

Sr. Denise Granger, "The Horse Distemper of 1872 and its Effect on Urban Transportation"  
*Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 2, No 1 (Spring 1973).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

[masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu](mailto:masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu)

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.wsc.ma.edu/mhj>.



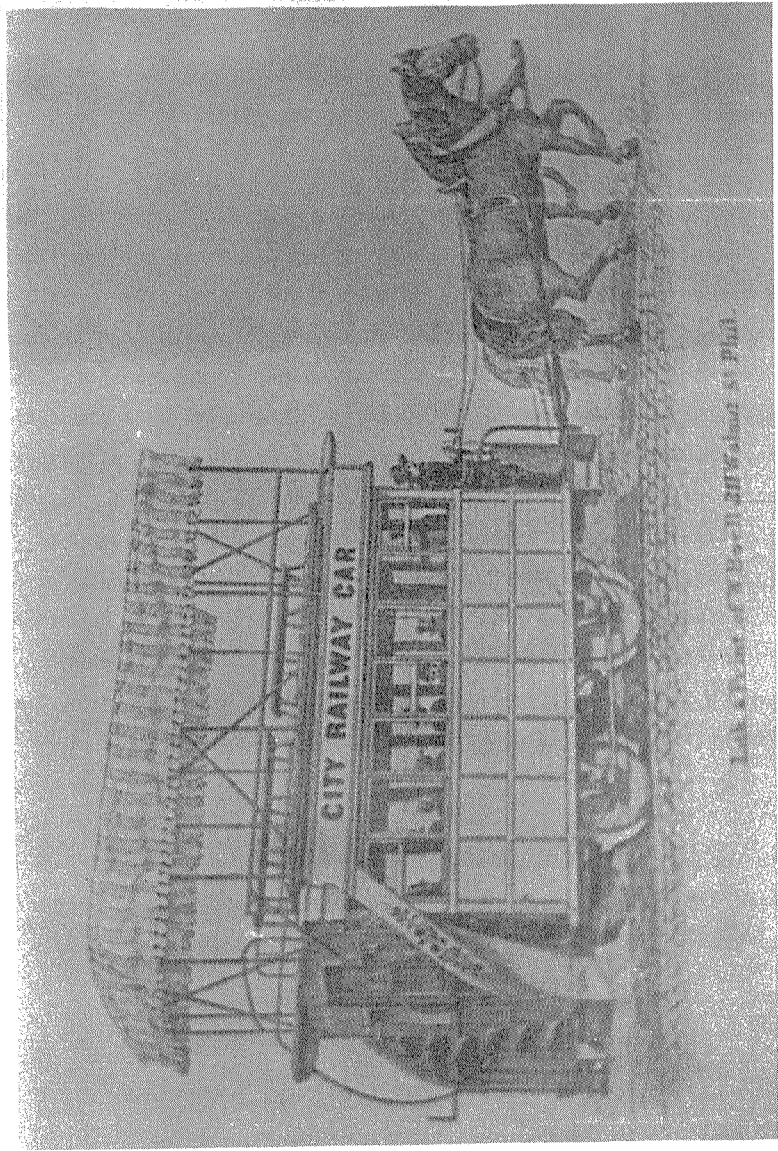
The Horse Distemper of 1872  
and its  
Effect on Urban Transportation

by

Sister Denise Granger

Through most of the nineteenth century, urban transportation depended upon the horse. In October of 1872 a raging epidemic of "horse distemper" paralyzed the east coast of the United States, demonstrating that the horse was not nearly as dependable as it was generally believed to be. Entire cities came to a standstill; food could not be delivered; fires could not be extinguished; it was virtually impossible to travel within the city except on foot. The distemper first appeared in Canada and spread through New York State, across New England, and as far south as Pennsylvania. By October 23rd, the disease was reported in Syracuse, Boston, Springfield and Philadelphia. The Secretary of the Treasury, George S. Boutwell, reacted to the situation by prohibiting the importation of Canadian horses into the United States.

