

Plagues of 1854 and 1918

Programs aimed at immunization of the masses have virtually eliminated the threat of disease reaching epidemic proportions in this country.

The prediction two years ago that a Swine Flu outbreak appeared imminent was enough to mobilize the federal government. It sponsored a vaccination program unparalleled in the nation's history.

Millions line up for the shots, and, whether it was because the inoculations worked, or other factors were involved, the populace was spared.

Such was not the case in either 1854 or 1918, when great plagues spread death, desolation and terror in Fall River.

Asiatic cholera was first recognized here on Aug. 26, 1854, during Fall River's first year as a city.

Although official records listing the number of persons stricken were destroyed when city hall went up in flames, documents kept by James Buffington, the municipality's first mayor, indicate there were 100 victims.

Buffington, Rev. Edward Murphy, pastor of St. Mary's Church, and Rev. Eli Thurston, pastor of Central Congregational

Church, pooled their resources to fight the plague.

It was an arduous task, because the cholera in many instances, struck robust people, killing them within hours. Burial had to be immediate and most of the victims were interred in the North End's Oak Tree Cemetery.

A newspaper account of the men's activities recalled that they visited "lowly tenements," bringing food and medicine to the afflicted.

Buffington and the two clergymen reportedly provided nurses whenever possible. Failing that, the men were not above washing down the bodies of cholera victims.

The 1918 outbreak of Spanish influenza or "La Grippe" proved far more devastating. From September until December, 11,707 cases were reported. Deaths totaled 719.

The first case in Massachusetts is believed to have occurred at Boston's Commonwealth Pier, where a sailor was suddenly taken ill. The attending physician, who three days later contracted the disease, said the seaman was an influenza victim.

The city's Board of

Health got word of the first case here on Sept. 16. The doctor involved wrote to members, saying he thought they should know of the infection's presence here.

Seven more cases were reported within the next 24 hours and the board promptly ordered all physicians to make instances known.

A ban was placed on activities. Church services were limited, attendance at funerals was limited to immediate family members. Schools, theaters, pool parlors and saloons were closed.

Restrictions were lifted Oct. 23, although the city was not officially declared free of the outbreak until Oct. 31.

In a wrapup report on the epidemic, the board pointed out that the influenza was brought into the city by members of the armed services, home on leave. Of the first cases reported, 14 directly involved men on furlough.

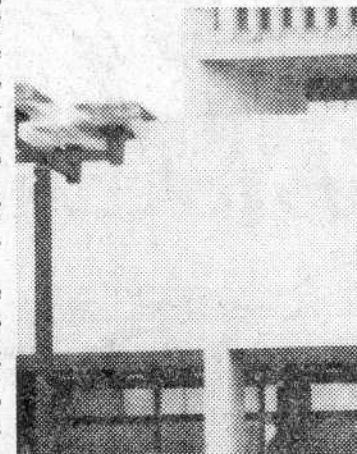
That epidemic ended up costing the city \$19,075, exclusive of the cost of disinfecting buildings used as infirmaries.

Measles claimed the lives of eight youngsters in a six-month period beginning in November of 1934. A total of 2,355 children who contracted

the illness were more fortunate.

By April of 1935, health officials considered the problem to be well in hand. They said that the number of reported cases could not be considered a true index.

They speculated that hundreds of cases were not reported, because parents chose to treat their youngsters at home,



Spread Death and Terror

using old fashioned remedies.

Parents again had cause for concern in 1935. Just three months after the measles outbreak ended, infantile paralysis, already raging in Virginia and the Carolinas, broke out here.

The first case was reported on July 15 and from that day until late in September, the news-

papers carried daily stories on the disease's progress.

It was not unusual for 15 cases to crop up over a weekend. By the time it was all over, 120 children had been stricken with polio. Five lost their lives.

The Salk vaccine had yet to be developed, but there was Brodie's vaccine. The Health Board

repeatedly issued pleas for the preventive. It was received from New York's Brodie Clinic in 50 and 100 dose lots, hardly enough to inoculate all of the area's children.

The board, in a more direct approach, asked that home and businesses be cleaned from top to bottom to help check the virus' spread.

Merchants were requested to keep fruits, vegetables and meats covered. Public swimming pools were closed and the opening of school was postponed until Sept. 25.

The disease surfaced here again in 1943 and in the mid-1950s, but the consequences were not so severe.