shot by the Omaha Sportsmen's Club, but presumably the idea was abandoned. With poisoned meat, firearms, traps, and clubs, Omaha citizens gradually ridded themselves of the dog menace.<sup>15</sup>

An ever-present danger when dogs roved at large was rabies.<sup>16</sup> Word that rabid dogs lurked in alleys and streets alarmed local citizens. After several persons were severely bitten, the community began an indiscriminate slaughter of dogs. Citizens urged the city marshal and police to take action as carcasses began to appear in front yards, parks, and thoroughfares of the city. As decomposition set in, the board of health and the town scavenger pled lack of funds and equipment to carry away the dead animals; yet the city council did take some action to protect the community.<sup>17</sup>

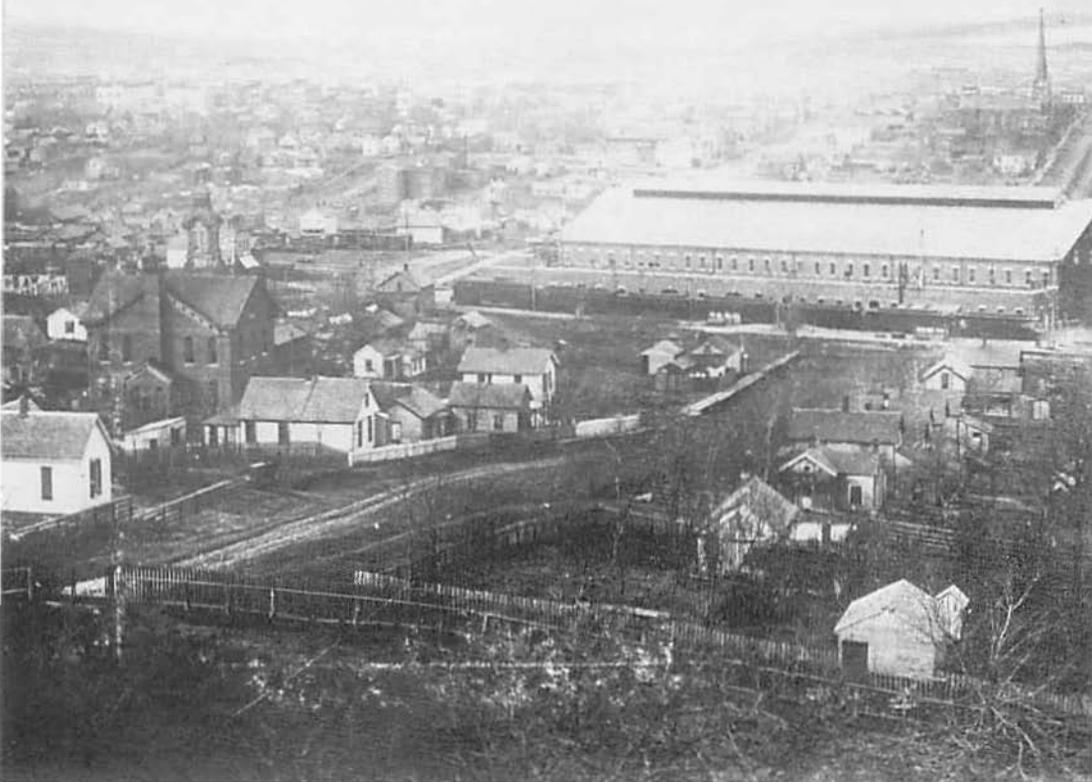
As early as 1862, the council had passed an ordinance re-

quiring that dogs be muzzled and penned during the summer and fall. Strays were to be captured, held for twenty-four hours, and then killed.<sup>18</sup> Citizens could retrieve a pet within the twenty-four hour period by identifying the dog and buying a dog tag. Well into the 20th century the council was still passing stronger anti-stray ordinances. The editorial nagging by the *Omaha Daily Bee* implies that Omaha's dog problem was never efficiently handled or thoroughly solved.<sup>19</sup>

Medical science had not entirely solved the origin of disease, though most individuals adhered to the germ theory. Others still believed in the disease composition and miasmatic theories. The controversy over cause lasted well into the 20th century. Decomposing garbage, flesh, rotting vegetables, and human excreta, from which flies hatched, were thought to generate disease.<sup>20</sup> The nauseous vapor arising from these conglomerations in itself was considered by some to be extremely dangerous to health. These conclusions prompted citizens to attempt to eliminate street dumping.

One of the first recorded instances of garbage being thrown on Omaha by-ways occurred in 1872. Henry Ritter, proprietor of the Illinois Hotel,<sup>21</sup> continually threw slop onto a 9th Street alley, and twenty citizens complained to the city council. When the board of health asked Ritter to cease, he replied that he would continue until the city constructed sewers and challenged anyone to stop him. Ritter continued to dispose of slop in the alley without restraint. The case was all too typical, and it worsened with the growing population.<sup>22</sup>

In 1872 twenty-five citizens complained to the city council about packs of hogs feeding on the garbage in the streets. Fifty petitions during the same year were presented to the council requesting curtailment of this nuisance. Some hogs which fed upon rotten and infected matter left from the earlier dog wars became sick and died. Their deaths added to the "noxious effluvia." In winter these homeless creatures took protective shelter under Omaha's wooden sidewalks, and many froze to death there during extremely cold nights. When warmer weather appeared, entire sections of the city were filled with a stench which prompted the city to take steps to alleviate the garbage-hog menace.<sup>23</sup>



*Omaha in 1870 looking south from 9th Street. Note outhouses.*

Early in 1875 the council passed a garbage ordinance providing the marshal, a member of the board of health, with power to arrest violators.<sup>24</sup> In April, 1881, the council granted the marshal the authority to serve notice on citizens to clean the streets and alleys adjacent to their homes. Four months later the council made the scavenger a permanent official; his job included removing dead animals from all public property and disposing of the bodies outside the city limits. In some instances the scavenger also removed trash and garbage. Reports of dead animals were to be filed with the city clerk. The scavenger received \$1.00 for each horse, mule, cow, or large animal removed. Smaller animals such as swine, goats, and calves brought 25¢, and each chicken, duck, dog, or smaller animal brought 10¢.<sup>25</sup> Yet, for all these ordinances passed in the 1870's-1880's, Omaha's garbage problem still persisted. In December, 1881, the council even censured the city marshal for dumping his own garbage into the streets.<sup>26</sup>

