

# Book Review



**Social Medicine**  
Health For All

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## When Death had Wings: The Yellow Fever Epidemic in Hermosillo (1883-1885)\*

Hiram Félix Rosas (2010). *Cuando la muerte tuvo alas. La epidemia de fiebre amarilla en Hermosillo (1883-1885)*.

*Reviewed by Patricia Olga Hernández Espinoza*

*When Death had Wings*, by Hiram Félix Rosas, is an account based on historical and demographic sources of the impact of the yellow fever epidemic in Hermosillo towards the end of the XIX century, specifically during the years of 1883-1885. For those of us interested in social history, epidemics offer a fascinating window into the ways societies organize themselves to confront one of the greatest predators of all-time: infectious diseases.

Despite regional studies conducted by the School of Sonora and its parent institution, the University of Sonora, there continues to be a lack of literature concerning the impact of epidemics on the populations of northern Mexico (in comparison to the abundant bibliography that exists for the central part of the country). This is especially true of the region we

now call the Mexican northwest. This book seeks to fill that important void by offering one piece of the enormous puzzle that constitutes the historical development of the peoples of our country. Although yellow fever had a long history among the Sonoran people, we know little about it, how and why it killed entire families, how and why it depopulated the center of the state during its presence in the XIX century and the first half of the XX.

Transmitted via mosquitos, Yellow Fever thrives in humid regions like the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico. It is uncommon in hot, arid zones like the Sonoran desert where the city of Hermosillo is located.

The author diligently (and wonderfully) reconstructs both the physical setting as well as the society of the time and doing so provides answers to the above questions.

Yellow fever arrived at Guaymas in August of 1883 on board the *Newberry*, a merchant ship that transported among its passengers Angela Peralta, “the American nightingale.” Peralta, infected by mosquito bite, died at the Sonoran port, one of the first victims of the epidemic. In October, the epidemic arrives in Hermosillo, a town with a population of 7000

souls and in constant commercial development. Hermosillo has the sanitation and public hygiene problems typical of XIX century towns. Despite legal and policy measures enacted by government officials, the streets remain dusty and dirty. Dead animals can be found along the sides of roads. Irrigation ditches, despite the existence of ordinances, continue to be the sources of potable water. The canals irrigate local orchards and gardens which provide shade during the afternoon; during the hot season (some eight months a year) the ditches are home to an explosion in the insect populations including *Aedes aegypti*, the mosquito responsible for one of the most severe demographic crisis in Sonora.

Félix Rosas recreates the world northern Mexican society towards the end of the XIX century, touching on its fears, emotions, and ambitions. Mortality from Yellow Fever was sufficient to decimate a non-immune population. Poor and rich, young and old, mothers and fathers, grandparents, and even a few priests died. The communal grave was soon filled and a second had to be built. Here families deposited their children, their parents, without the benefit of a funeral. There was no time. Death had wings and was unforgiving.

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\*Hiram Félix Rosas (2010). *Cuando la muerte tuvo alas. La epidemia de fiebre amarilla en Hermosillo (1883-1885)*. El Colegio de Sonora, Universidad de Sonora, ISBN: 978-607-7775-08-9)

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