

COVID-19 was not Perrysburg's First Epidemic

By Richard Baranowski

The world is presently under siege from the coronavirus pandemic. Suspected to be animal-origin, the virus began spreading from China in late 2019 and has now reached the United States. A contagious virus, the disease causes flu-like symptoms such as fever or cough and seems to primarily affect older populations. The disease can develop into acute respiratory distress, sometimes fatal.

Precautions, such as six-foot social distancing are being taken to minimize the spread of germs. Activities where large groups mingle are being postponed or cancelled. Airline travel has been curtailed. Concerts, sports contests, even the 2020 Olympics have been postponed. Schools, churches, libraries, and all non-essential business has closed.

Perrysburg is no exception. On March 16, the Perrysburg Schools closed for an undetermined amount of time as well as the library, churches, and most business. Grocery stores and gas stations remain open. Restaurants can still sell food, but takeout only and bar business is closed.

As I write this (April 1) about 4,000 people have died in the United States. It's still to be determined if or what havoc it will wreak on Perrysburg as the infectious wave has not reached here yet. It's still a situation of unknowns, changing by the hour. Although this medical crisis is all new to us, epidemics are not new to Perrysburg history. The village has suffered three other major epidemics over the years. The cholera epidemic in 1854, influenza in 1918 and polio in 1944.

The Cholera Epidemic

The 1854 cholera epidemic in Perrysburg originated with a 4th of July celebration at the Union Sabbath School located on today's Commodore Grounds. From then until August 20, 117 people died, although some sources speculate 140. Similar to future epidemics no one knew what the cause was. And it went away just as sudden as it appeared.

Cholera is caused by contaminated water, probably waste from an outhouse seeped into a well. And was it just one well? With so many people getting sick over a seven-week period, I suspect the bad water might have been from a community pump somewhere in the village as cholera is rarely passed person-to-person. The school most likely had a well or perhaps one nearby and outhouses. It is also possible that more than one well in the vicinity shared the same water supply, as our population was only 1,800.

During the epidemic business came to a standstill. The *Perrysburg Journal* suspended publication for lack of employees. Perrysburg's streets were deserted. People were terrified and they fled in large numbers. Whenever there was cholera in those days, it was quite common for people to pack up and leave the area. John Bayer for example, moved his family to Berea and didn't come back to Perrysburg until 1862.

Coincidentally, the cause of cholera was discovered that same year of 1854 by Dr. John Snow in London, a tremendous scientific advance, but unfortunately not in time to help the dear old village of Perrysburg.

The Influenza Epidemic

Although it was labelled the Spanish Flu, there was nothing Spanish about it. It started in other places first, most likely at the army base in Fort Riley, Kansas in March of 1918. The virus jumped from birds, perhaps chickens to pigs then people. Soldiers carried it to the trenches of Europe and it eventually went around the globe.

It reached Perrysburg in late September. By October 14, the village was put under semi-quarantine by the Perrysburg Village Board of Health until further notice. The schools closed and all religious services were cancelled. The library closed. Store hours were shortened. Saloons would have been closed, as they were in Toledo if Perrysburg had any, but liquor was voted out in 1908.

But Perrysburg's pool halls, dance halls, soda and soft drink parlors were shut down. All gatherings, public or private, such as lodge meetings were prohibited. Necessary businesses were permitted to remain open usual hours, but no loitering and you took your food from restaurants home with you.

There was no panic, although 20 or 30 people were dying every day in Toledo. Again, they did not know the cause. Stay away from crowds. Drink milk. Don't let anyone breathe on you. Keep your windows open – and this included the streetcars even if it was raining. People lived in fear.

The flu ran its course in large towns quickly, but due to Perrysburg's size and limited movement it took longer. The flu seemed to abate by October 31 and during the next ten days, schools, churches, and businesses gradually reopened. But it was too soon.

Perrysburg had its first flu fatality December 4. The disease began making its rounds again. The schools, churches and businesses again were closed on December 17. They stayed closed until after New Year. In the meantime, three more people died.

Two people died in January and several more, the last in April of 1919. The epidemic had claimed – in the village of 2,400 people – 15 residents.

Influenza is still a global concern today. There have been outbreaks in 1976, 1997 and 2009. But medical advances such as flu vaccines have made us safer, at least from known strains of the disease.

The Polio Epidemic

The polio epidemic in June of 1944 quarantined Perrysburg for about three weeks. It resulted in about 16 cases and at least one death. Again, not much was known about the disease or how it spread. About all was known is that it caused paralysis. The polio vaccine was still in the future.

By June 22, 1944, ten cases of Infantile Paralysis (polio) had been diagnosed. All were children under the age of ten. The City of Perrysburg released an emergency ordinance that quarantined all village children 16 or under. It limited the appearance of children in all public places. They were asked to stay at home or in their own yards. The library, the roller skating rink and the Palace Theatre were closed.

Mrs. Merlin Bowers, a registered nurse with experience with poliomyelitis was named village health officer and kept track of the cases on a daily basis.

As in the two prior Perrysburg epidemics, the cause of the disease was not known. There was wild speculation. All empty milk bottles should be boiled twenty minutes before being returned. Do not fish or swim in Grassy Creek of the Maumee River. See that your screens are in good order and use fly spray if necessary.

Other measures were taken. The State came and continuously tested the water. Since boys delivered the newspapers, there was no delivery. You picked up your newspaper at Hayward's Drug Store, the Blade distributor.

No new cases were reported after June 23 and by July 12, the polio quarantine was lifted. How it started or how it stopped nobody knows. There were 72 cases in Ohio and 5 fatalities.

Today, we know that polio is caused by a virus and a vaccine was introduced in the 1950s which has nearly eliminated the disease in developed countries. Thank you Dr. Salk!

In the meantime, history repeats itself in Perrysburg (and the world) as it battles against the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.