From 1881 to 1901 the council passed nearly fifty garbage

ordinances and proposed twice as many without entirely solving the problem.<sup>27</sup> The main difficulty rested with the indifferent enforcement of ordinances. No member on the board of health except the marshal had the power of enforcement. Neither city physicians in the 1880's nor commissioners of health in the 1890's were granted enforcement powers. However, due to more efficient street cleaning practices, such as a time table for cleaning specific streets and the development of a garbage dump on the Missouri River, the situation did improve.<sup>28</sup> Hog complaints had diminished by 1885; at least thirty ordinances were passed from 1870 to 1900 to prevent animals running at large. With hogs becoming more highly valued, citizens watched them closely to prevent straying or theft.<sup>29</sup>

Like most of out-state rural communities, Omahans also had to battle a flying pest — the grasshopper. This insect invaded the Midwest several times in the 1870's and created problems wherever it descended. The worst invasions took place in 1874-1875 and 1876-1877.<sup>30</sup> Although not a man-made nuisance, grasshoppers came under the jurisdiction of the local health board when they died from infectious parasites and other causes, thus cluttering the community with their dead bodies. On June 15, 1875, grasshoppers in an eight-mile-wide wave struck Omaha, and Mrs. Charles H. Dewey, wife of furniture store owner Charles H. Dewey, noted in her diary: "Grasshoppers flying north and thick here."<sup>31</sup>

The board of health and other civic-oriented organizations made no effort to shield the city or curtail the insect. Citizens, organizing on their own, constructed smudge pots to drive the hoppers from gardens, homes, and places of employment. Some persons, panic stricken at the sight of the creatures approaching like a huge black cloud, believed the wrath of God had truly descended upon them. During the attack thirty-four acres of corn at the county poor farm at the western edge of the community, was destroyed.<sup>32</sup> Omaha gardens disappeared; orchards were damaged. Full-grown hoppers could eat, digest, and excrete three times their own weight in green corn, four in peaches, and six in turnips every twenty-four hours.<sup>33</sup>

George McCoy, owner of a vegetable garden in North Omaha, frantically searching for a remedy, discovered the use of lime as

a partial deterrent, yet the hoppers still came. On June 16 the pests arose *en masse* as if under command and traveled westward, leaving their dead behind. For Omahans the worst was over; however, banks of decaying grasshoppers remained scattered throughout Omaha. The hoppers, infected with a parasite, had died by the million.<sup>34</sup> Rumors circulated that the infected hoppers would carry disease to livestock and possibly to humans. The board of health took no action to dispel these false notions or to calm the excited populace. During the citizen-directed clean-up campaign the board and other city officials still remained inactive. No directions explained the proper sanitary policy to follow or designated suitable areas to dump or burn the diseased creatures.<sup>35</sup>

In rural Nebraska citizens were not concerned about disposing of dead hoppers but with staying alive. Food supplies were depleted, and with apparently small chance for relief, the situation appeared bleak. However, the state received assistance when the Army dispatched troops to man relief stations in stricken areas. Even the Nebraska Legislature passed a relief bill.<sup>36</sup> These measures still were not sufficient to prevent numbers of pioneers from emigrating "back East." Passing through Omaha their wagons displayed the caption, "Eaten out by grasshoppers. Going back East to live with wife's folk's."<sup>37</sup>

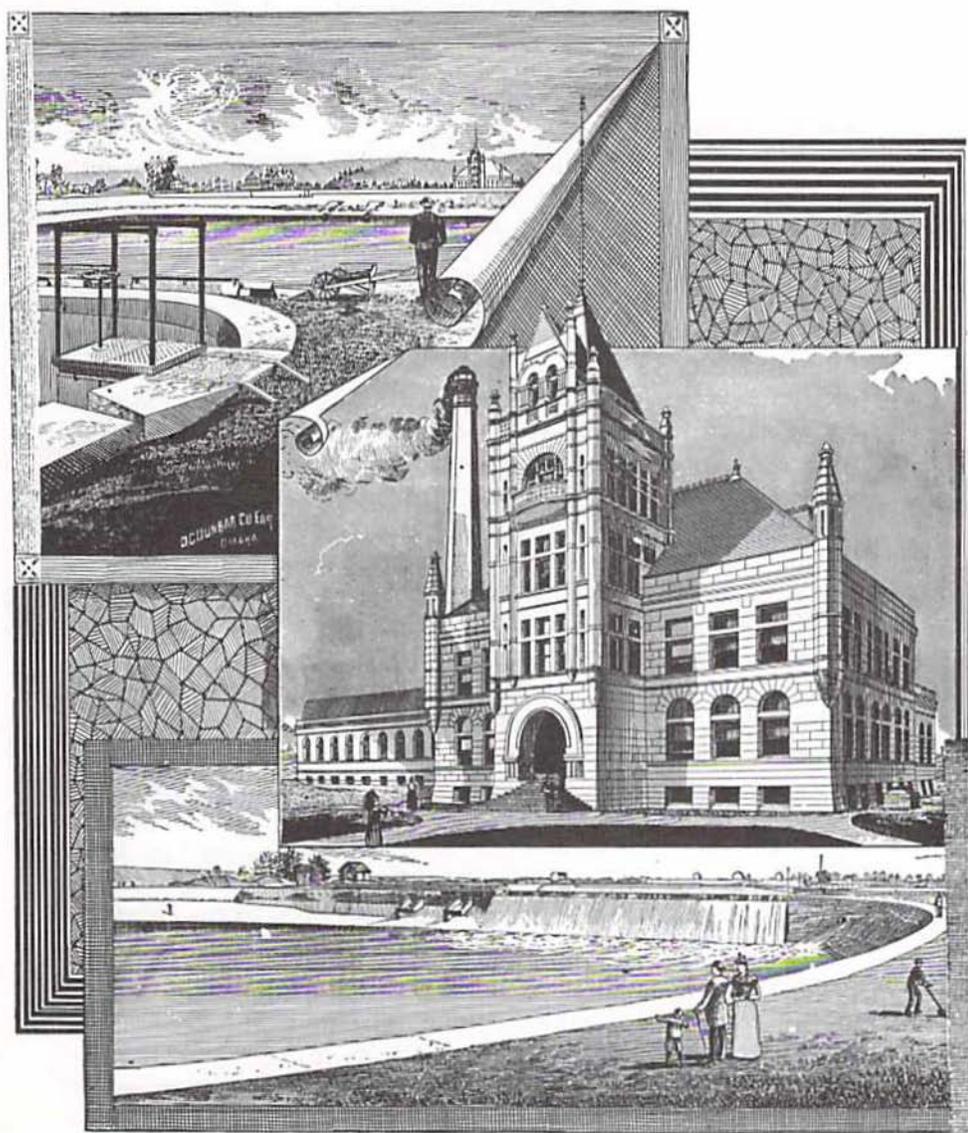
On August 23, 1876, grasshoppers returned and raised havoc for several days in Omaha. The insects, flying west in the summer and fall of 1876 and late winter and spring of 1877, paused briefly in Omaha. In May, 1877, they developed into such annoyances that in an attempt to impede their progress, Samuel Cafferty, owner of a local brick company, and his employees dug several ditches eighteen inches wide with holes in the bottom. The hoppers falling into the ditch would eventually collect in the holes. Cafferty's men then burned the area. The process worked so well that Omaha citizens adopted it,<sup>38</sup> though the city council and board of health again took no active part in grasshopper control. Presumably, since hopper invasions did not evolve into a perennial concern, Omaha's health officials decided to ignore their control by ordinance.

