

From Henry's Desk *by Henry Holland*

Wytheville, Virginia, 2004

The most severe polio epidemic in the United States per capita of the population occurred in Wytheville, Virginia in 1950. This epidemic was an epidemic within an epidemic. In 1950 the Commonwealth of Virginia had 1200 cases of polio reported to the Virginia State Health Department. Of this number approximately 189 cases reported were in Wythe County, Virginia. Wytheville was and is the county seat of Wythe County and the concentration of the Wythe County cases were in Wytheville, a town of 5,500 people in 1950. There were 17 to 23 deaths in Wythe County, depending on the reliability of reporting deaths caused by acute polio. Thus, the death rate in Wythe County was around 10% compared to 5% statewide (62 reported deaths out of 1200 reported cases).

Over the last fifty-four years the lasting effect on the families of this community has become part of Wytheville's shared cultural heritage. The town did not become a ghost town in 1950. The citizens did not panic. They dealt with this unexpected epidemic in very appropriate and supportive ways. In fact the citizens of Wytheville do not want to forget this sad, but historic time. The town's Department of Museums has done research and have begun a two year project about the Wytheville Polio Epidemic of 1950. This project will include three components. The first one occurred on June 30, 2004, and there is more on this event in this text. The second planned component is the publishing of an oral history book in January 2005. The third component is the opening of the permanent polio exhibit in the town museum. The exhibit will include an iron lung, a pediatric iron lung, old prescription records from 1950 and a reproduction of the highway sign warning travelers of a "polio outbreak" in Wytheville. State route 11 passed through Wytheville in 1950 and travelers would put up their car windows and cover their faces with handkerchiefs while riding through. Interstate highway 81 had not been constructed in 1950. The highway sign warning travelers read:

INFORMATION FOR TOURISTS

POLIO OUTBREAK IN WYTHEVILLE AND WYTHE COUNTY

**"IF YOU DO NOT STOP WITH US THIS TRIP WE INVITE
YOU TO VISIT US ON YOUR NEXT VACATION."**

*COURTESY OF WYTHEVILLE TOWN COUNCIL
WYTHE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
WYTHE COUNTY HEALTH DEPT.*

On June 30th, this writer was honored to be invited and sit with a panel of witnesses from this 1950 event. I had polio in 1950 in Richmond, not Wytheville, but I had written about the Wytheville epidemic four years ago in an article about the Virginia Polio Epidemic of 1950. Also I was asked to be on the panel to explain some

information about Post Polio Syndrome (PPS). One panel member was John Seccafico of New Jersey. John was the first reported case of polio in Wytheville in 1950. He was twenty-one months old at the time, has spent most of his life in a wheelchair and is a retired mental health worker. John was apprehensive about returning to Wytheville because he felt he might be treated as a "Typhoid Mary," but he was fondly welcomed and honored. John Johnson, the Wythe County African-American historian, was on the panel. He reported that African-American polio cases had to be transported to St. Philip Hospital in Richmond, 250 miles away. Racial segregation was the law in 1950 and St. Philip Hospital of the Medical College of Virginia Hospitals was the location of the only African-American polio ward in Virginia. Other panel members were: Alex Crockett, newspaper manager of the Wytheville Statesman in 1950; Eugene Warren, a pharmacist from 1950; D. L. Barnett, retired mortician and ambulance driver in 1950; and Drs. C. D. and Bobby Moore, sons of Dr. Chimer Moore, a revered Wytheville physician during the epidemic and Carter Beamer, town manager in 1950.

The discussion that followed was most interesting and the meeting room was packed. Mr. Beamer recalled that various efforts were undertaken to contain the virus. The town was sprayed with DDT. Rats were shot at night at the town dump. Swimming pools, children's camps, church Sunday Schools, the movie theater and the draft board were closed. The local semi-pro baseball team canceled their remaining games. Many survivors of this epidemic and their family members were present in the audience and many were interested in the pathogenesis of PPS.

Linda Logan of the town of Wytheville Museum staff coordinated this event. She told me that 116 survivors of the 1950 Wythe County epidemic have been identified and oral histories are being obtained from many of these survivors. She also mentioned that the adult iron lung that will be in the permanent exhibit was used by a Wythe County resident for over thirty years before his death. A video tape of this panel discussion will also be edited and produced.

Wytheville was and is a small historic town in southwest Virginia. The town has not forgotten their "Summer of Polio" in 1950. They are in the process of honoring the victims, their families and public servants of the time. The Wytheville citizens of 1950 pulled together as a community and dealt with this epidemic. We can all learn from their example.

If you are interested in making a tax deductible contribution to this permanent polio exhibit, contact: Town of Wytheville Department of Museums, P.O. Box 533, Wytheville, VA 24382 or call at 276-223-3330 or contact by E-mail at: museums@wytheville.org

A special thanks to Linda Logan for some of the information contained in this article.