

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Tuberculosis, Typhoid 1920

Historians may judge the world-wide pandemic of 2020 as the most deleterious, economically crippling event of all time for the U.S. The gravity of the times, notwithstanding, life-threatening sickness and contagious disease are nothing new.

The wisest man in Old Testament times rightly understood this. Inspired by God, Solomon wrote, "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

A little more than a century ago, the nation was rebounding from a polio epidemic in New York. Officially confirmed in 1916, it "caused widespread panic...thousands fled the city to nearby mountain resorts; movie theaters were closed, meetings were canceled, public gatherings were almost nonexistent, and children were warned not to drink from water fountains, and told to avoid amusement parks, swimming pools, and beaches," (Wikipedia, *History of Polio*, para. 6).

Polio epidemics continued every summer in at least one area of the country from 1916 until the mid-twentieth century. Reported cases and deaths peaked in the 1940s and 1950s. Some local readers remember being quarantined in their homes. The first polio vaccine shot was administered in the U.S. in 1955. Polio vaccine was dispensed in sugar cubes to area residents at the former La Grange School cafeteria in the early-1960s.

Exactly one hundred years ago, two other diseases were front and center in the country: tuberculosis and typhoid. On the tail of World War I (1914-1918), much of the national population was suffering from poor hygiene, coupled with malnutrition, which contributed to the spread of tuberculosis. Aggressive campaigns from State health officials to educate the public in 1920 reached Bucklesberrians locally:

1920, July 20: "At Hickory Grove School [Bucklesberry] Friday night Dr. W. T. Parrott spoke to a crowded house on tuberculosis. Stereopticon slides illustrating the subject were shown at the same time by the county health nurse. Dr. Parrott stressed the danger of indiscriminate kissing as one of the means by which tuberculosis is spread. He also spoke of fresh air as being one of the most important means of preventing tuberculosis, as well as being one of the most valuable curative remedies. The address was highly appreciated by the audience, the Health Bureau stated, and it is much to be desired that similar addresses be given throughout the county." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)

In the same month of July, 1920, the State Board of Health administered vaccine to fight the incidence of typhoid disease. Fifty deaths attributed to typhoid in Lenoir County in 1919 had been reduced to a single death in 1920, which, interestingly, occurred in the Falling Creek area on the outskirts of Bucklesberry.

Typhoid was spread through unsanitary water or food sources contaminated with infected fecal matter. Poor and non-existing sewage systems prevalent in the early-1900s were perfect breeding grounds for typhoid. Eventually proven not to be a distinctly rural disease, folks in rural areas were nonetheless at higher risk for typhoid and saw more frequent outbreaks. A typhoid outbreak in Bucklesberry in the summer of 1920 prompted community-wide vaccine inoculation at the Hickory Grove School:

1920, July 13: "It's all right. There won't be any more typhoid at Hickory Grove, Lenoir County. There will be nobody left there capable of having it. The whole community is being vaccinated. Two cases were reported from the neighborhood recently. 'They are wide awake, progressive folks,' according to the Health Bureau here. All hands decided to apply for immunization. Dr. Darius C. Absher inoculated 89 persons at a single sitting. Practically every person in the vicinity will be typhoid-proof shortly." (*The Daily Free Press*, Kinston)