At first the outdoor privy was thought of as a structure where a person could retire from view with modesty and privacy and

little thought was given to its effect on the health and well-being of the city. Scant interest was shown even in disposing of the human waste that collected in these structures. Not until the late 1870's did most citizens practice sanitary cleaning of privies.<sup>39</sup> To avoid cleaning privies Omahans usually provided openings in the rear of the outhouse and allowed the waste to freely run out. The fecal matter found its way into alleys, streets, and eventually into the local water supply. The first recorded instance of action taken by local citizens to correct the problem was developed in 1876, prompted perhaps by the increase in typhoid fever.<sup>40</sup>

In the spring of 1876 about one hundred petitions, communications, and complaints concerning open privies and backed-up cesspools came to the attention of the city council. From these complaints the proprietor of the Grand Central Hotel emerged as a significant offender. Lacking a sewer system, the hotel employees emptied all waste, after their privies collapsed, into a large cesspool that backed up and spewed forth its contents onto the nearby streets, thus irritating residents. After studying the situation the council and the board of health considered the problem<sup>41</sup> and came up with an ordinance designed to force sanitary practices on offenders in the heart of the city.<sup>42</sup> The board then requested hotel owners and other violators to clean up the messes they had created. Since private citizens were careless in cleaning their own privies and cesspools, the board did not immediately gain compliance by business firms of the ordinance. However, some concerned individuals began to clean their own privies without being pressured by the board of health. Many never gave the problem their slightest attention, and for this lax attitude Omahans would suffer.<sup>43</sup>

Soil surrounding open privies became contaminated. Privies and cesspools also attracted chickens, dogs, rats, hogs, and other animals, which after wallowing in the filth, transported excreta throughout the city. Typhoid fever, dysentery, and diarrhea germs were spread into the community.<sup>44</sup> For two years, 1876-1878, Omaha suffered a major privy problem, little relieved by the ordinance enacted in 1876. However, lack of effective enforcement led to demands from citizens for a real solution, and in 1878 the council proposed a major city sewer system.<sup>45</sup> In



*In 1888 the Omaha water plant moved "six miles up the river to Florence" because of "the danger of contamination of the supply from sewerage" in the city. The formal opening of this new plant was on August 1, 1889. Drawing is from History of Omaha and South Omaha (1894) by James W. Savage and John T. Bell.*

introducing the resolution Councilman Isaac Hascall, a real estate agent,<sup>46</sup> commented that "it was demanded by the health of the city." Hascall said cesspools and privies were a major threat to the community's health and that unless outlawed a full-scale pestilence could break out. Thus in 1878 Omaha began constructing a sewer system, though it was not fully developed until 1895.<sup>47</sup>

From 1876-1895 the board of health regulated the purification and cleaning of privies. Cleaning an outhouse required a license costing \$1.00, and cleaning instructions from health officials were to be followed.<sup>48</sup> Instructions included the manner in which the waste was to be removed, the time it could be removed, and where the waste could be dumped. The board usually inspected the premises afterward. In April, 1885, the council almost passed an ordinance compelling citizens to disinfect privies during epidemics.<sup>49</sup> Ten years later, in 1895, the board of health began designating sites where privies could be constructed and banned unsuitable locations. Shortly afterward the city passed an ordinance directly controlling the construction, maintenance, and sanitary regulation of privies.<sup>50</sup> The influence of the board in this area is hard to determine, since privies continued well into the 20th century. Omaha finally outlawed privies and cesspools fifty years later in 1945 and urged citizens to connect with sewers and establish indoor plumbing. In some cases those who could not afford to do so "bootlegged" their connections.<sup>51</sup> Today Omaha has no legal privies; illegally they still occur in some sections of the city.<sup>52</sup>

Omahans were no less immune to the blandishments of quack medical men than people elsewhere. Patent medicines to "cure" anything were sold hardly without restriction. The newspapers were full of the advertisements of such doctors and of such elixirs. Those in need of immediate medical care and treatment often failed to seek it until their condition worsened. The cheapness of nostrums and the claims of miracle doctors had soothed their aching bodies only temporarily.

