

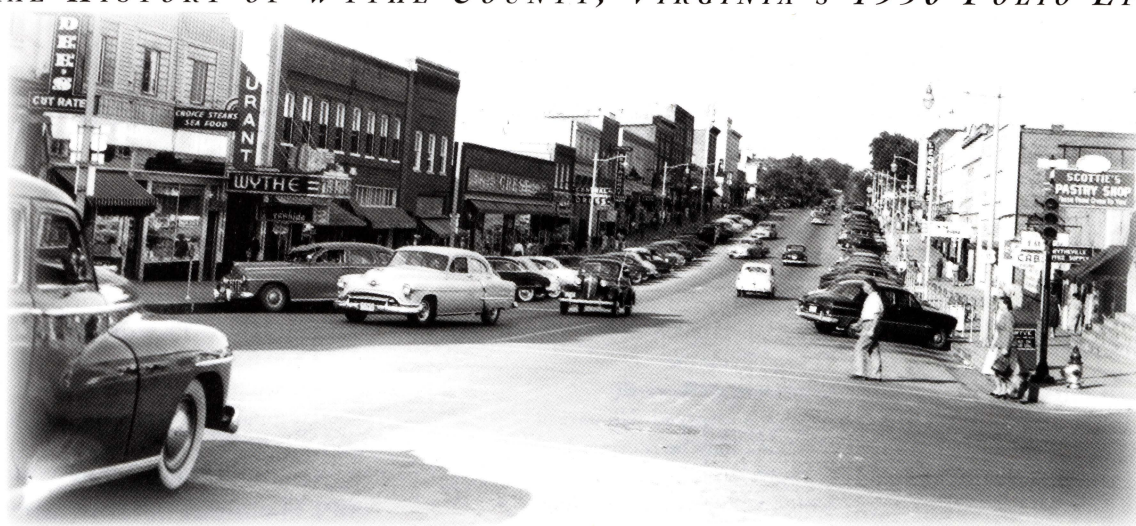
A Summer Without Children:



AN ORAL HISTORY OF WYTHE COUNTY, VIRGINIA'S 1950 POLIO EPIDEMIC

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*Main Street, Wytheville, VA, circa 1950
(Courtesy of the Spiller/Waller/Walters Photograph Collection)*

Oral History and Compilation of Stories by Linda H. Logan

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Town of Wytheville Department of Museums

Wytheville, Virginia



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for the Humanities and
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Front Cover Photograph:
Child Zan Arnold
carried by father and rushed to Roanoke
Hospital from Cripple Creek farm.

Courtesy of Jim Hansen
as published in Look Magazine, 1951.

Back Cover Photograph:
Nurses applying hot packs to a patient's legs in
hospital.

Courtesy of the Virginia State Health Bulletin

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Preface

There was talk of bomb shelters, communism's threat to America, and Howdy Doody as we stood in line to get a sugar cube placed on our tongue. "Some new medicine" was the buzz. "Keeps you from getting polio" was heard down the line. "Have you seen pictures of those iron lungs?" another said with disgust and horror in her voice. "My mother tells me we shouldn't play in rain water when it floods the street half way up the block," another said. "But it sure is fun. It's better than going all the way over to Ballew's Farm and jumping in the creek, especially when the cows are out in the pasture."

We took our little sugar cube laced with polio vaccine and swallowed it down; happy to know we didn't have to take the shots anymore that left scars on your arm. As elementary school students we just took what the teachers handed us — cod liver oil, oral polio vaccine, a paddling. So early in my life I became aware of this thing called polio. But, fortunately, being in the throes of growing up in a rather typical 1950s neighborhood, I never encountered any of my friends suffering from the disease. I grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, some 180 miles south of Wytheville, Virginia, on pre-Interstate twisty, windy roads, literally worlds away from the epidemic that Wytheville was experiencing in 1950. Polio became a part of my consciousness because of that little sugar cube we stood in line to take.