The symptoms of the "horse distemper" were a sore throat, slight swelling of the glands, a loss of appetite, a severe hacking cough, fast pulse, quickened respiration, great feebleness on the part of the animal, and a yellowness of the eyes and mucus membrane. The illness, lasting a period of days, was rarely



L. L. COOPER, Inventor of the

fatal if properly attended to. It did, however, totally incapacitate the animal.

New York City already was a sprawling urban complex crisscrossed by tracks of the so-called "street railroads," which were horse-drawn streetcars. These railroads were used by businessmen to haul merchandise, by workers going to and from work and by the public which relied on the street railroads for transportation. When the distemper hit, these vital links in urban transportation were broken.

There was such concern over the "Horse Plague" that the New York Herald appointed a reporter to be the "Herald Horse Plague Commissioner," whose assignment was to investigate the stables in New York City. In an article entitled "The Poor Beast," dated October 23, 1872, the "Horse Plague Commissioner" described a ride on the Bleeker Street Lines and an interview with a driver. The reporter asked: "How do your horses feel today, my friend?" The driver answered: "on this line they feel pooty bad, I can tell you, they always feel bad on this line, they aren't treated right and they know that they're only worth \$130.00 a piece."<sup>1</sup> The Bleeker Street Line seems to have received bad press all through the reports of the distemper. The route was a notoriously hilly one with a number of corners making it rough on horses and drivers alike.

The reporters assigned to cover the situation found it difficult

to obtain information. The people connected with the stables were afraid that if it became public knowledge that a large number of their horses were unable to work, the company's stock would depreciate.

The "Horse Plague Commissioner" of the Herald was kept busy during these days. On October 25th, he reported that sixteen thousand horses in the city were too sick to work, and that many stages and street railways had been halted; the inevitable result was increased irritation to all segments of the population.

The veterinarians enjoyed their finest hour, being in constant demand. In an editorial, the New York Times praised the "Horse Doctors." Although the Times noted that veterinary medicine was not a respected profession, it went on to indicate that "the epidemic among horses has given in the eyes of the public an unusual value to the service of persons skilled in treating the disease of the lower animals..." The editorial continued by stating that although the work of veterinarians was "of infinitely less consequence than treating the malaise of human beings...we do not see why it should be regarded as a matter of inferior dignity..."<sup>2</sup>

However respected the veterinarians were, there was some confusion among them in diagnosing the illness. Some labelled it

pneumonia or diphtheria, while others thought it was either a liver disorder or blood poisoning. There was general agreement, though, that the most likely cure was to treat the animal as if it were a human being with the same symptoms. The Springfield Daily Republican advised horse owners that "affected animals should be kept in a well-ventilated stable and fed upon hot, soft food easily digested such as linseed tea, oatmeal gruel and boiled oats or barley. The appetite of invalids should be tempted by carrots, apples or any other delicacy our sick, quadruped friend is known to have a failing for. In all stables a carbolic disinfectant should be liberally used."<sup>3</sup>

New York City officials stated on October 23rd that sanitation was vital to the containment of the disease and that strict measures would be taken to force companies to clean up their stables. The Herald reported that the city government would quarantine the worst offenders unless considerable improvement could be seen within twenty-four hours.

On October 26, 1872, the New York Times reported that the disease was spreading, with "car companies compelled to reduce their forces; partial suspension of business in the livery stables" and "travel and business impeded." The Times noted that the "number of affected horses increased nearly 60% yesterday with comparatively few horses being left to do the work." For instance, 74 of the fire department's 141 horses were "laid up."<sup>4</sup>

During the last few days of October, the ravages of the horse distemper were most conspicuous. In New York City traffic came to a stop, and it was reported that business was at a standstill on the 29th. In an article entitled "Streets Without Traffic" the New York World reported "a common feeling of common inconvenience and common losses for everyone..."<sup>5</sup> In some sections of the city, notably at the great market centers like Jefferson and Washington businessmen turned to oxen for hauling their vegetables and provisions. On October 30 a prominent citizen, George Templeton Strong noted in his diary that the "horse distemper raged. Saw an ox team on Broadway." He predicted: "They will have to utilize the elephants and camels of Central Park..."<sup>6</sup> On the same day the New York Sun reported that the fruit dealers were devastated due to their inability to get their produce to market; the cotton market too was suffering heavy losses with thousands of bales piled high on the city's wharves.