For every step authentic medical science took, there seemed a matching stride for pseudo-science. Moreover, "wherever regular physicians were weak, lo, there the nostrum maker was strong. Their therapy was brutal, his was mild. Their therapy

was costly, his was cheap. Their procedures were mysterious, his were open."<sup>53</sup> With trained physicians still practicing bleeding, blistering, purging, and vomiting, citizens at times turned to quacks almost in self-defense. This verse was making the rounds in the newspapers:

Bleed! says Doctor Green,  
That's downright murder! Cut his throat you mean!  
Leeches! the reptiles! Why for pity's sake  
Not try an adder or a rattlesnake?  
Blisters! Why bless you, they're against the law!  
Stomach's turn pale at the thought of such rebuke!  
The portal system! What's the man about?  
Unload your nonsense! Calomel's Played out!<sup>54</sup>

During the last thirty years of the 19th century, Omaha's daily papers advertised at least thirty principal nostrums and fifteen medical institutes and Turkish baths.<sup>55</sup> Patent medicines included Dr. Swayne's Compound Syrup of Wild Cherry, guaranteed to relieve one's "cough, diarrhea, aphonia, breast fever, parched skin, night sweats, and nervous debility";<sup>56</sup> Hyatt's Life Balsam for the Blood; Tutt's pills "for torpid bowels"; Darby's Prophylactic Fluid, guaranteed to cure malaria and scarlet fever, and prevent diphtheria,<sup>57</sup> and Mihalovitch's Hungarian Blackberry Juice, a remedy for cholera morbus, dysentery, diarrhea, and other disorders.<sup>58</sup> The device of paying persons — some claiming miracle cures — to endorse medicines persuaded the ill that these elixirs had some medical value. Deaths from patent medicines occurred throughout the country; however, few were ever publicized. One example occurred in Quincy, Illinois, in 1883. Two men, after drinking a bottle of bitters purchased from a local drug store, died. Severe spasms seized a third.<sup>59</sup> There were complaints from local physicians and medical societies as to the unrestricted sale of such concoctions, but Omaha authorities still failed to take repressive action.

David Hostetter, who patented Hostetter's Bitters, made a fortune of well over eighteen million dollars peddling an elixir guaranteed to cure about anything. In 1888 Hostetter died of a kidney infection his medicine guaranteed to cure. William Randam, an ex-Prussian soldier and Texas gardener, produced in the 1890's his famous microbe killer, "A New and Improved Fumigating Composition for Preserving and Purifying Purposes." This mixture consisted of 99.38 percent water and the rest red

# Hostetter's United States Almanac

FOR THE YEAR

1906

CALCULATED FOR

BOSTON, PITTSBURGH & NEW ORLEANS.

## THE CHIEF CONCERN.

No matter from what point of view we consider this brief life

of ours, the question of health looms up as one of paramount importance. If we are born in easy circumstances, and can devote our leisure to the pursuit of happiness, untrammelled with the cares of active business, without a good constitution to start with, such a life is but a mockery and a delusion. If we are thrown on our own resources, as most of us are, and have to enter the lists where only the fittest survive, we will be at a great disadvantage if we do not inherit and cultivate the largest measure of robust health. So that, in our journey through this world, which we can never retrace or amend when once past its successive milestones, the first and best asset, in fact, the only solid foundation on which to build

a pleasurable and prosperous career is a "sound mind in a sound body."

When this standard of physical well-being is lacking, through inherited

weakness or invalidism of any sort, our chief concern should be to restore to their normal functions all of the misdirected energies of our frame—to bring back to their natural sphere of action the stomach, liver and bowels—that the brain and brawn may work in harmonious and healthy intercourse.

As a means of facilitating such an improvement in our health, no medicine has had a longer and surer hold on public confidence than **Hostetter's Stomach Bitters**. Beginning its career in the middle of the last century, it is now recognized as THE standard household remedy. Renewing the natural functions of the stomach, the liver, kidneys and bowels are aroused from their lethargy, the blood is purified, and the whole man soon feels its beneficial effects.



*The Hostetter Company printed its own almanac, which ran heavily to articles praising its bitters but was short on calendar and astronomical data.*

wine, impure acids, and oils. Randam's fortune exceeded that of Hostetter.<sup>60</sup> The use of patent medicines is attested to by pre-1900 Omaha city dumps where myriads of patent medicine bottles are to be found.<sup>61</sup>

The Omaha Medical Society, which was organized in the late 1860's, joined with active citizens to expose medical quackery. Before the intensive exposes of the 1870's, quacks practiced freely in the city and competed with regular physicians. The society labeled the practice of allopathy, hydropathy, and homeopathic medicine as quackery.<sup>62</sup> In Omaha two establishments charged with non-professional activity were the Nebraska Surgical and Medical Infirmary and the Omaha Medical and Surgical Institute.<sup>63</sup> Both were owned by experienced, well-accepted physicians who had graduated from legitimate medical colleges. These institutes supposedly treated some diseases without medicine, and almost all physicians practicing in them had never attended medical college.<sup>64</sup> The institutes claimed to cure deformities of the feet, legs, arms, and hands without surgery. Other devices employed were Turkish baths, electro-magnetism, and Swedish movement baths.<sup>65</sup>

From 1871 to 1881 reputable Omaha physicians continued with some success by court action to protect the community's health. Successively the society took to court midwives and herbal doctors. Yet, many quacks still managed to operate lucrative businesses. In 1881 relief came when the Nebraska State Legislature, under the pressure of medical societies, passed a bill requiring physician registration with county clerks. As a result physicians' qualifications, background, and proficiency received some scrutiny and analysis. Somehow a large number of quacks still managed to register to the consternation of their opponents. In response to the city's plea, the governor appointed a committee composed of Omaha and state physicians to investigate the practices of unethical doctors.<sup>66</sup> Legitimate physicians used a variety of techniques to discover, expose, and prosecute quacks, sometimes posing as patients themselves. One story, although not local, points up this activity. A physician in disguise visited a quack eye doctor, who proclaimed his ability to restore eyesight by removing the eye, scraping it, and then reinserting it. The physician inquired what anesthetic was used. The eye "expert" replied, "I can

hardly explain that to you, you wouldn't understand; but I can tell you that it's shaped something like a spoon."<sup>67</sup>

