

Leprosy in Hawaii: Scare Advertising at the Turn of the Century

Ronald Fettes Chapman

Throughout its long history there has been serious disagreement with respect to the way in which leprosy was transmitted from one person to another. Numerous writers have discussed, for instance, the folk beliefs that the disease was caused by divine wrath or due to sexual intercourse with an infected woman. World-wide medical beliefs well into the 20th century ran the gamut from cockroaches, flies, mosquitoes, bed-bugs, rats, fish, bananas, sneezing, coughing, dust, and snuff-taking, to tattooing, meteorological conditions, and bare feet as the causative agent, combined with poor nutrition and lack of resistance to the disease.

In Hawaii, where leprosy assumed epidemic proportions, the Kalaupapa leprosarium on Molokai was opened in 1866. It was to this settlement, later made famous by Father Damien, that victims of the disease were forcibly banished, usually for life. As in other parts of the world where leprosy was prevalent, the cause of the disease was unknown. Because Hawaiians were more apt to contract leprosy than were other races, the native food staple, *poi*, was at one time suspected to be the cause.

This flier, distributed with the *Honolulu Evening Bulletin*, ca. 1900, plays on this fear.

Or was this merely an inventive sales technique?

Ronald F. Chapman, Head Librarian at Honolulu Community College, recently completed his doctoral dissertation on "Leonard Wood and the Culion Leper Colony, 1921-1927."

The flier is from the author's collection.

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