

Polio epidemic of 1916 extends summer breaks

Officials guarded towns and even the state from traveling children who were susceptible to the virus.

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In 1916, schoolchildren in Bucks and Montgomery counties had an extra month of summer vacation, but little chance to enjoy it.

A polio epidemic that began in New York City in May of that year had spread to Pennsylvania and other mid-Atlantic states by August. There was no vaccine yet against polio, an infectious virus also called infantile paralysis. It commonly

resulted in a withered or stunted limb, and in severe cases, it could leave a child or adult permanently paralyzed or dead.

State and local health officials tried to contain polio's spread through quarantines, isolating households with known cases and imposing restrictions on travel and activities by children under 16, who were believed to be most susceptible to the disease.

Pennsylvania posted more than 1,000 men to guard 900 miles of state border, monitoring highways, railroads, ferries and bridges to prevent children under 16 without a good-health certificate from entering the state. Dr. Samuel G. Dixon, state commissioner of health, ordered all public, private and parochial schools

closed during September for students under 16.

Densely populated boroughs took additional actions on their own as local school boards decided to keep the public schools, which were to reopen in early September, completely closed.

In August, the Doylestown Town Council appropriated \$1,000 to enforce a quarantine ordered by the borough's Board of Health, which exercised authority over public health matters.

"Doylestown went under strict quarantine at 12 o'clock on Wednesday, with twenty-two guards placed at the entrances to the borough to inspect every trolley car, automobile, wagon or other vehicles,

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and if they carry children under sixteen years of age to require them to show a clean bill of health before being allowed to stop in the town, or compel them to continue through the borough without stopping," reported the Doylestown Daily Intelligencer.

"Resident children will be permitted to go out of the town and remain for four hours only without a permit. It is urged, however, upon all parents to keep their children home, and it is especially urged that they do not allow their children to visit any amusement parks or gatherings of children where they may become liable to infection or become carriers of the contagion," the article stated.

The Intelligencer also reported: "Langhorne Manor has instituted a very drastic quarantine and Yardley has four guards to keep children under sixteen years out of that borough."

A 3-year-old boy in Langhorne and an 11-month-old boy in South Langhorne (now Penndel) were stricken with polio. A 4-year-old boy in Lower Southampton died from the disease.

In Hatboro, "it was decided to have Officer Winner watch all incoming and outgoing trolley cars. The trains will be watched by Health Officer Jarrett," the Public Spirit reported in early September. "Children entering the borough will be required to show a health certificate, and will only be allowed to stay under certain conditions. Motorists and wagon drivers also will be under observation. Hatboro so far has not had any cases of infantile paralysis and hopes to escape the contagion by taking due precautions."

Other precautions:

■ To combat the spread

of polio, Bristol Borough in August began collecting garbage daily, with a special collection at 7 p.m. from "infected houses," the newspaper stated.

■ A farm on Davisville Road in Moreland Township (then undivided into Upper and Lower) was quarantined after two children living there were found to be infected, the Public Spirit reported.

■ Willow Grove Park banned children under 16 from certain attractions at the popular amusement locale as a precaution, according to the Spirit.

By the end of September, the polio epidemic had subsided in Pennsylvania. The state and localities lifted their quarantines, and children went back to school on Monday, Oct. 2. It was up to each school board whether to make up the lost month of classes.

■ In Hatboro, "the board decided owing to the loss of time by quarantine, to lengthen the session during the first term one hour and utilize all the holidays possible, and may add one week at the end of the year. The board feels the children deserve as much time this year as accorded to them other years, and it is their duty to make provision to give the children as much as possible," the Public Spirit reported.

Pennsylvania recorded 1,360 polio cases, including 324 deaths, in the summer of 1916. New York City had 8,900 cases with 2,448 deaths, according to a historical account. Approximately 6,000 people nationwide — mostly children — died from polio in 1916, making it America's worst polio epidemic.

Widespread polio outbreaks occurred periodically over the next four decades. Dr. Jonas Salk's vaccine, first tested successfully in 1954, ended the scourge of polio for a whole generation of children.

Today, polio has been eradicated in the United States, and quarantines are a thing of the past.