



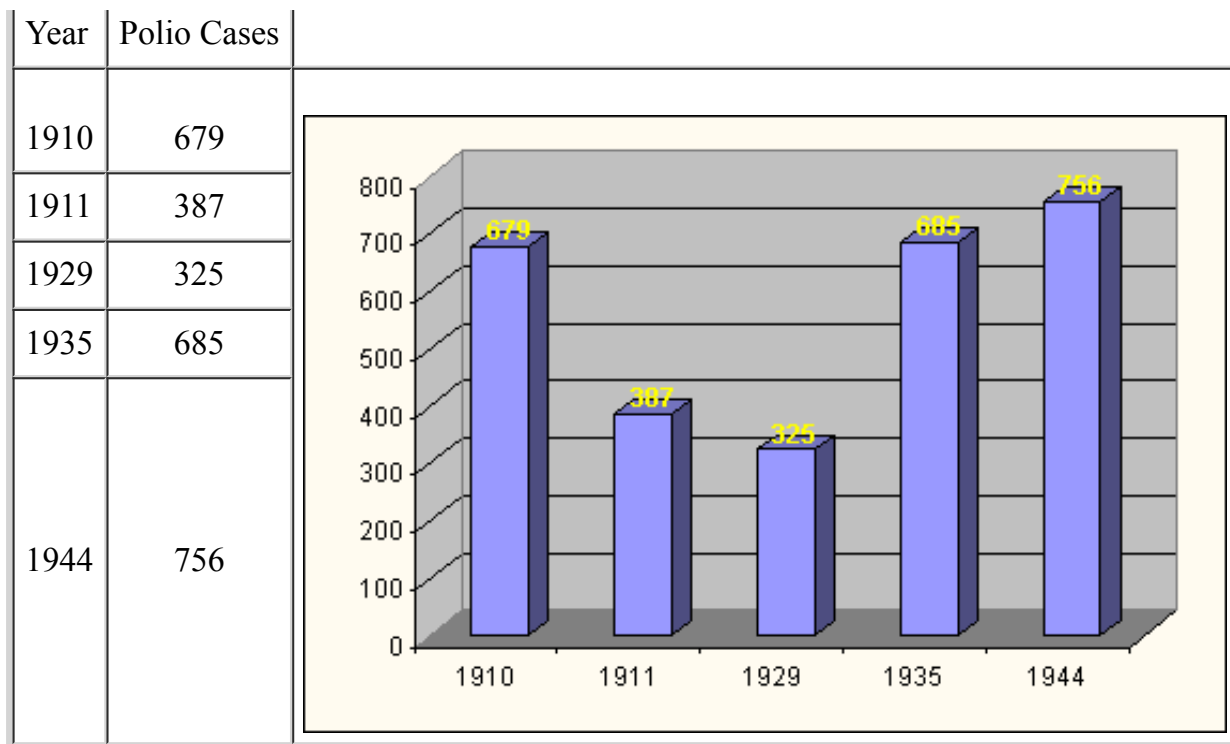
Dr. Henry writes about the Virginia Polio Epidemic of 1950.

I contracted polio on Sunday, September 17, 1950, entered the polio isolation ward on the ninth floor, south wing of the Medical College of Virginia Hospital on Saturday, September 23 and was discharged almost three months later on Monday, December 18. In addition to the isolation ward, I spent time on nine west during post isolation, and the majority of my hospitalization on five south and five west in convalescence and rehabilitation. The event of polio changed my life thereafter. Until recently, I had little interest in the polio events of that year. With help from the Virginia Health Department, Division of Immunization, and newspaper records from Richmond Newspapers, I have learned that 1950 was a record year for polio in Virginia and that Virginia ranked second in the nation in the incidence of polio per capita in 1950.

