At Angel Island the ship is quarantined by the US's top bacteriologist, Joseph Kinyoun. Assuming that plague bacteria is spread person-to-person, Kinyoun quarantines the mostly Asian passengers and crew. Like his colleagues, he also believes plague bacteria thrive in dirt and can be spread to human dwellings by vermin. So he orders the ship fumigated with steam and poisonous sulfuric sprays. As officers inspect the cargo, stowaways are discovered. Two appear to have the plague. Fearing imprisonment the ill stowaways escape during the night and try to swim to

San Francisco. Early the next morning their corpses are found floating in the harbor. When local officials announce that they do have the plague, the city feels more vulnerable than ever.

On March 6, 1900 the Chinese, year of the rat, the body of Chick Jin, a Chinese merchant, is found in the basement of a cheap hotel. An autopsy confirms everyone's worst fears - the plague has struck in Chinatown. Accusing the Chinese of being foul spreaders of disease, the city jumps into action. Policemen string a heavy rope around the 15 square blocks of Chinatown. Guards are assigned to keep residents from spreading the disease to the white community. Armed with crowbars and disinfectants, posses systematically raid and fumigate every house, destroying the worst of the slums. Anyone who even looks sick is whisked away to Angel Island. The Chinese smuggle their sick out of the city through a vast labyrinth of tunnels beneath Chinatown. As a result, no one knows how many plague victims there really are... but with fewer than 200 confirmed deaths, relieved authorities declare the quarantine a success. In time, the city begins to relax. Life returns to normal. The memory of the plague recedes over the years.

In 1906 a devastating earthquake rocks San Francisco. Rats, disoriented by the earthquake, swarm through the streets, and the plague strikes again. But this time, there is no talk of quarantining neighborhoods. Public health officials now target rats instead of people. Rats had always been associated with plague outbreaks, but now scientists understand their role in transmitting the disease. Researchers in India noticed that plague-ridden rats and human victims were moth covered with flea bites. When they found plague bacteria in the saliva of fleas, the connection was made. Fleas were biting diseased rats and then transmitting the plague bacteria when they bite humans. The city bands together to wage a war on rats and fleas. Buildings are rat-proofed and fumigated. Garbage is collected and removed. Over a million rats are trapped and slaughtered.

As a result, a disease that could have reached epidemic proportions is stopped in its tracks.

(Historical narrator speaking) "When the 1907 epidemic finally petered out, San Franciscans could look back and discover a few things. One, is a better understanding of medicine - of scientific medicine - had led to the extermination of rats and a hunt for rats rather than people as compared to 1900. But certainly bacteriology was becoming increasingly important. The germ theory had led to a whole new scientific understanding of what makes people sick."

(Main narrator now returns) Epidemic diseases, like typhoid and cholera, begin to fade as cities start providing safe drinking water and better sewer systems. Counties bolster efforts to pick up garbage and spray for insects, reducing disease like yellow fever. And educational campaigns teach mothers how to better feed and nurture their children. As a result, infant mortality begins to decline. And by the second decade of the century life expectancy in Western countries starts to rise.

(Gert Brieger, historian speaking):

"Now public health tried to be proactive, rather than reactive. They tried to prevent things from happening rather than reacting after they happened."