

TIPPECANOE COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

# LIFE & TIMES

## LEARNING FROM HISTORICAL PANDEMICS IN TIPPECANOE COUNTY

“The City depopulated, business suspended and streets deserted...” This headline could come from today’s newspaper as easily as did from a newspaper from the 1849 cholera epidemic that gripped the nation. While in the middle of the Covid-19 emergency, it’s difficult to see the bright side, but we can look back at epidemics of the past and see that they provided us with important opportunities to improve public health.

In 1849, cholera swept the country and eventually reached Tippecanoe County in early July with the first confirmed case. Local accounts are rare, but in later newspapers it was reported that *“Business was entirely suspended. There was no wagon nor vehicle to be seen on the street unless it was a hearse carrying the box or coffin. The physicians did all that physical strength and endurance was capable for doing. It is said that Dr. [David T.] Yeakel had three teams and conveyances, and that as soon as one was exhausted he would start out with another. Illinois [now Fourth] Street north of the public square was literally depopulated.”* It is estimated that as many as 300 people in Tippecanoe County died of the highly contagious intestinal disease, but detailed records were not kept at that time.

After the epidemic had passed, local newspapers called for better city sanitation, increased public knowledge of clean practices and a hospital where

the sick could find a clean, healthy place to recover with trained medical staff. It’s hard to imagine today, but in its early years Lafayette had a reputation as a dirty river town. This outbreak served as a wake-up call for the city to turn things around and improve conditions.

The diphtheria outbreak in 1891 resulted in the city of Lafayette passing its first garbage control ordinance and the beginning of trash pick-up service. A trash incinerator was constructed to reduce waste and remained in operation until 1941. Although the term “social distancing” was not yet coined, people were made aware of the importance of quarantine and avoiding large gatherings. In 1902, the Detention Hospital for contagious diseases was constructed on the west bank of the Wabash and remained in use until late 1914.

The early years of the 1900s were marked with a fight against Tuberculosis. In 1920, A local branch of the TB society brought health expert Murray P. Horwood from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to conduct a health survey of Tippecanoe County. This survey was the first to be conducted in the state of Indiana and one of the first in the nation. It made a number of recommendations for better public health practices and well as food handling in

local farms. A new William Ross Sanatorium was built to help treat Tuberculosis.

The Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 and 1919 reached Lafayette, but it is unknown just how many were impacted. A look back at the TCHA collection of Oral History interviews found that many of those interviewed remember the outbreak and the widespread illness. Some even remembered deaths and the fear of coming in contact with the sick. The 1920 health survey reported a small spike in county-wide deaths in 1918, but the cause of many of those deaths is unknown. Many families were still treating the sick in the home and the total number of flu cases was not reported. It seems that Tippecanoe County was luckier than most recovering from the flu outbreak.

What should we take away from this history-making moment we find ourselves in today?

-Kelly Lippie, Curator of Collections



## DIPHTHERIA EPIDEMIC

The diphtheria epidemic that occurred in the fall of 1891 struck fear in the hearts of parents all over Tippecanoe County. Although now largely eradicated from the United States by a vaccine developed in Europe in the 1920s, in 1891 diphtheria was a deadly disease with no effective treatment. Its method of transmission was not known for certain and there were multiple theories, some credible and others guesswork. The disease seemed to strike children the hardest, and it became a leading cause of death in children by the end of the 19th century, death usually occurring as a thick diphtheritic layer of dead cells coated the throat gradually cutting off breathing. On September 25th, 1891, the Lafayette Daily Courier ran a front-page item reporting that the current epidemic was the greatest ever known in Lafayette. Ten cases had been reported as well as two deaths. Obituaries of six-year-old Arthur Campbell on September 19th and eight-year-old Mary Quaco on September 25th indicated they had died from diphtheria. Families were advised to thoroughly disinfect their homes and take precautions including boiling their drinking water. Public health laws would be enforced; these included quarantines and hanging orange flags on premises with known cases. It was thought that the disease was confined to the north end of town, in the Fourth Ward.