Most of the truckmen, grocers, and hackmen were hurt financially, but those whose horses somehow avoided the distemper could name their price. A gentleman offered a hackman \$12.00 to take him from the Courtland Street Ferry to the 42nd Street Depot, but the hackman refused the offer and waited for a better one. Another journeyman demanded and obtained \$42.00 for transporting one load of cotton.

The distemper was a disaster not only to New York, but it was to disrupt business elsewhere. The Springfield Daily Republican reported on Monday, October 28, that the "one absorbing topic of conversation and general inquiry yesterday was the horse disease. Politics were forgotten and, we fear, the thoughts of many of the worshippers were divided between worldly and spiritual matters...."<sup>7</sup> Nine of the thirteen largest stables in town had been hit by the distemper, and the remaining four were expecting its arrival momentarily. A reporter observed that even in stables where every precaution was taken, "the disease seemed to rage quite as severely as those in sections more exposed, and the greatest care proves entirely unavailing."<sup>8</sup> An example was made of the stable of E. W. Burr on Liberty Street, located in the lowest dampest section of the city. Burr's horses were healthy while those on the Hill just up the road had been severely affected.

Later in the week the Republican reported that the ailment had crossed the Connecticut River into West Springfield. Palmer, Pittsfield and Deerfield were also reporting cases, with a rare fatal case having occurred in Deerfield.

New York City, Syracuse, Boston, Springfield, Hartford, Newport and Philadelphia were all attacked regardless of the precautions taken or the care given. Cornelius Vanderbilt found



that his vast resources were not enough to stop the disease. His trotter "Mountain Boy" died on November 15 after a three week bout with the distemper. When interviewed by a reporter, Vanderbilt said that "Mountain Boy" "was the kindest, and best of horses.... I never had a horse I loved so well."<sup>9</sup> Vanderbilt had the horse buried in the same building that contained his carriage house and stable.

By early November the situation was critical. All along the eastern seaboard, businessmen were losing vast sums of money, and that proved to be a great incentive to seek a solution to the problem.