Some time later, as I was struggling with the hormone of my teens, one of my sisters came home, excited with sparkle of love in her eyes. In the year that John F. Kennedy was assassinated, she had met a friend of my oldest sister's husband whom she really liked. Kenny was his name and Kenny was the first person I had been around who was permanently confined to a wheel chair. I found myself, at fifteen, being uncomfortable, not knowing exactly what to say. Kenny had contracted polio when he was eight years old, in western North Carolina, some two years before the epidemic in Wytheville. As time went on, I became much less uncomfortable and the love between my sister and the man in the wheelchair grew into marriage within a couple of years. I came to learn that Kenny could do just about

anything anyone else could do, with the exception of being able to walk. But polio had come to my family, if only by marriage.

I had just been born the year my future brother-in-law contracted polio and only two years old when the polio outbreak hit Wythe County, Virginia. It was years later that I became aware of the event that, in a statistical sense, was as devastating to that community as plagues had been around Europe in a much darker time. How frightening it must have been, and would have been, save for being a naïve little kid?

To chronicle this story of a localized modern plague is important work. There were many hours that went into the research and many memories that provided fodder for this historical recollection. It is indeed time to tell this story in order that the saga can find an entire new appreciation from people like myself who lived through those times but didn't quite understand until their adulthood the severity of it, or the potential for personal disaster in living through that time, and for those who grew up after the vaccine worked so well that the disease of iron lungs and debilitated arms and legs became virtually eradicated, not only in America but around the world. The story of the polio epidemic of Wytheville, Virginia is now told by those who lived it. The story is now understood by those who did not.

Stevan R. Jackson, Ph.D.

Cultural Anthropologist

“What in the World Was Going On Here?”

As I sit down to write this late December morning in 2004, the newspaper headline reads, “Tidal Waves Kill 11,800 in Southern Asia.” The polio epidemic in Wythe County wasn’t a disaster of that dimension, nor did it have much in common with the 9/11/01 terrorist attack on New York City. But when something awful strikes, the images of the time and the place linger, and the mind puzzles over them. As someone who grew up in Ivanhoe--18 miles southeast of Wytheville--I know that I will never forget the summer when polio hit our county.

Though tidal waves and terrorist attacks have a hideous logic, Wythe County’s polio epidemic never made much sense. Why were so many stricken in such an unlikely place? That question has never been answered, and the mystery lingers as part of the county’s cultural heritage. The outbreak has an almost Biblical resonance that inspired more than one radio evangelist at the time.

Unexplainable sickness and death, mostly of children, are the first chapter of the story, but the second chapter tells of ordinary citizens in a fearful situation answering the call to do the right thing. We can call it heroism, but it’s of a different order than, say, of New York City’s Fire and Police Departments after the attack on the World Trade Center. It was a day-in, day-out variety of heroism. Dr. Charlie Graham tirelessly tended to the sick. D. Lee Barnett drove his ambulance from Wytheville to Roanoke again and again without regard to his own exposure to the disease. Newspaper editor James A. Williams saw to it that the people of the county knew the facts of what was happening. These were only three of the hundreds of Wythe Countians who did what they could to help--who acted in a neighborly and community-minded spirit.

In our puzzling over what happened to Wythe County half a decade ago, evidently we’ll never penetrate the mystery of why it happened to us. Children died; family members and neighbors were struck down; many of our own were crippled--the facts are deeply disturbing. But the second piece of our knowledge--to which the pages that follow testify persuasively--is that many of our people stepped up; they struggled to help. That knowledge is comforting. In a time of fear and suffering, our people responded with courage and decency.

I think that people from Wythe County are no better than people from anywhere else, but I know they’re just as smart, ethical, compassionate, and capable as citizens of the most sophisticated cultures of the world. There are whole communities whose histories are tainted by episodes of disgrace--e.g., Tulsa, Birmingham, Watts, Munich, Johannesburg--and certainly we Wythe Countians would not have to look very hard to find instances of our own despicable behavior. The occasion of this book is not one of patting ourselves on the back, but rather of counting ourselves lucky that we have this proud moment in our past. It is no small thing to possess--*Once there was this dark time when our people acted well*. In the ominous future that appears to be bearing down on us, maybe we can hold onto this story as a charm.