As early as 1865 Omaha passed an ordinance suppressing houses of prostitution, a primary source of venereal disease. Shortly after its passage citizens complained of its ineffectiveness, and by 1871 the city passed two additional ordinances strengthening the hand of the city marshal and police to move against violators.<sup>68</sup> In 1876 citizen committees again presented the council with petitions urging action against "these disreputable establishments." The brothels, they said, had begun to endanger even the well-being of Omaha's school children. Elementary children on their way home were being exposed to obscene activities from dives near the school in Omaha's third ward. The following year the board of education with limited success spearheaded a drive attempting to remedy the situation.<sup>69</sup>

Basically the trouble stemmed from the council itself, which directed complaints to enforcement agencies other than the board of health. Consistent enforcement was rare, and complaints from moralists as well as medical men continued well into the 20th century. Both the city council and the board of health failed to recognize that there were problems caused by the organized houses which reached beyond that of disease. Even in numerous known cases of venereal disease, the board still took half measures. The council, paying lip service to hundreds of petitions, between 1871 and 1900 passed twenty ordinances attempting to control prostitution.<sup>70</sup>

Most anti-prostitution laws in the 1870's imposed \$1.00 to \$100 fines and ten days imprisonment for women of the houses convicted of violations. For each twenty-four hours these establishments remained open after being notified to close, they were fined \$100.<sup>71</sup> In the 1880's and 1890's fines and terms of imprisonment were increased, and occasionally women who were habitual offenders were evicted from the community. However, without strict law enforcement and strict surveillance by marshal and city police, suppression lacked continuity.<sup>72</sup> A member of the city council in March of 1885 brought the problem to the surface in a tongue-lashing of the marshal when he

asked him "to explain why he has so long permitted . . . [these places] to run in violation of law and decency?"<sup>73</sup>

Bodysnatchers roamed the by-ways of the Gate City at night, their purpose being to obtain handsome profits by selling badly needed cadavers to local medical schools for experiments.<sup>74</sup> Bootlegging bodies from burial grounds dates to antiquity and throughout history individuals near death have worried about the disposition of their remains. Supposedly even prestigious Johns Hopkins Medical School in 1899 acquired its last body through extra-legal means. By 1913 twelve states, one of them Nebraska, still had no law on the subject, though Omaha had experienced trouble with bodysnatching from early in its history.<sup>75</sup>

In 1868 the Omaha Medical Society solicited for the body of a condemned criminal. Since a judge refused to grant them the body, the society made other arrangements for a specimen — arrangements that were never made public. In 1871 the society created a "skeleton committee" and assigned it the task of providing specimens for lecture purposes. Methods used to obtain the demonstration cadavers never were discussed during the society's meetings. A motion to discharge the committee lost when Dr. Samuel Mercer, streetcar railway executive, gave the committee's activities his support.<sup>76</sup> In 1883 the Legislature passed an act assigning bodies of paupers to medical colleges after instances of body-snatching from local cemeteries were disclosed.<sup>77</sup> The discovery of such activities suggests that the bodies provided by law did not satisfy Omaha groups. Local medical students usually preferred specific types of bodies or a certain quality that could be obtained only from the local cemetery through a middleman.<sup>78</sup>

In 1884 body-snatchers created trouble by robbing the poor farm cemetery, Prospect Hill, and the Catholic cemetery. Enraged citizens protested. In 1885 when human bones were unearthed in an alley, citizens again became uneasy and complained to the city council and board of health. The *Omaha Daily Bee* in reporting the incident suggested that the medical college probably lost the bones "in a shuffle." Finally the council requested the mayor to appoint a policeman to patrol local cemeteries.<sup>79</sup> Citizens were uneasy during these years,

since the community experienced serious small-pox epidemics from 1882-1885.<sup>80</sup> The board of health drew no correlations between the two and took no active part in preventing these activities.

Omaha was again upset the following year when a laborer for the Belt Line Railroad unearthed a partially dissected body. The *Bee* reported that near the corner of 15th and Izard close to the private stables of an Omaha physician a partially decomposed and dismembered body came to the surface during excavations. The coroner failed to identify the victim, though he suggested the body might have been the subject of a medical school dissection.<sup>81</sup> In 1887 and 1967 excavations at the medical college revealed skeletal deposits, which local papers identified as Indian remains.<sup>82</sup>

Yet, throughout the first forty years of Omaha's checkered health history, it miraculously remained one of the healthiest cities in the United States. The impression first gained from reading local newspapers and periodicals of the late 19th century is that the community suffered massively from major health nuisances. However, in relation to other metropolitan areas — New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and San Francisco — Omaha's annoyances were mild. Perhaps disinterest in abatement was not pure apathy on the part of the citizens but merely a realization that the city was no worse than others its size.

Too, the board of health was often composed of non-health-oriented individuals who had little interest in the field. Since the city's nuisances threatened only in a nebulous way the existence of a major part of the populace of the city who lived in more affluent areas, the board members perhaps felt no need for stringent or immediate measures. Furthermore, the board could always pass along criticism to the elected city council which was more accountable to the people.

Most councilmen were either indifferent or unconcerned about Omaha's health, as long as no major epidemics threatened the community. The councilmen being politically oriented were more concerned about being re-elected. The 1894 garbage monopoly illustrates this point. Councilmen secured the city's garbage contract for a monopolistic group that was not prepared to do a thorough job, and as a result garbage accumulated

throughout the community. An investigation exposed the group. The construction of a sewage system and waterworks plant in the late 1870's began a trend which year by year improved the health of the community. The waterworks, privately operated at this time, provided the citizens with fresh and clean water at a reasonable rate, and contaminated wells and river water were gradually abandoned. Overall, during the last thirty years of the century, Omahans experienced no major epidemics other than smallpox, and not more than twenty appear to have died of the disease. Yet, if the community was generally safe from disease and epidemics, why would the board of health not take an active part to relieve common annoyances?