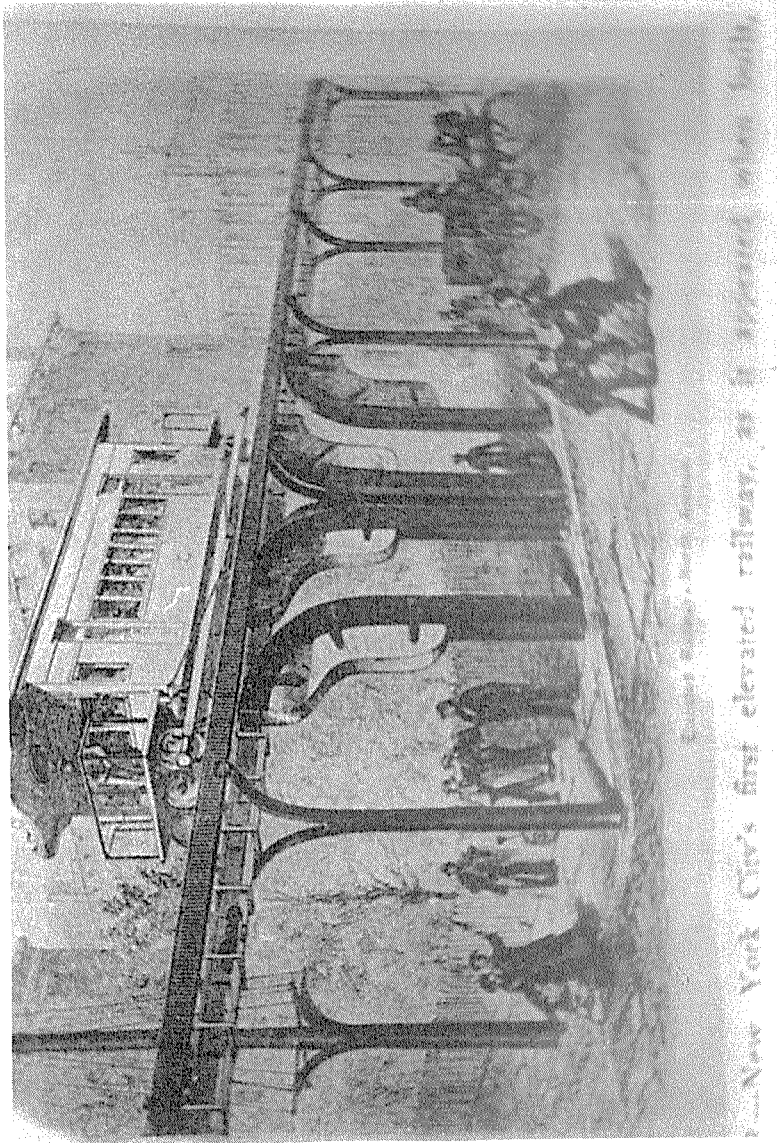
The New York City Board of Aldermen took the matter in hand on November 20, 1872. Representatives from two steamcar companies met with the Railroad Committee of the Board and a resolution was passed permitting the use of "dummy engines" on the city's streets for three months. F. M. Peck, representing the Remington Steam Car Company, proposed that his car could be stopped safely within six feet when moving at four miles per hour. He claimed that the cost of running a Remington Steam Car was less than the expenditure for a team of horses. The Remington car was tested on Elm Street, on the Bleeker Street route, and it was able to overcome the steep grade which was one of the most difficult in the city.

Not to be outdone was U. M. Camp of the Langdon Steam Car Company. He claimed that his car provided greater utility in that

it could run either way and could pull three loaded cars at once. The Langdon car had been tested on the Brooklyn and Flushing Road, where it reached a speed of thirty miles per hour. Camp and Peck both stated that their machines were noiseless and as safe as the streetcars then in use.

The Railroad Committee decided in favor of the Langdon car, which was brought into New York City on an experimental basis. On November 22 the Herald reported the trial run. A committee of the Board of Assistant Aldermen boarded the car at city hall, and they headed for the uptown depot of the Bleeker Street Line. Unfortunately, when the car reached Howard Street it hit a horse that was standing on the track. Luckily there were no injuries and the Herald attributed the mishap to the fact that the sand boxes on the steam car were not in working order. Cheering children lined the streets to cheer on the car and it attracted the stares of many passers-by, who all seemed enthralled by the novelty of a horseless street car.

This experiment and others like it all across the country marked the end of the horse-drawn streetcar and the dawning of a new era in city transportation. The steam car, with all its assets—speed, safety, security and economy—was here to stay; it was never to be stopped by a hacking cough, swollen glands, and the other symptoms of the "great horse distemper of 1872." The great calamity



NEW YORK CITY'S FIRST STREETCAR

of the horse epidemic drew on the energies of man's inventiveness and budding technological know-how to produce a step toward transportation as we know it today.

## References

1. New York Herald, October 23, 1872.
2. New York Times, October 29, 1872.
3. Springfield Daily Republican, October 21, 1872.
4. New York Times, October 26, 1872.
5. New York World, October 30, 1872.
6. The Diary of George Templeton Strong: Post War Years, 1865-1875, edited by Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomse (New York, 1952), p. 448.
7. Springfield Daily Republican, October 28, 1872.
8. Ibid.
9. New York Sun, November 16, 1872.