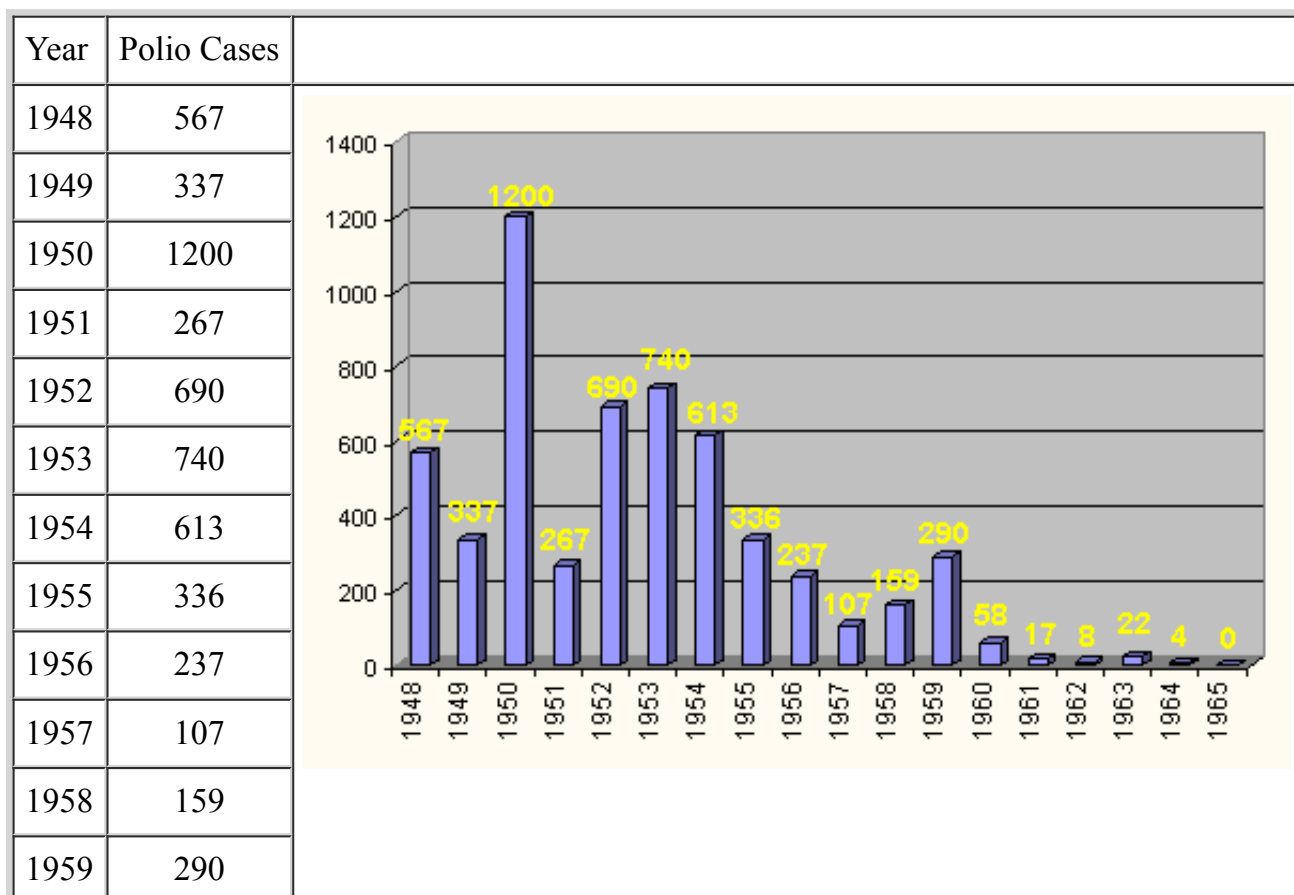
During most of the first half of the twentieth century, the Virginia State Health Department's Bureau of Communicable Diseases kept records about every reported case of polio in regard to confirmed diagnosis, location of each case, and the age, sex, and race of each individual. In the Richmond area, information was published identifying the section of the city that each case originated. Health officials used these numbers to track the disease throughout the epidemic years. As cases were reported in any given year, comparisons were made to previous years as one way of predicting whether a particular year might be a light year or a year of high incidence of polio. At the end of a year, the accumulated data would reveal the numbers of cases in each city and county in Virginia.

Virginia was one of the leading States in its efforts to prepare for each polio season. There were five designated hospitals for polio cases in Virginia. They were Children's Hospital in Washington DC for cases in northern Virginia, DePaul and Maryview Hospitals in the Hampton Roads area, Roanoke Memorial and Crippled Children's Hospital in Roanoke for southwestern Virginia cases, and the Medical College of Virginia Hospitals in Richmond. St Phillip Hospital of the MCV Hospitals accepted almost all of the African American polio patients. Racial segregation was a reality in Virginia in the epidemic years. MCV typically handled approximately 40 to 50 per cent of Virginia's polio cases. Combined efforts from physicians, nurses, the State Health Department, the March of Dimes, the Red Cross, local rescue squads, and even the Virginia Air National Guard were instrumental in providing necessary trained staff, hot pack machines, and iron lungs where the need was the greatest. The year 1950 was the greatest challenge for teamwork and proper allocation of therapeutic resources.