David Huddle

University of Vermont, Professor of English

*The number killed by the Tsunami has risen to 150,000.

Acknowledgements

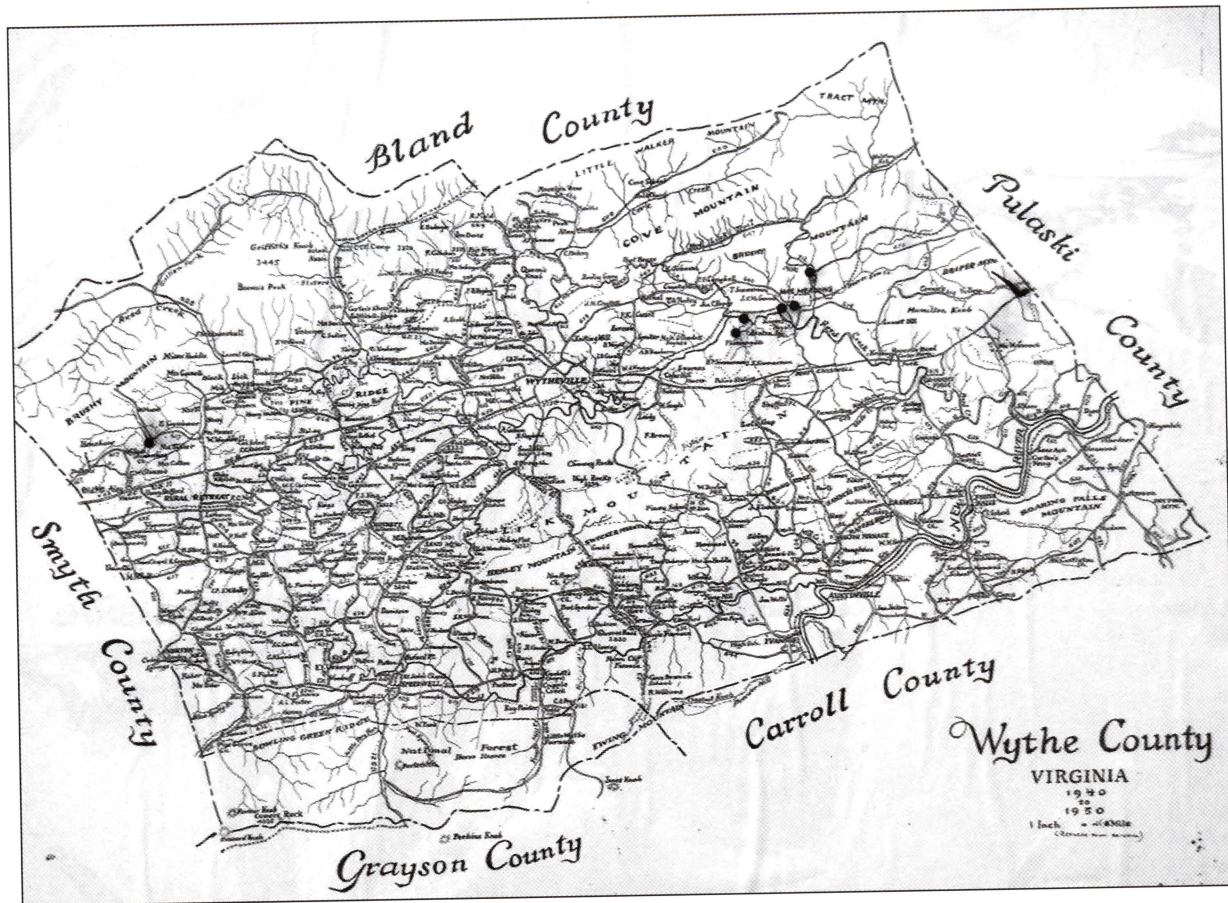
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Ethel Stephens Brown
Mrs. Sammie Cook
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Annie B. Crockett-Stark
Alice Phillippi Debart
Cindy Lester Dunford
Kathleen Ewald
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Map of Wytche County, VA in 1950.

