

QUARANTINE: "THE YELLOW CLUB" OF 1893

By Susan Cluff

In April 1893, 32 first class passengers were quarantined for two weeks on Angel Island after a passenger in a cabin stateroom came down with smallpox on the Pacific Mail steamship City of New York traveling from Panama. The ship entered the Bay flying a yellow flag and Dr. William Lawler, the local quarantine officer was put in charge.

The event was significant as until then only steerage passengers and sailors, most of them travelling from China and Japan, had been held for quarantine at Angel Island. In 1891, ten acres on the north side of the military reservation had been set aside as a quarantine station by the federal government with barracks for about 200 passengers, an administration building and some rough sheds.

Quarantine procedures then meant all the passengers on the affected ship immediately received inoculations. Once disembarked, their bedding was burned and the ship disinfected by the station's fumigating steamer using steam, sulfur and manganese, and the whole ship scoured and washed clean. All the ship's freight and passengers' luggage were then taken away, opened, sorted and disinfected. Money and small items were dipped in carbolic acid.

Passengers were then taken to the Angel Island station where they were separated by sex and type of ticket, cabin or steerage, entered a disinfection shed where they stripped, washed with carbolic soap and donned coveralls while their clothing was boiled and disinfected. Anyone showing signs of disease was kept isolated in separate barracks. Doctors held daily medical inspections and barracks were fumigated with sulfur dioxide and flushed with salt water every morning. Armed patrols ensured no one left the island for at least 14 days after any active cases.

But now the whole system was thrown into a tizzy. For one thing, all the first class passengers refused to leave the steamship! A riverboat, the Aurora, was found for them and moored at the wharf where they could disembark every day after being inspected. Wearing yellow ribbons on their lapels or dresses, the quarantined passengers called themselves "the Yellow Club" and passed their time of isolation playing quoits, baseball, fishing, card playing, singing and flower gathering. According to the SF Examiner, requests were made and granted for a piano, for mail, games, embroidery thread, candies, and cigars.

All this public focus made a difference. With increased demands on Angel Island station, which sometimes had to quarantine thousands of passengers at a time, larger and better barracks were added, a powerhouse, laboratories and a crematorium built, and the disinfecting stations enlarged. By 1907, the Angel Island Quarantine Station had some 45 buildings and had effectively prevented the spreading of smallpox,

diphtheria, leprosy, typhus, yellow fever, cholera, typhoid and the bubonic plague into California.

Improvements in sanitation and health gradually reduced the threat of infectious diseases from foreign ports and in 1946 the Quarantine Station at Angel Island was declared surplus property. In 1957, after Hospital Cove (renamed Ayala Cove) became a state park, most of the Quarantine Station buildings were torn down. Today, only a few staff buildings remain - they now house park rangers and their families.

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"The Tradition Starts With You."



1. Hospital Cove in 1896 with the fumigating ship Omaha tied up a safe distance from the dock. The buildings on the right were probably used for "The Yellow Club."

2. Recently arrived passengers opening their luggage for inspection and disinfection.

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