Three days later, the County Health Officer, Dr. Emil Schaible, reported only one new case and predicted little further spread. But on the 30th he reported two new cases within the last 24 hours. The well water at Jenks School was being tested. An article the following day interviewed several unnamed local physicians who expressed their varying theories about the disease. And on October 2nd, Dr. W. P. Youkey a local physician who had previously practiced in Carroll and Clinton Counties shared his prevention tips which included fumigation of the home with burning sulfur

and blowing pulverized sulfur into the throats of children through a goose quill each morning. Dr. Schaible reported that same day that there were no new cases in the last 24 hours, but that funerals for cases of diphtheria must be held privately. This would be enforced by the police and violators would be punished. In addition, all Sunday schools would be closed until the epidemic subsided. He also recommended burning sulfur in the home and using only city water rather than well water, and still boiling it before use. It was recommended that private schools should close. Several local children were reported to be improving. However, the very next day 3 deaths, including Richard and Roy Bailey who had been reported to be improving, and 3 new cases were reported. Churches were complying with the recommendation to close, and public and private schools were to remain closed for at least another week. Citizens complained that children were seen out on the streets while the schools were closed. Families who were able, sent their children out of the city.

On October 5th, 1891, Dr. Schaible made the "very comforting statement" that the epidemic would soon end. There was only one new case to report, but parents should not let down their guard and should continue to practice precautionary measures. On October 7th it was announced that diphtheria had reached Romney, as people fled Lafayette to get away from it. There was another reported case in Lafayette on the 7th and two more on the 8th. The news continued in this manner through October and most of November, with the Health Officer reporting new cases, but assuring the public that the epidemic was declining. New cases cropped up in the outlying areas of Mulberry and Linden and the disease was reported to be spreading rapidly. The results of the water test at Jenks school were finally reported on October 13 and the water

was found to be safe, "exploding the rumor" that impure water caused the spread. Public and private schools and churches remained closed, but by mid-October, the German Lutheran School announced it would reopen, "the epidemic having subsided". More cases were reported at Buck Creek and Colburn, and Indianapolis reported 47 new diphtheria flags going up. While most activities for children were cancelled, life seemed to go on normally for adults. Although children appeared to be hardest hit by diphtheria, it was not known then that others could be asymptomatic carriers of the bacteria. Football games were hugely popular at the time, and a notice in the paper on Friday, November 13 advised parents that if their children attended a football game Saturday, they would not be allowed to attend school for one week, because the stadium was located in a part of town where diphtheria was rampant.

By the end of November, the epidemic seemed to taper off, and life started to return to normal. The last obituary I found mentioning diphtheria as a cause of death was eleven-year-old Otto Balser who died on 15 December. He was the 3rd in his family to die from the dreaded disease. Articles in the newspaper about diphtheria turned to research that was being conducted on diphtheria in animals. This research eventually led to an anti-toxin and the vaccine we use today. Robert Kriebel wrote in an Old Lafayette column in 1979 that citizens continued to worry about a recurrence until January 1892 when the temperature fell to 18 degrees below zero. Although it's unknown how many cases occurred in Tippecanoe County, diphtheria was reported to have a fatality rate of 10 percent. I counted 27 obituaries specifically listing diphtheria as the cause of death that fall of 1891. Tragically many families had multiple victims.

Arthur Campbell - 6  
 Mary Quaco - 8  
 Roy and Richard Bailey - 9 and 3  
 William and Catherine Dieterle - 10 and 11  
 Edward Reifers - 6  
 Gertrude, Porter and Fay Sheets - 14, 11 and 6

George Potel - 3  
 Caster child -  
 Clara Jane Smith - 4  
 Arthur Sweet - 19  
 Breckweg Kate Breckweg - 4  
 Samuel Kalberer - 7

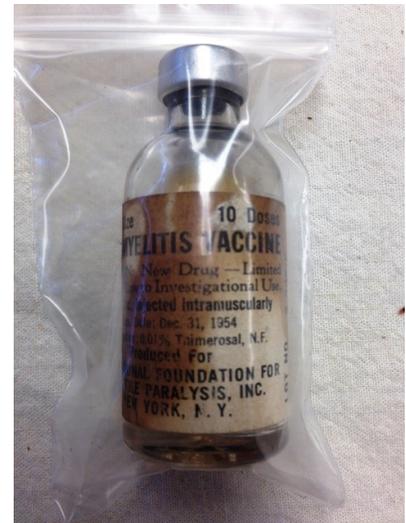
Charles and Emma Klingener - 12 and 15  
 Artings child - 9  
 Henry, Willie, Louisa and Otto Balser - 57 (father), 13 and 11 (Willie's age not given)  
 Frank and George Wiegand - 5 and 2  
 Ella, Georgie and Raymond Russell - 9, 5 and 3



Columbian Park Swimming pool, 1950s



Sterling McElwaine going fishing, ca. 1930 .



Poliomyelitis Vaccine vial- a vial of the first Salk Polio shot given in Tippecanoe County, May 1954.