The dark spots indicate red pins marking the locations of polio victims when they became ill with polio. This is a work-in progress for the permanent exhibition. Names and locations of polio cases are still being collected.

(Courtesy Eugene F. Warren)

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

The worst per capita polio outbreak in the United States occurred in the summer of 1950 in Wythe County, Virginia.¹ Wytheville, a picturesque Appalachian town, isolated by traditional culture and geography in the 1950s, has become known as a model of community spirit, common sense, and cooperation in a public health crisis that is not easily forgotten by those who witnessed it. A Richmond physician and 1950 polio survivor, Henry D. Holland, in writing about the statewide epidemic that year, put Wythe County's plight in perspective:

What happened [in Virginia] that year to set it apart from other years? First there was an epidemic within the overall epidemic. Wythe County, particularly the little town of Wytheville (population 5,550) accounted for 184 [other reports say 189] cases. Small town and rural southwestern Virginia accounted for one-third of polio cases [in Virginia] in 1950. Among the twelve hundred cases [statewide], there were sixty-two deaths, a death rate of five percent. In Wythe County, there were seventeen deaths, a death rate of almost ten percent. This data would indicate that the wild poliovirus in Wythe County was more virulent than in most other regions of Virginia.”²

In August 1950 during the epidemic's peak intensity, The Washington Post published an article calling Wytheville, “the town that kept its head.” The following year Look Magazine, in a photo-essay, further explored the public health crisis this Appalachian town endured with such calm courage.

The media, then and now, fifty-five years later, continue to wonder at the ways an isolated rural community transcended fear and contagion to enlist every possible resource to care for the stricken and prevent the spread of disease to other localities. What reporters and others want to know and usually ask is, “Why Wytheville and Wythe County?” There are numerous theories as to the local causes but no answers have yet been conclusive. People still ponder possible reasons why the fate of Wytheville that summer was so intertwined with polio.

This was not Wythe County's first close encounter with the tragedy of the poliovirus. Lee Hale, a 1944 polio case, had already made headlines by holding a Guinness Book of World Records in 1976 for surviving the longest time in

an iron lung.³ Mr. Hale's story of thirty-two years in an iron lung is widely known and often still comes up in local conversations in which polio is mentioned, and his iron lung, which was donated to the museums, is on display in the Thomas J. Boyd Museum in Wytheville. His wife and daughters' devotion to his care and their creative solutions to their financial struggles have been inspirations to many Wythe County people who witnessed this family's faith and perseverance.⁴

As the world becomes smaller in a global economy with mounting overpopulation, human populations become more concentrated and create even more inviting opportunities for infectious "crowd diseases" to spread.⁵ Consequently, models of survival from the past, such as the Wytheville story, become valuable records for observation and contemplation. The objective story of the 1950 epidemic has been told very well in newspapers and private essays. The subjective stories of the everyday lives of those who survived the epidemic, whether as victims, doctors, nurses, volunteer ambulance drivers, relatives, and witnesses, are presented in this publication. Perhaps we can attribute the strengths exhibited in these stories to the genetic legacies their ancestors, the early settlers of Appalachia and their African-American counterparts, gave them from their own adaptations to a harsh frontier environment which demanded cooperation, mutual support, religious faith and ideals, and calm courage in order to survive in the New World. The African-American experiences during the epidemic in these stories reflect the state of affairs prior to racial integration in our country.

We are extremely grateful and indebted to our narrators for their time and attention to this project. No doubt, there are some narrators with more to add, and we sincerely regret the time constraints that prevent us from finding them. More questions are likely to arise as you read these experiences of the narrators who describe in vivid detail their impressions of a town taken hostage by polio one mid-twentieth century summer before the polio vaccine became available.

Linda H. Logan

Coordinator of Heritage Education, Department of Museums



Map of Town of Wytbeville in 1950.

Dark dots represent progress on locating the names and addresses of cases in town. Names and locations of those stricken by polio in 1950 are still being collected until the one-hundred eighty-nine reported cases are identified and mapped.

(Courtesy Eugene F. Warren)