Most likely these nuisances were a daily problem that citizens willingly endured. They became part of their life style and were accepted as unsolvable. When annoyances got out of hand, the board took some positive steps, then watched as enforcement became desultory. The board, it should be remembered, chronically lacked adequate funds to carry on an active health program. Control of common annoyances that affected health would not develop until well into the 20th century — and not without pressure by concerned citizens outside the government hierarchy.<sup>83</sup>

SELECTED BIRTH AND DEATH FIGURES, OMAHA 1880-1900

	Births	Deaths
1880 . . . . .	242	240
1888 . . . . .	1594	1225 (1047)*
1891 . . . . .	1629	1345
1892 . . . . .	1856	1199
1893 . . . . .	1960	1204
1894 . . . . .	1898	1149
1895 . . . . .	1900	1122
1896 . . . . .	1898 (1909)*	1149 (943)*
1897 . . . . .	1960	1204
1898 . . . . .	1856	1199 (943)*
1899 . . . . .	1726	1187
1900 . . . . .	1790	999

\*Additional figures in Board of Health Reports, that conflict with newspaper and other sources.

Records of births and deaths were not required in Omaha until 1873 when an ordinance was passed to this effect. However, from 1873 to 1883 reporting was often neglected. During this period at least five additional ordinances were passed trying to refine the registration process. The Omaha Medical Society and local physicians spearheaded the efforts to secure passage of the 1873 ordinances.

SELECTED PERCENTAGES OF DEATHS  
PER 1,000, OMAHA, 1870-1896

1870 . . . . .	36.0
1880 . . . . .	11.16
1887 . . . . .	11.87
1888 . . . . .	10.21
1893 . . . . .	8.60
1894 . . . . .	8.01
1896 . . . . .	6.60
1898 . . . . .	6.71

### NOTES

1. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), August 21, 1874, 4. References to the *Bee* will be fully cited, since a considerable difference exists among various editions. All *Bees* cited in this paper are local editions.

This method of treating public health nuisances and other health problems such as epidemics, vaccination, and city sanitation usually followed this same procedure from 1870 to 1888 in Omaha. In 1888 Omaha received a new city charter providing for the establishment of a metropolitan board of health. Prior to this date a board established in 1871 by the city council handled public health problems. Howard D. Kramer, "Early Municipal and State Boards of Health," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, XXIV (November, December 1950), 502-529.

2. Harry S. Mustard, *An Introduction To Public Health* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), 137. For utopian dream of a city of health see Benjamin Ward Richardson, *Hygeia: A City of Health* (London, 1876), and James H. Cassedy, "Hygeia: A Mid-Victorian Dream of a City of Health," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Science*, XVII, (April 1962), 217-228. *The Rat and Its Relation to the Public Health*, Public Health Bulletin No. 30 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 18.

3. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), August 21, 1874, 4; *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), July 15, 1882, 5.

4. George Rosen, *A History of Public Health* (New York, 1958), 234.

5. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., *The Rise of The City* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 33-34. For information on influx of immigrants see Oscar Handlin, *Boston Immigrants* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), and Carl Degler, *The Age of the Economic Revolution: 1876-1900* (Glenview: Scott Foresman, 1967).

6. *Omaha: The Western Metropolis* (Omaha: H. N. Blood Co., 1891), 3. No author listed.

7. Palmer Findley, unpublished biography of Thomas Campbell Sexton, type-written, unnumbered pages. Located at the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

8. Edward F. Morearty, *Omaha Memories: Recollections of Events, Men and Affairs in Omaha, Nebraska, from 1879 to 1917* (Omaha: Swartz Printing Co., 1917), 120. George E. Waring, Jr., compiler, *Report of the Social Statistics of Cities, 10th Census of the U.S., Social Statistics of Cities*, Vol. 19, pt. 2 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1887), 7431.

9. George R. Hrdlicka, "Communicable Diseases in Omaha with Special Reference to Scarlet Fever, Diphtheria, and Smallpox" (M.D. thesis, University of Nebraska College of Medicine, April, 1933). Hrdlicka notes the inefficiency of the city health department from 1900 to 1933 and comments upon corrupt practices. A survey of

municipal reports, 1888-1910, show 80 percent of the health funds being paid as salaries to board members.

10. Charles N. Glaab and A. Theodore Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), 164-166. See also Roy Lubove's "The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890-1917" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1960).

11. Mustard, *An Introduction to Public Health*, 137.

12. John Duffy, *A History of Public Health in New York City 1625-1866* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1968), 193.

13. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), traces dog problem from 1873-1900. On page four under "Omaha Brevities" mention of dogs often occurs. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), May 13, 1872, 4; *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), December 5, 1873, 4.

14. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), September 27, 1873, 4; November 3, 1873, 4; November 18, 1873, 4.

15. *Ibid.* April 8, 1877, 4; May 22, 25, 26, 1874, 4; May 4, 1876, 4.

16. From 1890 to 1899 over 230 deaths took place in seventy-three principal cities including Omaha. Rabies statistics were not required to be reported until 1900. In 1890 Nebraska reported two deaths from hydrophobia. *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, 1900* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), 219.

17. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), April 3, 1877, 4; April 18, 1877, 4.

18. Original handwritten City Ordinance, Omaha, Nebraska, No. 54, passed June 25, 1862. Located in the office of the city clerk, Interim-City Hall. (Hereafter ordinance references will be cited by number and date of passage).

19. Ordinance 257, June 18, 1872; Ordinance 273, June 3, 1873. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), June, 1872-June, 1873.

20. Harry H. Moore, *Public Health in the United States; An Outline with Statistical Data* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923), 73. Henry E. Sigerist, *Civilization and Disease* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

21. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), June 5, 1872, 4. Briggs and Lowry, compilers, *Omaha City Directory of 1872-73* (Omaha: Omaha Daily Herald, 1873), 193. No names or initials could be secured for Briggs or Lowry.

22. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), June 5, 1872, 4; May 29, 1872, 4; May 25, 1875, 4.

23. *Ibid.*, May 31, 1872, 4; January 21, 1873, 4.

24. *Ibid.*, May 21, 1875, 4; April 27, 1881, 4.

25. Ordinance 473, August 19, 1881.

26. Handwritten manuscript, "Minutes of the City Council of Omaha," December, 1881 (hereafter cited as Minutes). *Omaha Bee* (Evening), December 7, 1881, 4.

27. Minutes, May, 1881; August, 1881; October, 1881; June, 1882. Ordinance 614, August 24, 1883. *Omaha Bee* (Evening), June 14, 1883, 4. Minutes, August, 1883. *Daily Union* (Evening), August 31, 1883, 4; *Omaha Evening Dispatch* July 11, 1884, 4. Ordinance 1053, June 1, 1886. Ordinance 1650, March 6, 1888. The ordinance to create the office of garbage inspector and provide for limited collection passed in March, 1888. Ordinance 2443, May 20, 1890. City-wide collection emerged in 1909 under Mayor James C. Dahlman. City council Document Report No. 5822, Series 1909; No. 6145, December 13, 1909.

28. *Omaha Municipal Report, 1880-1900*. This pattern of the effectiveness of city physicians and health commissioners can be traced in their reports concerning public health.

29. Ordinance 164, October 12, 1868. *Omaha Bee* (Evening), July 3, 1878, 4; March 21, 1877, 43. Ordinance 164 declared hogs running loose a public nuisance. The marshal was instructed to pen the hogs but not otherwise harm them.

30. Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska The Land and The People*, Vol. 1 of 3 Vols., (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company 1931), 493-496. Donald F. Danker and Paul D. Riley, compilers, *Out of Old Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1968), 67-68.

31. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), June 15, 1875, 4. Dairy of Mrs. Charles H. Dewey, Tuesday, June 15, in Omaha Public Library. Charles H. Dewey became one of Omaha's wealthiest merchants during the 1870-1880's. Wealth enabled him to become one of the most-traveled persons in the state. During the Spanish-American War Omaha was stirred when Dewey's nephew took Manila Bay. Today an Omaha avenue bears his name.

32. No correlation could be drawn between the clean-up campaign and an attempt to purify the city, The 1870 and 1880 census reports indicate an increase in vice and saloons. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), June 15, 1875, 4. The 160-acre poor farm was located in the 1870-1880's in the present area of Hanscom Park. Alexander Rogers served as superintendent during this period. *Wolfe's Omaha City Directory for 1878-79*, 159.

33. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), September 21, 1874, 3; June 15, 1875, 4. During these raids the hoppers refused to eat radishes, evidently finding them distasteful.

34. *Ibid.*, June 16, 1875, 4; June 17, 1875, 4; February 9, 1875, 2.

35. *Ibid.*, January-July, 1875.

36. *Ibid.*, 4, 1872, 4; February 4, 1875, 1; February 16, 1875, 4; January 19, 1875, 4.

37. Sheldon, *Nebraska The Land and The People*, 493-496. Danker and Riley, *Out of Old Nebraska*. 67-68.

38. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), August 23, 1876, 4; February 17, 1877, 4; May 18, 1977, 4.

39. Charles Wardell Stiles, *The Sanitary Privy: Its Purpose and Construction*, Public Health Bulletin No. 37 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 4. Throughout the late 19th century and early 20th the privy served as the butt of jokes and pranks. On Halloween evenings privies might be toppled. Anzel Ames, "Removal of Domestic Excreta," *Public Health*, IV (1877), 74. See illustration 1, Unsanitary Privy for a typical example of the problem bothering late 19th century America, 30.

40. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), March 22, 1876, 4.

41. *Ibid.*, May 31, 1876, 4.

42. Ordinance 342, May 30, 1876.

43. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), June 7, 1876, 4.

44. L. L. Lumsden, *A Sanitary Privy System for Unsewered Towns and Villages*, Public Health Bulletin No. 89, (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 1-7.

45. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), April 9, 1878, 4. P. H. Richmond, "American Attitudes Toward the Germ Theory of Disease," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Science*, IX, No. 4 (October, 1954), 428-454.

46. John M. Wolfe, compiler, *Wolfe's Omaha City Directory for 1878-79* (Omaha: Herald Publishing House and Book Bindery, 1878), 159.

47. Minutes, April, 1878. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), April 9, 1878, 4.

48. Ordinance 342, May 30, 1876.

49. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), April 22, 1885, 4.

50. Ordinance, 4098, December 23, 1895. *Omaha Municipal Report for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31, 1895*. (Omaha, Klopp and Bartlett Co., 1896), 15. By this year the board consisted of a milk inspector, commissioner of health, assistant commissioner of health, and plumbing inspector. The other four members were selected from non-health related areas. Both health commissioners were physicians.

51. Interview with Jerry Welcher, permits and inspection department, Interim-City Hall, April 6, 1972. The ordinance may have had since sewer connections for 1894-1895 were above average. Volume 1, *Record of Sewer Connections City of Omaha, 1894-95*, lists over five hundred legal sewer connections. The following three years installations decreased. Most connections consisted of indoor plumbing and usually signaled the demise of the outdoor privy.

52. Interview of with director of Omaha's sewerage system, Interim-City Hall, April 6, 1972.

53. James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicine In America Before Federal Regulations* (Princeton: University Press, 1961), 169, 173. For a superb treatment of quackery in the 20th century see Young's *Medical Messiahs: A Social History of Health Quackery in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

54. *The Omaha Clinic*, II, (February, 1890), 286. This periodical was issued by the Omaha Medical Society from 1888 to 1900. For similar stories of early medicine and physicians that shed some light on public health see Chauncey D. Leake, "Medical Caricature in the United States," *Bulletin of the Society of Medical History of Chicago*, III (April, 1928), 1-29.

55. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), September 21, 1883, 8. *Omaha Republican* (Morning) and *Evening News* during 1883.

56. *Evening News*, June 13, 1878, 4. Aphonia refers to the loss of voice except for a whisper.

57. *Omaha Daily Republican* (Morning), February 14, 1884, 2; February 10, 1884, 8; February 9, 1884, 8.

58. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Morning), July 30, 1887, 8.

59. *Ibid.*, (Evening), September 21, 1883, 1.

60. Young, *Toadstool Millionaires*, 134-135, 144-148.

61. Excavations conducted April 1, 8, 15, 16, 18, 1972, at 11th and Locust the foot of Leavenworth Street, east end of Mason Street, south along the Missouri River bank. For description of 1880 and 1890 city dumps, see Ordinance 4212, May 11, 1897, and *Omaha Municipal Reports*, 1890-1900.

62. Handwritten "Minutes of the Omaha Medical Society," February 28, 1871, 111. Located in the Medical History Collection, University of Nebraska College of Medicine, Omaha. Mary Seeley, "The History of the Omaha Douglas County Medical Society" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1969). Allopathy (allopathia) includes using any and all cures to relieve a disease; usually the opposite of homeopathy. Hydropathy is the use of water to cure disease. Homeopathic medicine holds that like drugs cure like diseases.

63. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), July 23, 1885, 8; May 13, 1872, 4. "Minutes of the Omaha Medical Society," December 26, 1884, 4.

64. *Omaha Bee* (Evening), February 5, 1884, 4.

65. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), May 13, 1872, 4; April 3, 1874, 4.

66. *Daily Bee* (Evening), December 19, 1878, 4; June 4, 1881, 4.

67. Young, *Toadstool Millionaires*, 161. David Elstrom, "Medicine Man of the 80's," *Readers Digest*, June, 1938, 77-78.

68. Ordinance 83, September 27, 1865. Ordinance 216, June 1, 1870. Ordinance 237, May 16, 1871.

69. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), November 29, 1876, 4; February 21, 1877, 4; April 18, 1877, 4; May 2, 1887, 4; February 21, 1877, 4. Jacqueline Johnson, "A History of the Health and Safety Conditions of the Omaha Public Schools from 1872 to 1908" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, Omaha, 1968).

70. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), January 9, 1878, 4; February 13, 1878, 4. August 16, 1882, 4. *Omaha Daily Union* (Evening), June 21, 1883, 4. See also ordi-

nances from 1871-1900 under misdemeanors. According to the United States Census for 1880, Omaha officially reported seventeen houses of "questionable character." By 1890 the census noted forty-three. According to Harold Becker, the number rose well over one hundred by 1910. Not until 1918 did Omaha recognize this significant health problem. Under cowboy Mayor James C. Dahlman an ordinance making it unlawful for any person to expose others to venereal disease secured passage.

71. Ordinance 216, June 1, 1870. Ordinance 237, May 16, 1871.

72. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), August 16, 1882, 4; June 3, 1885, 4. *Omaha Evening Dispatch* July 2, 1884, 4.

73. Minutes, March, 1885. *Omaha Evening Dispatch*, March 13, 1885, 4.

74. Alan F. Guttmacher, "Bootlegging Bodies: A History of Body Snatching," *Bulletin of the Society of Medical History of Chicago*, IV, (January, 1936), 390-394 and 140-142. Guttmacher says the South was an exception to laws giving the bodies of paupers to medical schools. No body of an ex-Confederate soldier or his widow was ever to be used by a medical college for dissection.

75. *Ibid.*, 400-402.

76. Handwritten manuscript, "Minutes, Omaha Medical Society," February 1868, 52-58; May 9, 1871, 116; June 13, 1871, 117.

77. *Omaha Daily Union* (Evening), September 4, 1883, 4.

78. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), January 7, 1884, 4.

79. *Ibid.*, January 2, 1884, 4; May 13, 1885, 6; July 8, 1885, 4. Bernice M. Hetzner, "The Development of the Omaha Medical College, 1869-1902," *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*, 47 (April, 1959), 105-116.

80. *Ibid.*, January 16, 1882, 4; June 11, 1883, 7; May 29, 1885, 5. Smallpox appeared intermittently with great severity. *Omaha Municipal Reports*, and *City Physicians Reports*, 1883-1885. An accurate total number of those that perished during the epidemic can not be given, since vital statistics were inaccurate and often overlooked as a nuisance. From material available an estimation is that thirty to fifty deaths from smallpox occurred between 1883-1885.

81. *Omaha Daily Bee* (Evening), March 9, 1886, 4.

82. Excavations conducted at the Nebraska College of Medicine, 42 Dewey Avenue, spring-summer, 1967, by Michael J. Harkins.

83. For numerous examples of Omaha's privy and cesspool problem as late as 1940 see "Plumbing Inspectors Manuscript Minutes, 1930-1940," located at Interim-City Hall, sewerage department; for Omaha's garbage and street cleaning failures during the 1920's, see the correspondence of Mayor Edward P. Smith, private papers, Michael J. Harkins. Since Dan Butler, chief of street cleaning and maintenance, did little from 1918-1921 in this area, numerous letters flooded Mayor Smith complaining of garbage, trash, and dead animals on city streets. For example, several letters to Smith dated February, 1920, complain of chickens running loose on the streets and of citizens throwing trash onto the streets. The complaints came from the area of 67th and Florence Boulevard. In addition to these, in January, 1921, Mrs. C. T. Byorth of 3022 Chicago Street wrote to Mayor Smith informing him that for two years neighbors in the area threw rubbish on the streets and alleys. Mrs. Byorth stated, "I complained twice in the office of street cleaning and maintenance department, but nothing has been done." Mayor Smith in turn contacted Mrs. Byorth to obtain the names of the offenders. Smith then wrote to these individuals and requested them to stop this activity or police action would result. See also W. T. "Some Common Facts about Plumbing," *Architectural Record*, I (July, 1891), 94-108.