## PROGRAMS UPDATE!

Despite the fact that all TCHA programming has been cancelled through June 13 due to COVID-19, the program department has been busy adapting to these new circumstances we live in. Technology has been utilized to continue educational outreach and connect with the membership and friends of TCHA. Videos and social media posts pertaining to the history of Fort Ouiatenon and the archaeological excavations have proven extremely popular. The program department has been working with the curator

of collections to come up with a series of photographs of collection items pertaining to the time period, as well as archival material.

The program committee (Pete Bill, Zula Kress, Annie Hatke Schap, David Hovde, Walt Griffin, Quentin Robinson, and staff members Craig Hadley, Megan Lee and Leslie Martin Conwell) continue their work to navigate the challenges incurred by COVID-19 and to turn those challenges into innovative ways to meet TCHA's educational mission. TCHA is interested in

your ideas for what you'd like to see in the way of programming for 2021. If you have some suggestions for new programming, please contact Program Director Leslie Martin Conwell at:

programs@tippecanoehistory.org,  
 765.426.2128.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Leslie Martin Conwell

Program Director



## FEAST OF THE HUNTERS' MOON

TCHA is planning on holding the Feast unless government public health agencies put COVID-19 restrictions in place that prohibit or make impractical large gatherings during that time.

Planning for the Feast is currently operating under the "Back on Track" plan that Indiana Governor Holcomb introduced May 1 which allows festivals, events, and large gatherings beginning July 4.

The TCHA board of Governors and Feast Steering Committee will continue to monitor the situation, and will keep the membership apprised.

Leslie Martin Conwell,

Feast of The Hunters' Moon Event Manager



### TCHA Reopening Plans (as of 6/2/2020 — subject to change)

The Tippecanoe Battlefield Museum, Arganbright library, and TCHA History Center will all remain closed with no programming or social events until June 14th, 2020

**June 14th:** per Governor Holcomb's reopening guidelines for the State of Indiana, TCHA will begin to open up its facilities

- Arganbright library will be open to the public by appointment only. Volunteer staff will be limited. **Face masks are required** for staff, volunteers, and any members of the public using the research facility.
- The Tippecanoe Battlefield Museum will be open to the general public allowing 50% of the normal capacity of the building. **Face masks are required** to enter the museum. Further specifics on numbers of people allowed to be admitted to the building and museum hours will be posted on the front door of the museum (see details on Page 5 of this newsletter).
- History Center will resume public programs. However, seating will be set up to maintain six-foot social distancing. **Face masks are required** for staff, volunteers, and public members using the facility.

**July 4th and beyond:** per Governor Holcomb's reopening guidelines "Restrictions are lifted at amusement parks, ... and like facilities. Social distancing guidelines should be maintained."

- Operations at Arganbright, the Tippecanoe Battlefield Museum, and History Center will return to normal barring any change in plans by the state or county public health officials.
- Social distancing should be maintained as much as possible
- The use of masks will be evaluated and notices of mask requirements, if any, will be posted on the front doors of the buildings.

*Thank you for helping us to keep everyone safe and for your support during these difficult times.*

*The Staff and Board of Governors of the Tippecanoe County Historical Association*

## TIPPECANOE BATTLEFIELD NEWS



Like many businesses and museums, the Tippecanoe Battlefield Museum and History Store has been closed since mid-March due to the Corona Virus outbreak.

We now look forward to reopening on June 14th, if all goes well.

Between June 14 and at least July 4th, we will operate at reduced capacity 3-days per week: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Hours will be 10:00 to 5:00 as usual, and **masks will be required** of both visitors and staff.

We are also removing many duplicate copies of books from display, so

that only one copy is on the shelf, to minimize handling.

We can still fill mail orders for books, t-shirts, mugs, etc. and ship or arrange for pickup. To place orders, call 765.426.2128 for more information or to place an order.

In the meantime, we are conducting a virtual tour of the museum via short video segments explaining the exhibits and the stories behind them. Very soon we'll be producing segments on the uniforms and equipment of the regular troops and the militia with a special segment featuring Nicholas Fleenor's sabre.

We hope you'll join us on the tour for a unique "behind-the-scenes" trip through the museum.

Look for the videos on any of TCHA's Facebook pages, either the Tippecanoe Battlefield, the Feast of the Hunters' Moon or TCHA's main web page.

Rick Conwell  
Museum Manager, Tippecanoe Battlefield

## FOLLOW US!



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Instagram: TippecanoeHistory



Tippecanoe County Historical Association is a private not-for-profit organization whose mission is to enrich the lives of Tippecanoe County residents and visitors by collecting, preserving, and interpreting our unique and exciting history.