How did 1950 differ in numbers of polio cases to other years? The data on polio from 1910 to 1960 would indicate that polio cases would occur in greater numbers about every five years until the disease became more consistently epidemic around 1948. Prior to 1948, the years with the greatest polio cases were as follows:



During the 1920s, there were five years in which the number of polio cases was below 100 with a low of 67 in 1926. Throughout the 1930s, there were less than 100 cases per year except for 1935 when there were 685 cases. The lowest year on record prior to the development of the Salk and Sabin vaccines was 1942 with only 43 cases. Two years later in 1944, the second highest total on record occurred. There were 756 polio cases that year. Thus, it is easy to conclude that the polio virus was unpredictable and a constant challenge to public health officials. Beginning in 1948, these rather extreme fluctuations seemed to be less frequent with a pattern of more cases occurring each year. It has been theorized that the virus was becoming more virulent during the late 1940s and 1950s. Below are the annual case numbers for 1948 to 1965.



1960	58
1961	17
1962	8
1963	22
1964	4
1965	0

The introduction of the Salk vaccine in 1955 and the Sabin vaccine a few years later began to bring the polio case numbers down considerably by 1960.

A reflection on the above numbers reveals that 1950, with 1200 cases of polio, was by far the greatest epidemic year in Virginia history. What happened 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 5,500) accounted for 184 cases. Small town and rural southwestern Virginia accounted for one-third of polio cases in 1950. Among the 1200 cases, there were 62 deaths or a death rate of 5%. In Wythe County, there were 17 deaths or a death rate of almost 10%. This data would indicate that the wild poliovirus in Wythe County was more virulent than most other regions of Virginia. Newspaper reports during July and August reported the daily increase of polio cases. Public hysteria was avoided by rational precautions and reassurance from the State Health Department. However, a state of alarm existed in Wythe County. Swimming pools were closed. The movie theater was closed due to lack of business. Church Sunday schools and camps were closed. The summer semipro baseball team canceled their remaining games. Even the local draft board temporarily closed its doors. Traffic through Wytheville on Route 11 was detoured around the town to avoid a possible polio contact. The State Health Department sent investigators to Wythe County, but was unable to uncover any common source of the poliovirus. The virus was apparently centered in Wytheville in Wythe County, but the distribution within this relatively small area was random.

No urban area ever had as many polio cases as the Wythe County count of 1950. Below are some of the higher urban polio statistics in Virginia

1910	Roanoke	65
1935	Richmond	60
1950	Richmond	52
1953	Norfolk	66
1954	Norfolk	55

Thus, Wythe County had nearly triple the number of polio cases in 1950 than any urban area in any other year. Because of this unexpected concentration of cases in southwest Virginia, the Roanoke Memorial and Crippled Children's Hospital was overwhelmed. MCV admitted and treated 410 cases in 1950. One of those cases was Mrs. Sidney Culver of Clarke County. She was the 24-year-old adult married daughter of

Basil O'Connor, the executive director of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis or the March of Dimes. After a week at MCV Hospital, she was transferred to Warm Springs Georgia for continued care.

When the need for an iron lung became immediately necessary, rescue squads would often transport the iron lungs or the Virginia Air National Guard could provide even more rapid transportation. The spirit of cooperation was evident in the news reports. When the need for polio nurses increased, nurses were recruited from other Virginia cities and from nearby States. The March of Dimes spent more money in Virginia in 1950 than expected, but the request for voluntary contributions usually exceeded the goals set. The public was well informed and aware that the vast majority of polio cases were children. In the daily news reports, the age, sex, race, and location of each victim was published. Usually, when a child or adult died from polio, his/her name was printed in the newspaper.

Thankfully, fifty years later, the wild poliovirus has been eradicated from Virginia, the United States, and the Western Hemisphere. The Virginia Polio Epidemic of 1950 is now past history. Hopefully, such an event will never be repeated. If anyone reading this article contracted polio in Wythe County Virginia in 1950, I would appreciate hearing from you.

References:

1. Records from the Virginia Department of Health, Division of Immunization. Special thanks to Jackson Milton, Jr., Deputy Director, Epidemiologist.
2. Richmond Newspapers Library, news articles from 1950. Special thanks to William McKelway, Reporter, Richmond Times-Dispatch.

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